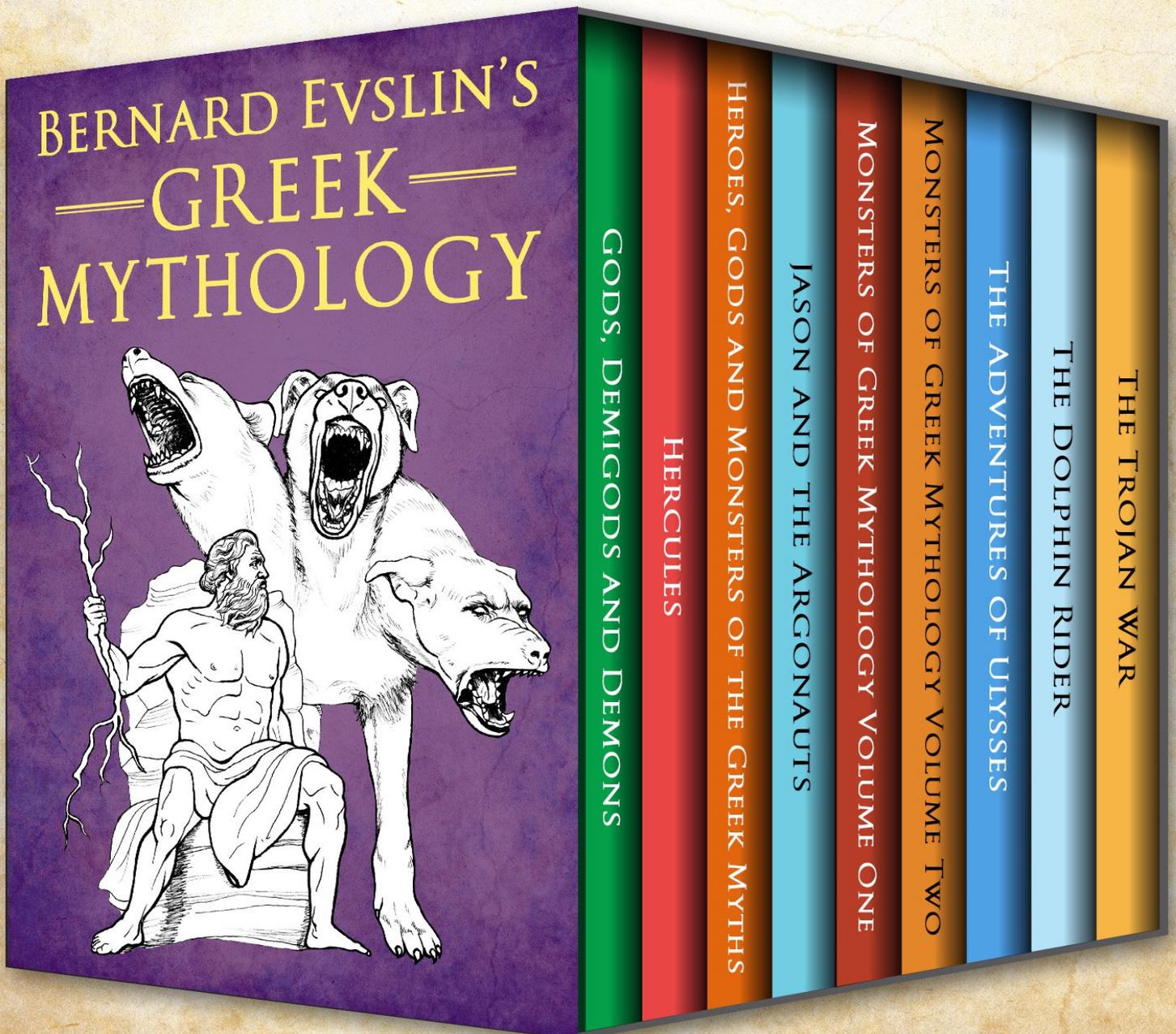
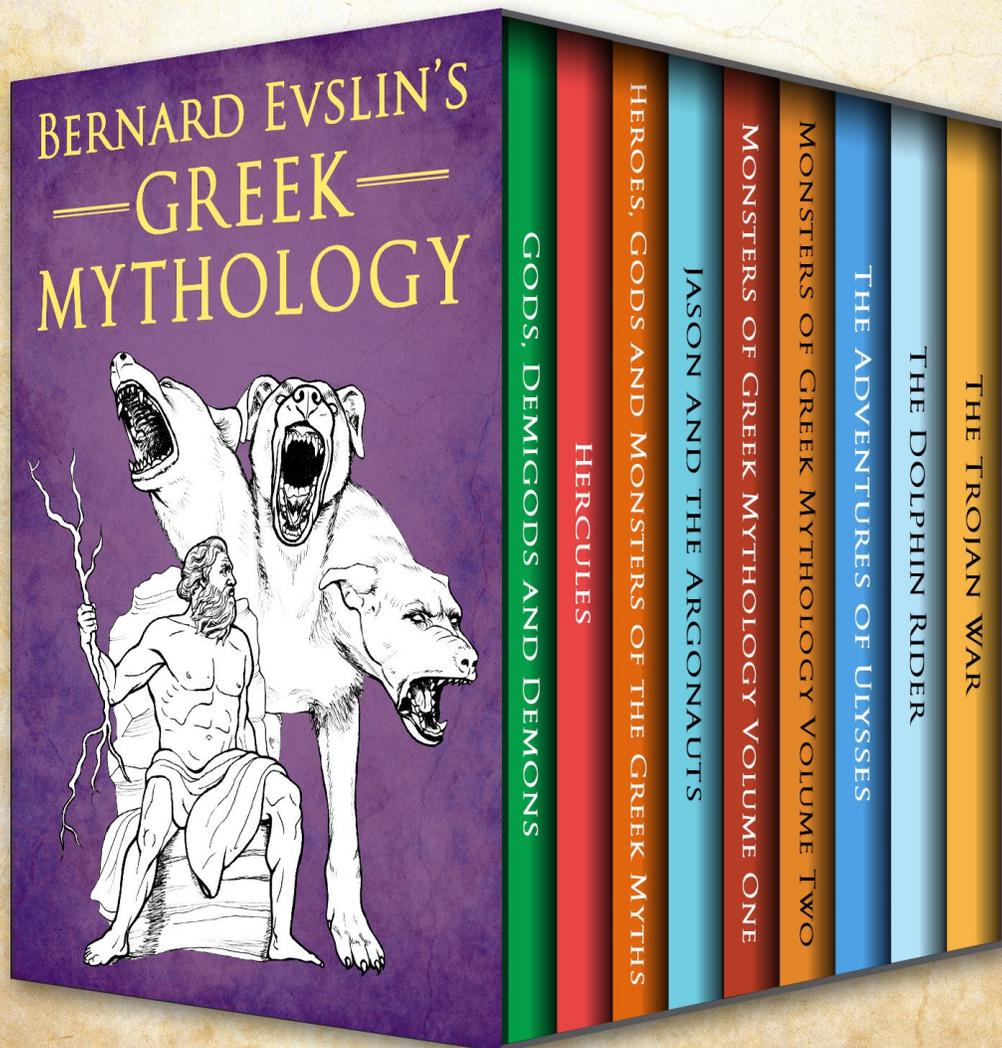


BERNARD EVSLIN'S —GREEK— MYTHOLOGY



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Bernard Evslin's Greek Mythology

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THE DOLPHIN RIDER

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About the Author

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BERNARD EVSLIN

GODS, DEMIGODS AND DEMONS

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY



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Gods, Demigods and Demons

An Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology

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For Tom and Bill
whose way of listening made wonder more wonderful

OceanofPDF.com

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Note to the Reader

THE KEYS TO PRONUNCIATION and principal sounds are those used in Scholastic Magazines' classroom periodicals. For most readers they are easier to understand than the diacritical marks usually found in encyclopedias.

KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

The pronunciation of a word is indicated in parentheses following the word in the encyclopedia.

The system used translates each syllable into the nearest common English equivalent. (A syllable is several letters taken together so as to form one sound.) Short, familiar words are used occasionally to make the pronunciation of a syllable easier. These words are:

dew less

ice sell

jay urn

lay us

A syllable in capital letters is the syllable that is accented.

Examples: Lucretia loo KREE shih uh

Leto LEE toh

Saturn SAT urn

Often the unaccented syllable has the neutral sound, uh.

Examples: the a in sofa

the e in silent

the i in charity

the o in connect

the u in circus

KEY TO PRINCIPAL SOUNDS:

a (as in add, cat)

ay (as in hay, ale)

ah (as in all, arm)

air (as in hair, care, there)

aw (as in soft)

ch (as in chair)

ee (as in Eve, eat, Lee)

eh (as in end, hen, met)

g (as in game, go, gone)

ih (as in ill, is, into)

j (as in jay, joke)

k (as in ache, can, keep)
oh (as in oh, old)
oo (as in food, mood, rude, the owl's oo, you)
or (as in oar, or, orb)
ow (as in out)
s or ss (as in miss, this, us)
t (as in at, Thomas, tin, Tom)
th (as in thigh, thin)
u (as in few, cube, use)
uh (as in charity, circus, connect, silent, sofa)
ur (as in lure, your)
y (as in eye, high, pie)
z (as in is, tease)

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A

Abas (AH buhs): An early king of Argos; great-grandfather of Perseus. He was a special favorite of Hera who blessed his shield, making it resistant to any sword-stroke. Thus favored by the goddess, Abas proved himself a fearsome warrior. His reputation persisted after his death, and the very sight of his shield, it is said, carried by one of his descendants, was enough to strike fear into the foes of Argos.

Acantha (uh KAN thuh): A nymph who disdained Apollo. Despite her refusals he kept pursuing her until she turned upon him and scratched his face. Enraged, he turned her into a thorny plant which we still know today as the “acanthus.”

Achelous (uhk uh LOH uhs): A river-god; son of Oceanus and Tethys. He competed with Heracles for the favor of the beautiful Deianira. Achelous transformed himself into a river and raged over his banks, trying to drown Heracles. When that failed, he turned into a serpent, and, finally, into a bull. But Heracles withstood all these metamorphoses, and hurled Achelous, senseless, to the ground. The defeated god slunk off to his underground springs — but it is said that he still swells angrily in the springtime at the memory of his defeat, and spitefully floods the villages of the plain.

Achilles (uh KILL eez): Son of Peleus and Thetis, and the greatest of all Greek warriors. When Achilles was an infant his sea-goddess mother, wishing him to share her immortality, dipped him into the river Styx. However, in doing so, she held him by the heel, and the part of his heel covered by her thumb became his one vulnerable spot. Otherwise, his hide was stronger than any armor. He could not be wounded by any weapon wielded by man. Even without this magic hide, however, he would have been a most fearsome adversary. For no one whom he engaged in combat lived long enough to get a blow in. He was masterful with spear, sword, bow and arrow — and, even weaponless, fighting with bare hands, he could disarm any foe. He could run faster than any horse — except his own two immortal stallions. Yellow-haired, gray-eyed, thin-lipped, sleek-muscled, he was beautiful to look upon as he moved in the fatal ballet of sword-stroke and spear-thrust. His very appearance on the field struck his foes with terror. When he charged, even the bravest scattered like sheep. The gods themselves, it is said, were loath to meet him weapon in hand. Indeed, on the morning that he killed Hector, he first overcame the river-god Scamander. His feud with Agamemnon almost cost the Greeks the war. For Achilles refused to do any fighting so long as Agamemnon led the army. But Ulysses persuaded Achilles to lend his golden armor to his beloved friend, Patroclus, so that the Trojans, believing that Achilles had taken the field, would yield some of the ground they had won. Achilles agreed and Patroclus

was slain by Hector, whereupon Achilles was moved to vengeance. He joined the battle, killed Hector, and turned the tide in favor of the Greeks. He did this despite the Fates' decree that he would not outlive Hector by more than three days. Three days later he was ambushed by Hector's brother Paris, who sent an arrow into the tendon above his heel, his one vulnerable spot — still called the Achilles tendon. The hero fell, but the tale of his deeds lives a stubborn life of its own, partaking of the immortality that Thetis meant to bestow upon her marvelous son.

Actaeon (uhk TEE uhn): A hunter unfortunate enough to glimpse the goddess Artemis bathing in the river. Angered at being seen in her nakedness by a mortal, the maiden goddess changed him into a stag. He was torn to pieces by his own hounds.

Adamanthea (ad uh man THEE uh): A nymph entrusted with the care of the infant Zeus. She concealed the new-born god among the olive groves which grew on the slopes of Mt. Ida so that he would be safe from his father, Cronus, who had formed the habit of devouring his children.

Admetus (ad MEE tuhs): A king of Thessaly whose herds were tended by the exiled Apollo. The king, ignorant that his new herdsman was a god, treated him, as he did all men, with great kindness. Apollo vowed that he would return the favor one day. When Admetus was called to an untimely death, Apollo intervened

with the Fates, arguing his case so persuasively that the fatal crones broke their own rule. They agreed that Admetus might return to life if he could find someone to take his place among the dead. The wife of Admetus, the lovely Alcestis, eagerly volunteered. But she was rescued from death by Heracles, who also owed Admetus a favor, and who wished to measure his strength against the one opponent he had never met — death. In all mythology, these two, Admetus and Alcestis, are perhaps the archetypes of the happily married — each bringing to their union love, faithfulness, and a capacity for self-sacrifice.

Adonis (uh DAHN uhs; uh DOH nuhs): Prince of Phoenicia, a youth of surpassing beauty, fruit of the union between King Cynyras and his daughter, Myrrh. Adonis was adopted by Aphrodite and tutored in the arts of love. But she could not woo him away from his passion for hunting dangerous beasts — which led to his death. The jealous Ares turned himself into a giant boar and gored Adonis to death. From his blood sprang the red flower anemone, which still carpets the slopes of Mt. Lebanon. And Aphrodite’s voice still mourns among the trees, calling, “Adon... Adon. ...”

Aegeus (EE juhs; EE jee uhs): King of Athens; father of Theseus. When Theseus went to Crete to fight the Minotaur, it was arranged that the homeward-bound ship would bear a white sail if Theseus had prevailed — but would keep its black sail if he had

been killed by the monster. Theseus, young and heedless, drunk with victory, forgot to raise the white sail. His father, watching from a hilltop near Athens, saw the black sail appear on the horizon. Grief-stricken at the thought of his hero-son's death, he leaped into the sea, drowning himself, and giving that sea its name — the Aegean.

Aegis (EE jihs): The magical goat-skin which Zeus used to cover his shield. Later, he gave it to his daughter, Athena, who hung the head of Medusa (a present to her from Perseus) from it and was able to turn her enemies to stone.

Aegisthus (ee JIHS thuhs): Key figure in a classic triangle. During the ten years that Agamemnon spent leading the Greek forces against Troy, his cousin, Aegisthus, made himself at home in Mycenae, wooing Queen Clytemnestra, and usurping the king's authority. His success was complete. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, Aegisthus validated his claims by helping Clytemnestra kill her husband. Then he in turn was killed by Agamemnon's avenging children, Orestes and Electra. Clytemnestra shared his fate.

Aeneas (ee NEE uhs): A prince of Troy; son of Aphrodite and Anchises. He was one of the heroes of the Trojan forces, second in fighting ability only to the mighty Hector. He escaped death in the sack of Troy, and saved the life of his old father — carrying him on

his back through the flaming city. His wanderings after the fall of Troy are the subject of Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*, which concludes with Aeneas landing on the shore of Italy and founding Rome.

Aeolus (EE oh luhs): King of the winds, a stormy red-faced god with disheveled white hair and beard. He dwelt on the island of Aeolia, which he surrounded with a brass wall so that no stranger could come to interfere with his duties. He kept the winds pent in a cave, and dispatched them at his will — sometimes as gentle breezes, sometimes as strong trade winds, and sometimes as gales, hurricanes, or typhoons — according to his temper. Upon certain rare occasions he sewed up the winds in leather bags and lent them to a sailor who could use them as he wished to speed his journey. But this happened only when Aeolus admired the voyager or had been offered a huge bribe. He bagged the winds for Ulysses once, but the favor miscarried, and the trip ended disastrously.

Aetna (ET nuh): A volcanic mountain in Sicily. Its smoky crater was used as a workshop by Hephaestus; the smith-god stoked its fires to temper the thunderbolts he forged for Zeus. Aetna was originally the name of a nymph who made her home on a slope of the mountain. At first, Hephaestus disliked this nymph because she had sided with his sister, Demeter, in a family quarrel. Later, his wrath was melted by her beauty. She bore him twin sons, the Palici — and Hephaestus gave her name to the mountain.

Agamemnon (ag uh MEM nuhn): Son of Atreus, brother of Menelaus, and leader of the Greek expedition against Troy. This king of Mycenae was one of the dominant figures of his age, a formidable battle-chief, but his abilities were marred by his vices. He was lecherous and swinish to the last degree. His insistence on claiming for himself a Trojan girl, captured by Achilles, led to the quarrel which kept Achilles on the sidelines until the Greeks had almost lost the war. On Agamemnon's return from Troy, he was murdered by his queen, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.

Aglaia (uh GLAY yuh): Youngest of the Graces, this beautiful, gentle daughter of Zeus and Eurynome, according to some legends, became the second wife of Hephaestus after he had tired of Aphrodite's infidelities.

Ajax (AY jax): A prince of Salamis, who was, next to Achilles, the most powerful warrior among the Greeks. This huge, beefy, red-faced brawler used the mast of a ship as a spear and hurled enormous boulders as if they were pebbles. He fought a draw with Hector and lived through the bloodiest battles of the war only to fall by his own hand. Legend says he went mad when Odysseus cheated him out of the dead Achilles' golden armor — with the last glimmer of his reason he chose to slay himself rather than run amok and destroy his comrades.

Albion (AL bih uhn): Most honorable of Poseidon's mischievous brood. According to one legend he flew to the Western rim of the world to fetch a golden apple from Hera's tree as a present for his mother, Amphitrite. Homeward bound, he found a mist-shrouded island just east of the Hesperides. It was inhabited by blue-painted tribesmen who immediately recognized him as a god and did him much honor. He lingered on the island teaching its people the arts of boat-building and navigation. Since then, the islanders have been the ablest boatwrights and bravest sailors in the entire world. They named their island Albion in honor of the kindly sea-god; it is now called England.

Alcestis (al SES tihs): Beautiful wife of Admetus, who offered to die if her husband's life might be spared. Her offer was accepted, but Heracles wrested her from the clutches of Hades, and she was joyfully reunited with her husband, King Admetus.

Alcmene (alk MEE nee): Princess of Argos, and mother of Heracles. Loveliest woman of her time, Alcmene was known as the "Lady of the Light Footstep." It was said of her that she could run over a field of grass without bending a blade. Zeus fell in love with her but, knowing her reputation for virtue, put on the form of her husband before visiting her. Heracles was the product of this impersonation.

Alcyone (al SY oh nee): Daughter of Aeolus; princess of the winds. She married Ceyx, son of the Morning Star. They were so happy they aroused the envy of the unhappily wed Hera, who sent a storm to wreck the ship on which Ceyx was voyaging. His ghost appeared to Alcyone, and she drowned herself to keep him company. But Zeus pitied them and turned them into a pair of kingfishers. Each winter thereafter Aeolus forbade his winds to blow for a space of seven days so that his daughter, now a beautiful white kingfisher, could lay her eggs in a nest which floated on the sea. It is from this episode that we derive the word “halcyon,” meaning a period of calm and golden days.

Alectryon (uh LEK trih uhn): The unlucky sentinel. He was assigned by Ares to watch for daybreak so that he might awaken the war-god who was trysting with Aphrodite and did not wish the sun to spy upon his doings. But Alectryon fell asleep — and Apollo, charioteer of the sun, observed the dalliance, and the secret was a secret no more. Enraged, Ares turned Alectryon into a rooster, who must wake himself earlier than any other creature to proclaim sunrise.

Alpheus (al FEE uhs): A river-god who fell in love with a nymph named Arethusa. He pursued her over the field and through the wood and was about to catch her when she claimed the aid of Artemis, who changed her into a stream. Whereupon Alpheus changed himself into a river and sought to mingle his waters with

the stream. But Artemis dammed him up and left him in thwarted flood. It was this river, Alpheus, which Heracles later diverted from its course to flush out the Augean Stables.

Amalthea (am uhl THEE uh): A she-goat whose milk nourished the infant Zeus on the slope of Crete's Mt. Ida. Zeus was always grateful to this compassionate creature whom he viewed as his foster-mother. He honored her in three ways. After her death he used her hide to cover his shield. This was the sacred "aegis," later given to Athena. He also filled her horn with golden fruit from the Garden of the Hesperides; when the fruit was eaten, it would magically replenish itself. This was the "cornucopia." Later, he set goat and horn among the stars, where they shine as the constellation "Capricorn."

Amazons (AM uh zuhnz): A nation of warrior women, said to have originated in Scythia. They trained their bodies for warfare, did all the hunting and fighting, and used men only for breeding purposes and menial tasks. They attained matchless skill in horseback riding and archery and became the most fearsome cavalry of ancient times. They enter many legends. Heracles and Theseus raided them and carried off two of their queens. A detachment of Amazons fought for Priam before the walls of Troy, and wrought much destruction among the Greeks until finally vanquished by Achilles. They invaded Lycia, and would have overrun that land had they not been defeated by Bellerephon, who

rode above them on the flying horse Pegasus, and dropped huge boulders on them. On their most successful expedition they swept over the entire Peloponnese, and laid siege to Athens — which almost fell to them before they were turned back by Theseus.

Amphitrite (am fih TRY tee): Wife of Poseidon; queen of the sea. This joyous daughter of Oceanus loved to frisk among the blue waves and come out at low tide to dance on the shore. Poseidon glimpsed her dancing on Naxos and fell violently in love with her. But she feared his stormy wooing, and fled him to the depths of the sea. Whereupon he changed his tactics and tried to win her with gifts. Of coral and pearl and the bullion off sunken treasure ships, he wrought her marvelous ornaments, but she spurned them all. Finally, he created something entirely new for her — a talking dancing fish. He dubbed the creature “dolphin,” and sent it to Amphitrite. The dolphin pleaded Poseidon’s cause with such wit and eloquence that Amphitrite yielded. She reigned as queen of the sea for many centuries and bore Poseidon scores of children, among them Triton of the wreathed horn. The dolphin remained her favorite of all the creatures of the deep and she employed a string of them to pull her crystal chariot.

Amphitryon (am FIHT rih uhn): Husband of Alcmene; stepfather of Heracles. His courtship of Alcmene was extremely eventful. She refused to marry him unless he avenged her eight brothers who had been killed by a certain Pterelaus, king of

Taphos. To mount an expedition against Taphos, however, he needed the help of King Creon of Thebes. Creon refused to help him unless he first killed a giant, man-eating fox. This fox was deemed uncatchable, but Amphitryon borrowed a hound from Artemis. With this wolfish black and silver hound he was able to track the fox to its lair and there slay it. Nevertheless, his invasion against Taphos would have failed had he not won the love of Princess Comaetho — who betrayed her father to him. For her father, the king, was invincible until he should lose a single golden hair that grew among his white hairs. The princess plucked this golden hair as her father lay asleep and presented it to Amphitryon, who thereupon defeated the king's army and killed the king. However, he disappointed the princess. He left Taphos and married Alcmena, whose conditions he had now fulfilled. Their marriage was very happy. He never blamed Alcmena for bearing Zeus an illegitimate child. He treated Heracles as his own son and viewed the strategy of Zeus as a compliment to himself. For Alcmena had broken all precedent by resisting the mighty god until he deceived her by assuming the form of her husband. Amphitryon and Alcmena remained happily united after the birth of Heracles.

Anchises (an KY seez): Father of Aeneas. This handsome young prince of Troy boasted that he had enjoyed the favors of Aphrodite. Zeus heard him bragging and hurled a thunderbolt at him — laming the young man and so disfiguring him that he was ignored by Aphrodite thereafter. Nevertheless, she bore him a son,

the hero Aeneas, who, after fighting very gallantly against the Greeks, saved his father from the sack of Troy by carrying him on his shoulders through the flaming city. Anchises lived long enough to accompany his marvelous son on the beginning of that voyage which was to culminate in the founding of Rome.

Andromache (an DRAHM uh kee): Hector's wife. One of the most attractive figures in mythology. All during the ordeal of the Trojan war she was constantly encouraging her husband and helping him in everything he did. After the fall of Troy she was taken into slavery by Neoptolemus, son of Achilles.

Andromeda (an DRAHM ee duh): A princess of Joppa, whose mother, Cassiopeia, boasted that she was more beautiful than those lovely ocean nymphs, called Nereids. This angered Poseidon, who was partial to Nereids, and he sent a sea-monster to ravage the coast. An oracle informed the king that the monster would not be appeased until Andromeda was sacrificed to him. Thereupon, the maiden was bound to a rock to be devoured by the monster. But Perseus happened to be passing that way with the newly killed Medusa's head in his pouch. He flashed the head at the monster turning it to stone, struck the shackles from Andromeda, and took her home to Sephiros to be his wife. After her death, Andromeda found a place in heaven among the stars and became a constellation, as did her mother, Cassiopeia, her father, Cepheus, and the sea-monster.

Antaeus (an TEE uhs): A giant who figured in one of Heracles' most famous adventures. This huge creature was a son of Mother Earth. He was tall as a tree and was reputed to be the most fearsome wrestler in the world. In addition to his titanic strength he held a magical advantage. He could not be pinned. Every time he touched earth he drew new strength from his mother and arose, more terrible than ever, to face his adversary. Heracles, during their bout, was unable to defeat him until he understood that Antaeus was being refreshed by every fall. Then Heracles lifted the giant from earth and held him there, out of contact with his mother, so that he could not renew his strength. And, holding him suspended, Heracles strangled him.

Antigone (an TIHG uh nee): Daughter of Oedipus. This young girl became a model for filial piety and family loyalty. She insisted on accompanying her blind father as he wandered homeless from Thebes, and stayed with him until he died at Colonnus. Then she returned to Thebes to find that her brother, Polynices, had been killed in a combat with his brother. Creon, their uncle, had declared the young man a rebel and refused him burial. Antigone stole her brother's body and buried it with proper ceremony, knowing that she was risking her own life in doing so. Nevertheless, she took the risk and paid the price: Creon ordered her to be buried alive.

Antiope (an TEE uh pee): An Amazon princess who married Theseus. She objected strenuously when he decided to put her aside for a second wife, Phaedra. Theseus met her objections by killing her. However, her ghost was avenged. For Phaedra, young wife of Theseus, fell in love with Antiope's son, Hippolytus, who was about her own age. But Hippolytus disdained her. He was interested only in taming horses. Phaedra, in a fury, lied to Theseus, saying the boy had assaulted her. Theseus killed his son and Phaedra hanged herself.

Aphrodite (af ruh DY tee): Goddess of love. Unlike the other Olympians, she was charged with only one duty — to incite desire. She did nothing else. Love was her profession, her pleasure, her hobby. She had no parents. Aphrodite means “foam-born.” In the beginning of time, Cronus killed his father, Uranus, and flung the gigantic body into the sea. The blood of the dismembered god drifted in the sun, whitening into foam. From the foam rose a tall yellow-haired maiden who came ashore at Cyprus. Where she walked, flowers bloomed and birds circled, singing. Thus, in the legend, love was born out of the primal murder, expressing the Greek belief in the final indestructibility of life. Aphrodite was courted by all the gods, but surprised everyone by marrying the ugliest of the Pantheon, Hephaestus, the little lame smith-god. As goddess of love, which is the mainspring of human activity, she enters more legends than any other god or goddess. She bore many children, who had almost as many fathers: Eros (the archer of

love), son of Zeus; Phobos (Fear), and Harmonia, mother of the Amazons, both sired by Ares; the misshapen Priapus, son of Dionysus; and her encounter with Hermes produced the self-sufficient monster, Hermaphroditus. After every adventure, however, she returned to Hephaestus — who always forgave her. Apple, rose, myrtle, and the dove were sacred to her. In Roman mythology, Aphrodite was known as Venus.

Antinous (an TIHN oh uhs): Most persistent and obnoxious of Penelope's suitors — and the first one killed by the avenging Odysseus.

Apollo (uh PAHL oh): The sun-god. Also god of medicine and music; patron of poetry, mathematics, and prophecy. This radiantly beautiful son of Zeus and Leto bears many names: Phoebus, or the Bright One; King of minstrels; Prince of oracles; Lord of the golden bow. His first act was to take up his golden bow and hunt down the Python, which, upon the orders of jealous Hera, had harried his mother from one end of the earth to the other. The giant serpent fled to its cave at Delphi. But Apollo pursued it into the depths of the cavern and there slew it with his golden arrows. He seized the cave for his own and raised a temple at Delphi, served by oracular priestesses, who were called Pythonesses. Each morning Apollo rose from his couch in his eastern palace, bridled his fiery-maned stallions, and drove the golden chariot of the sun across the blue meadows of the sky along the path marked by

white-winged dawn. Then, finally, he descended among festive pennants of fire and dipped beneath the western horizon, where he stabled his horses. Of all the gods of the Pantheon, Apollo resembles most closely the Greek ideal — eternally youthful, lovely to look upon, potent in battle, warm-hearted, and cool-thinking. He was beloved of mankind and used his influence very wisely, preaching always the middle way, counseling against excess. Once, his twin sister, Artemis, who always disapproved of his paramours, accused him of hypocrisy. “You preach moderation,” she cried. “But you let your own passions run away with you!” And Apollo replied: “I preach moderation in all things — including moderation.” It was this sunny jesting quality, combined with serene wisdom, that endeared him to god and man. There are conflicting claims as to which of his sons Zeus loved best, but it is agreed that he entrusted Apollo with more significant powers than any other god.

Apple of Discord (AP 1 uhv DIHS kord): A golden apple wrought by Hephaestus that triggered the Trojan War. The war-god, Ares, had a sister named Eris who was an ugly shrew. It was her pastime to ride beside her brother in his war-chariot, screaming for blood, laughing at the spectacle of violent death. She was unpopular among the gods and was left off the invitation list for the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the most brilliant fête ever held on Olympus. Eris vowed vengeance. She stole the golden apple from Hephaestus’s workshop and engraved it with these words: “To the

Fairest.” Then, when the festivities were at their height, she entered unseen and rolled the apple on the banquet table. It was immediately claimed by Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena. They appealed to Zeus for judgment. But the king of the gods, knowing that his choice of one would lead to endless recrimination on the part of the others, refused to judge the matter. He passed it on to Paris, young prince of Troy, for adjudication. Each of the goddesses offered bribes. Hera offered him limitless power; Athena offered him wisdom. Aphrodite simply took his hand and whispered to him, and he promptly awarded her the apple. What she had promised him was a woman as beautiful as herself — Queen Helen of Sparta. It was the abduction of Helen by Paris that launched the Greek invasion of Troy. During that war, Hera and Athena showed marked partiality for the Greek side.

Arachne (uh RAK nee): A young girl of Lydia, who was so proud of her skill at weaving that she dared challenge Athena herself to a contest. When the contest was joined, Arachne wove marvelous tapestries depicting scandalous incidents from the lives of the gods, and all the spectators thought she must surely win though she was matched against the goddess who had invented the spindle. But then Athena stood with her giant spindle on a hilltop; she gathered the rosy fleece of the sunset and the first blue and silver strands of starlight, and wove scenes of the world’s creation. She flung her starry brocades across the rafters of heaven so that the whole sky was hung with her handiwork, and the spectators fell

on their knees and worshipped. In despair at her defeat Arachne killed herself. But Athena took pity and changed her into a spider — a little creature who spins the hours away but does not brag about it.

Ares (AIR eez): Son of Zeus and Hera; god of war. The Olympians were by no means peaceable, nevertheless they disliked Ares whom they regarded as a bloody-minded butcher. He killed for the pleasure of it; incited men to warfare, then gloated over the battlefield. He was accompanied by his sister, Eris, goddess of discord, and two sons — Deimos (Fear), and Phobos (Terror). Terror was also the name of one of his chariot horses; the others were Fire, Flame, and Trouble. Only three gods were friendly to Ares: Aphrodite, who was fascinated by violence and thought him handsome in a brutal kind of way; Eris, his sister, who rode beside him in his war-chariot, shrieking; and Hades, god of the dead, whose kingdom was greatly enlarged by the wars that Ares started.

Argonauts (AHR guh nawts): The crew of heroes recruited by Jason for his quest of the Golden Fleece.

Argos (AHR guhs): Master shipwright, supposed to have been the author of such nautical refinements as the leather-socketed oar-port for easier rowing, a sail that could be tilted on the mast for quartering winds, and the first rudder — a pivoted steering-board used instead of the helm oar. The ship that he built for Jason, called

the *Argo*, was able to outrace and outmaneuver any other ship in the sea.

Argosy (AHR guh see): Name given to Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. The term was later applied to Spanish treasure ships.

Argus (AHR guhs): A hundred-eyed giant employed by Hera to spy upon Zeus and observe his trysting places. He was killed by Hermes upon the instigation of Zeus when he proved over-zealous in guarding Io.

Ariadne (air ih AD nee): Eldest daughter of Minos, king of Crete. She helped Theseus find his way out of the labyrinth by unreeling a ball of magical thread. She eloped with Theseus after he slew the Minotaur, but tiring of her, he abandoned her on the island of Naxos, where she was consoled by the voyaging Dionysus.

Arion (uh RY uhn): Singer and musician second only to Orpheus; inventor of the dithyramb, or poem of praise. He sang so beautifully that the fish would rise from the depths of the sea to listen to him — a phenomenon that was to save his life. When thrown overboard by pirates he was rescued by a music-loving dolphin.

Aristaeus (ahr ihs TEE uhs): Son of Apollo and Cyrene. Eurydice, wife of Orpheus, was fleeing Aristaeus when she was fatally bitten by a snake and began that journey to Hades which led to her husband's famed excursion into death.

Artemis (AHR tuh mihs): The moon-goddess. Silver belonged to Artemis as gold belonged to her brother, Apollo. She was the moon-maiden who rode the night sky in a silver chariot drawn by white stags, and bent her silver bow shooting arrows of silver light. Although Poseidon was king of the sea, this slender moon-princess owned a mystic power over his demesne; for she and she alone swung the tides on a silver leash — now hurling the waves onto the shores, now letting them subside in silvery ripples. She was the goddess of the hunt also, and ran in silver sandals down mountain slopes and through forest glades, followed by a troop of laughing dryads. She was also the Lady of Wild Things, and punished those who killed more than they could eat. She caused them to be thrown from their horses or to lose their way in the wood and be eaten by wolves. She was cold and disdainful and held herself aloof, disliking crowds and loathing cities. She admired her half-sister, Athena, and took similar vows of chastity — which she imposed upon her dryads with mixed results. She was less demanding of mortals, however, and in some legends was the patroness of young lovers — lending torches for their revels and casting shadows so they could hide. Wild animals were sacred to

her, especially lion, bear, wolf, and all kinds of wild birds. In Roman mythology, Artemis was known as Diana.

Asclepius (ass KLEE pee uhs): Son of Apollo; father of medicine. Apollo held domain over medicine and passed the gift of healing to his son, Asclepius, who became such a marvelous doctor that he could bring the dead back to life. He did this so often that Hades, king of Tartarus, whose subjects are the dead, became enraged because so few were crossing over into his kingdom. Hades complained to Zeus that Asclepius was robbing him, thus attacking the dignity of all gods. Zeus nodded, took up a thunderbolt, and hurled it at Asclepius, killing him. Apollo, infuriated, stormed into the volcano and slew all the Cyclopes who labored there forging thunderbolts. Then Apollo went to Zeus and pleaded his son's case so eloquently that Zeus recalled Asclepius to life. In return, Asclepius patched up the Cyclopes, who returned to forge thunderbolts for Zeus.

Astreus (ass TREE uhs): A titan. In an early legend he trysted in a corner of the sky with Eos, goddess of the dawn, siring the four winds and a litter of stars.

Astyanax (ass TY uh nax): Infant son of Hector and Andromache. During the sack of Troy he was flung off the wall to his death. Some say Menelaus committed this crime; others accuse Neoptolemus, son of Achilles.

Atalanta (at uh LAN tuh): When Arcadians saw this long-legged maiden racing across the fields and through the trees they thought she was the goddess Artemis, descended from heaven. Indeed, anyone seeing her run down a stag in full stride or wrestle a bear would have sworn that she was more than mortal. Abandoned in infancy by her father, the king, she was adopted by a she-bear who suckled her. Bear cubs were her brothers and sisters. She played with them, wrestled with them, hunted with them, and grew up wild and solitary as a wood-nymph. She was able to outrace and outfight any man she met. When Meleager, the only lad she had ever loved, was killed because his mother disapproved of the match, Atalanta vowed never to accept any other suitor. But she was surpassingly beautiful, and suitors swarmed. She devised a method to curtail their wooing. She promised to marry the first man to beat her in a foot-race, but warned that losers must pay with their lives. One by one, her suitors raced her and lost; one by one they lost their heads. Finally, one young man, Hippomanes, had the wit to pray to Aphrodite before the race. The goddess of love gave him three golden apples which he bore to the starting post under his tunic. One by one he dropped them. Each time that Atalanta stooped to retrieve a rolling apple, he gained ground. He won the race and Atalanta became his wife. There are those who say, however, that she was fast enough to have retrieved the apples and still have beaten him, but that she was tired of living alone.

According to legend, she and Meleager spent their first year together traveling with Jason on his Argosy.

Ate (ay TEE): Daughter of Zeus and Eris. In some legends she is the daughter of Discord, a self-sufficient spite, immortal sower of quarrels. In other tales, Ate is a variant name for Eris herself. Her mischief-making finally infuriated Zeus, who hurled her from Olympus. She then took up residence on earth and caused more trouble than ever, sowing suspicion among men and provoking them to feuds and bloody quarrels.

Athamas (ATH uh muhs): This king of Thebes was unfortunate enough to be involved in a quarrel among the gods. He had married Ino, daughter of Cadmus, and sister to Semele, whom Zeus had courted, and who bore the infant god, Dionysus. After the jealous Hera had contrived Semele's death, Zeus gave the orphaned Dionysus to Ino to raise. Hera's wrath was turned upon her and upon her husband, Athamas. She drove them mad. In their madness they murdered their children.

Athena (uh THEE nuh): Daughter of Zeus and goddess of wisdom. Athena's mother was Metis, a daughter of the Titans. But it had been prophesied of Metis that if she bore a son he would kill his father. Zeus, unwilling to take any chances, swallowed Metis whole. He was immediately stricken by a headache so terrible that he began to batter his head against a rock. Hephaestus sprang to his

aid, and split his father's head open with a blow of his mallet. From Zeus' skull sprang a tall gray-eyed maiden, brandishing a spear. Born in this way, Athena naturally became goddess of wisdom, patroness of intellectual activities, and protector of Athens, which was named after her and where she was particularly honored. She was called Pallas Athena, the Maiden Goddess, and remained a virgin forever. She is depicted always as wearing a helmet and breastplate, carrying lance and shield. She worked very assiduously to make men wise. She taught her favorites to invent the plough, the spinning wheel, and the sail. Scholars prayed to her for enlightenment, inventors for inspiration, judges for clarity and fair-mindedness. Captains, seeking to sharpen their tactics on the eve of battle, prayed to her also. The olive tree was sacred to her, also the owl. In Roman mythology, Athena was known as Minerva.

Atlas (AT luhs): A powerful Titan. He fought bravely in the war against Zeus, so bravely that when Cronus was defeated and the Titans exiled, Atlas was singled out for special punishment. He was condemned to station himself on the far western margin of the world and bear the rim of the sky on his shoulders. There he stood as the centuries turned, seas boiled and receded, and mountains were worn to pebbles — standing always under his burden, shoulders bowed, legs braced, enduring his punishment. In happier days he had married the Titaness Pleione, and fathered the Pleiades, the Hyades, Calypso, and the Hesperides. These last were three beautiful daughters, the apple nymphs, who accompanied their

father into exile and guarded Hera's golden tree that had been planted under the shadow of Atlas. He once rid himself of his burden when Heracles came upon his eleventh labor to fetch a golden apple. Atlas persuaded Heracles to take the sky upon his shoulders, promising to take it back again after he had stretched his aching muscles. He fully intended to break his promise, but Heracles guessed his purpose and tricked him into resuming his burden. The suffering Titan was never again able to find anyone strong enough to relieve him of his awful weight. Some say the ordeal of Atlas ended when Perseus, remembering his own visit to the Garden of the Hesperides and struck by belated pity, left the Elysian Fields, and traveled west again with his Medusa head. He showed the head to Atlas and turned him to stone. Thenceforth he was known as Mt. Atlas; he still bore the sky on his snowy shoulders, but without suffering.

Atreus (AY tree us): Son of Pelops; king of Mycenae and head of the most tragic house in Greek mythology. Atreus' wife, Aerope, fell in love with his twin brother, Thyestes, and bore him two children. Atreus took a terrible vengeance: He killed the two children, roasted them, and served them to his brother at a banquet. For this horrid crime the gods fastened a curse upon Atreus and all his descendants. His son, Menelaus, married Helen and became the most famous cuckold in the world. His other son, Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces against Troy, was murdered by his own wife upon his return from the wars. His grandson, Orestes, killed

his mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge his father's death, and was himself torn by the Furies. The misadventures of the House of Atreus have been a treasure trove for writers for almost three thousand years. Of the thirty-three Greek dramas which have come down to us intact, eight of them are concerned with members of this accursed family. Scores of later writers, including many contemporaries, have also mined the riches of this tragic tale.

Atropos (AT roh pohss): Eldest of the Fates, and most fearsome of the three sisters. She waits with her shears to cut the thread of life after it has been spun by Clotho and measured by Lachesis.

Augean Stables (uh GEE uhn STAY b'lz): The sixth labor of Heracles was to clean these stables in one day. Now King Augeas of Elis was a man of very filthy habits. For thirty years he had kept three thousand cattle housed in a huge system of barns and byres, and never once in all those thirty years were the cattle allowed outside, nor were the stables cleaned. The result was a stinking midden that defied imagination. Heracles reversed the flow of the river Alpheus, lifting it from its bed and hurling its waters through the stables, flushing them out in a mighty torrent. He left the stables clean, but to this day the river still runs the wrong way.

Autolycus (oh TAHL uh kuhs): Son of Hermes, grandfather of Odysseus. He inherited Hermes' craftiness and talent for thievery.

His cattle grazed on the lush slopes of Mt. Parnassus, but his herds had a disquieting way of expanding overnight. He would raid his neighbors' herds in the dark of night, so swiftly and so silently he was able to cut out the best beeves and drive them onto his own grazing grounds before his neighbors detected anything amiss. Not only that, but he could change the appearance of a bull or heifer so that no herdsman was able to identify his own property, He changed the color of the animals' coats, the length and shape of their horns, or dehorned them completely. His techniques were a secret, but their effectiveness was notorious. Hermes was entertained by the exploits of this crafty son, and many times intervened to save him from sudden death at the hands of his outraged neighbors.

Avernus (uh VUR nuhs): The somber lake whose underwater caves, the ancients believed, opened into Tartarus, the Land Beyond Death.

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Bacchantes (buh KAHN teez): Worshippers of Dionysus (Bacchus), son of wine, and bestower of ecstasy. Ivy-crowned and joyous, these women danced in the moonlight, abandoning themselves to adoration of their radiant young lord.

Balius (BAY lih us): One of Achilles' wonderful horses. It spoke Greek, and was in the habit of unyoking itself from the chariot to fight at its master's side. Its partner was Xanthus, an equally remarkable horse.

Baucis and Philemon (BAH sihs) (fih LEE mahn): An old couple who, despite their poverty, lavishly entertained Zeus and Hermes while they were wandering the earth in mortal guise. The gods, deeply moved by this unassuming generosity, granted the aged pair their dearest wish — that they remain united even in death. They were transformed into trees whose branches ever after intermingled.

Bellerophon (buh LAIR uh fuhn): A hero who bridled Pegasus and slew the Chimaera. Bellerophon was a young Corinthian who, unknowingly, offended the king of Lycia. The king was in the habit of killing those who displeased him, but Bellerophon was a guest, and the laws of hospitality forbade

outright murder. Therefore the king sent the young man on a mission he believed would be fatal — to slay a monster that had been ravaging the countryside. Called the Chimaera, it was half ram, half dragon; it flew on leathery wings and breathed flame. The youth, who was very innocent, thought it entirely proper that he be sent upon such an errand. He prayed to Athena, queen of tactics, for such aid as she might believe him to merit. Athena, much impressed by his modesty and uprightness, appeared to him in a dream, and instructed him to capture the winged horse Pegasus, before battling the Chimaera. When Bellerephon awoke, he found a golden bridle lying on the bed and knew that the dream had been a divine visitation. Bellerephon found the marvelous horse grazing on the slope of Mt. Helicon. He was a gorgeous creature — snow-white, with coral-red nostrils, gold wings, and brass hooves, with a mane of bright gold. When the stallion saw Bellerephon, he neighed, beat his wings, and began to fly away, but Bellerephon threw Athena's bridle over his head — whereupon he descended and allowed the youth to mount. Inspired by Athena, Bellerephon had made a careful battle plan. Nothing, he knew, could withstand the flaming breath of the monster; he must find a way to turn this deadly quality to his own advantage. He affixed a lump of lead to the point of his spear, and spurred Pegasus to rise above the Chimaera. Then he made Pegasus fold his wings and side-slip, diving suddenly out of the sun and appearing beside the monster's head before it realized it was being attacked. The surprise was

complete. The Chimaera opened its terrible jaws, but before it could lick Bellerephon with its tongue of flame, he thrust his spear between its jaws. The lump of lead was melted by the fiery breath, and flowed down the Chimaera's throat, scorching its liver and killing it instantly. The Chimaera folded its wings and dropped like a stone. Bellerephon coasted down to the plain where a multitude of people had assembled to watch the battle. He was hailed as their champion, and the king forgave him. He also gave him his daughter, the princess Philinoe, in marriage. Bellerephon fought many other battles, always riding Pegasus into the fray, always triumphant. But as his fame grew, his modesty shrank. He became very vain, and decided to ride Pegasus as high as Olympus, and there boast to the gods of the deeds he had done. But the gods discouraged such displays. Zeus sent a gadfly which stung Pegasus in mid-flight, causing the horse to buck suddenly, throwing his rider. Bellerephon fell as the Chimaera had fallen. He was not killed by the fall, but was terribly lamed — and had to drag out the rest of his life as a beggar. Pegasus was stabled among the horses of Zeus. But those charming daughters of Zeus, the Muses, were struck by the beauty of the steed, and coaxed him away from their father, who could refuse them nothing. The Muses kept Pegasus as their own, riding him from Olympus to Parnassus, and back again. Sometimes, it was said, they lent him to young artists in need of help. But he still sometimes bucked suddenly when he felt that his rider had grown too vain.

Biblis (BIHB luhs): The ancient Phoenician city which gave its name to books. Some say it is the oldest city in the world. Phoenicia took its name from King Phoenix (Cinyras), father and grandfather of Adonis.

Boreas (BOH reh uhs; boh REE uhs): A name for the North Wind. The Romans called it *Aquilo*, the eagle-wind. It was the most unruly denizen of Aeolus' cave. It loved storm and trouble, exulted in shipwrecks, and was more feared than any of its brothers.

Briareus (bry AHR ee uhs): A hundred-handed giant who won the eternal favor of Zeus by releasing him from captivity. The king of the gods had been surprised by a rebellious faction of Olympians led by Hera, and lay bound and helpless. But Briareus searched for his master and untied the hundred knots that bound Zeus, allowing him to escape and suppress the rebellion. Zeus trussed Hera in golden chains and hung her upside down from the rafters of heaven — and kept her hanging until she pleaded for forgiveness, vowing never to rebel again. Thereafter, Zeus ruled unchallenged, retaining Briareus as his most trusted servant.

Briseis (bry SEE uhs): A beautiful Trojan girl captured by Achilles. When Agamemnon unfairly claimed her, Achilles quit the war. He did not return until the Greeks had suffered huge losses and Agamemnon had been humiliated.

Brize (BRY zee): A horrid little spite who served Hera. She was a gadfly, large as a sparrow — with a sting as long as a dagger. She was sent by Hera to torment the nymph Io, to whom Zeus had been attentive. Hermes killed this gadfly when he saved Io.

Brontes (BRAHN teez): A Cyclops who labored underwater making horse troughs for Poseidon. He wrought the silver new-moon bow for Artemis, even though she had rejected him as a suitor.

Butes (BU teez): One of the Argonauts. Bee-keeper extraordinary, the honey made by his swarms was sweeter than any other; he supplied it to Olympus for the gods' repast.

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Cabeiri (Kuh BY ry): Archaic gods whose legends were told long before the tales of the Olympians. Their attributes are lost in the mists of unrecorded time, but they are associated with the most ancient ceremonies of planting, fishing, and toolmaking. The Cabeirian Mysteries were performed in Thebes, and on the islands of Imbros, Lemnos, and Samothrace. The secrets of these rites were disclosed only to initiates, who were forbidden to speak of them upon pain of death.

Cacus (KAY kuhs): A three-headed giant; son of Hephaestus and Medusa. He was unwise enough to steal cattle from Heracles, who pursued the giant, withstood the flame that issued from each of his three mouths, and decapitated him one head at a time.

Cadmus (KAD muhs): An early hero of mythology; brother of Europa. This young prince of Phoenicia entered legend when his sister was abducted by Zeus, who had turned himself into a white bull for the occasion. Cadmus immediately set off in search of his sister, even though he had been told that the most powerful god had claimed her as his own. Cadmus searched all the lands of the known world, following the trail of Europa, whose name has been given to that Western land mass. Finally, Cadmus prayed to Athena, who answered him and said she could not help him reclaim his

sister, who now belonged to Zeus. But she also told him that with her counsel he could found a great nation. She filled him with such courage that he was able to kill a dragon that attacked him when he came to Thebes. Then, still following instructions of the goddess, he sowed the dragon's teeth. A legion of iron-clad men sprang from the furrows. He hid himself and threw stones at them. They began to fight among themselves and fought until there were only a handful of survivors. Then Cadmus came out of hiding and proclaimed himself their king. With these men he founded Thebes, fought off invading chieftains, and built a prosperous and warlike nation. He became so powerful a monarch that Aphrodite gave him her daughter, Harmonia, to be his queen. Their daughters were Semele, mother of Dionysus, and the ill-fated Ino.

Caduceus (kuh DOO see uhs): The serpent-wreathed staff carried by Hermes. Since he was the messenger-god, this staff was later carried by all heralds. It is said that the original staff belonged to Apollo, who gave it to Hermes in return for the lyre Hermes had invented. Apollo was also god of medicine and so the caduceus became the insignia for the healing art, and is still used in that way.

Calais (KAL ay uhs): A son of the North Wind. With his twin brother, Zetes, he accompanied Jason on the Argosy. It was these twins who delivered Phineus from the Harpies who were tormenting him. In gratitude, the king of Thrace gave them each a

pair of wings. At their deaths the gods changed them into a pair of birds.

Calchas (KAL kuhs): A soothsayer whose expert prophecies guided the Greeks in their war against the Trojans. It was he who advised Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia in order to bring fair winds that would carry his fleet to Troy. He warned that the Greeks could not win without the presence of Achilles, and it was his timely counsel that stopped the plague Apollo had sent as punishment for Agamemnon's impiety. He also foretold that the war would last ten years. However, he was undone by his high opinion of himself. Challenged to a guessing contest by Mopsus, he failed to estimate the number of figs on a tree. When his opponent guessed correctly, Calchas strangled on his own vanity.

Calliope (kuh LIE oh pee): The Muse of epic poetry. This stalwart daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne was the most assertive of the eight sisters. She loved to sing of heroes, wars, and glorious victories. Later, she bore a son, Orpheus, who was the sweetest singer of his age.

Callisto (kuh LISS toh): She was a princess of Arcadia and an attendant of Artemis. Now Artemis, the Maiden Goddess, imposed strict vows of chastity on her court and enforced them stringently. Zeus, however, pursued Callisto, and persuaded her to break her vows. Thereupon, Hera turned Callisto into a bear and set her in the

path of Artemis when the goddess was out hunting. Artemis killed the bear, but Zeus snatched her from the dead and set her among the stars as the constellation of the Great Bear.

Callirhoe (kuh LIHR oh ee): Daughter of the river-god Achelous, and second wife of Alcmaeon, an Argive chieftain, who was assassinated by the father of his first wife. The widow Callirhoe thirsted for vengeance. She prayed to Zeus that her infant sons grow to manhood in a single day so that they might avenge their father's murder. Zeus granted her prayer, and the children, growing six feet in one day, took up arms and killed their father's murderer.

Calydonian Boar Hunt (KAL uh DOH nih uhn BOHR HUHNT): A key incident in the legend of Atalanta. The king and queen of Calydon had angered Artemis, who sent a wild boar to waste their kingdom. This beast was huge, larger than an elephant, with razor-sharp tusks and an incredibly vicious temper. It defied the efforts of anyone to trap or kill it. Prince Meleager sent messages to the best hunters in all the lands that bordered Calydon, proclaiming a gala boar hunt. The ablest hunters and warriors of the time responded, including Theseus, Castor, Polydeuces, Peleus, and many of those who later became Argonauts. Now, the fleet-footed maiden Atalanta, who had been raised by a she-bear and could hunt and fight better than most men, was Meleager's beloved. They always hunted together and at the Calydonian Boar Hunt they

cornered the boar and, working in tandem, killed the beast. Meleager courteously presented her with the boar's hide. His angry uncles objected, and insulted Atalanta, whereupon Meleager slew his uncles. This led to his own death at the hands of his mother who had been driven half-mad by the prospect of her son marrying a wild girl from the hills.

Calypso (kuh LIHP soh): A daughter of Atlas. This beautiful Titaness dwelt on an island all alone, occasionally amusing herself with shipwrecked sailors whom she pulled from the sea. The most noted of these was Odysseus. She rescued him after one of his misadventures, and made life very sweet for the wanderer. After seven years, however, he grew restless and insisted on departing. She pleaded with him, offering him immortality and eternal youth, but he refused all her offers, and sailed away from her island on a raft she had sorrowfully built for him.

Carya (KAHR ih uh): A girl beloved of Dionysus. She returned his love, and when she died the grieving god turned her into a walnut tree. Thereafter, the word "caryatid," was applied to a female statue used as a temple column — these columns were carved of walnut.

Cassandra (kuh SAN druh): Daughter of Priam and Hecuba. This beautiful, shy, yet witty princess had the misfortune to be loved by Apollo. He promised her great gifts if she would yield to

him, and caressed her with sun-stroke — under the influence of which she uttered startling prophecies. But when she would still not warm to his advances he added a fatal twist to his gift: She would prophecy truly, But no one would ever believe her. And so, she read the future with total accuracy, but could not communicate her vision; her utterances were ignored. She warned that if Paris were to visit Sparta, he would bring disaster on Troy. She warned against bringing the Wooden Horse through the gates into Troy. She foretold that she would be taken into slavery. And she further warned the man who enslaved her that he would be dishonored and killed on his return from Troy. This man was Agamemnon — but he did not believe her either. Her only happy prophecy on record concerned her cousin, Aeneas; she foretold that he would surmount all perils and found a great nation.

Cassiopeia (kas ih uh PEE uh): Mother of Andromeda. She also became a constellation after her death, together with her husband, her daughter, her throne, and the sea-monster sent by Poseidon to ravage the shores of her country.

Castor and Polydeuces (KASS ter) (pawl ih DEW seez): The Spartan Twins; sons of Leda; brothers of Helen. Castor was the greatest wrestler of ancient times, and Polydeuces the greatest boxer (excepting Heracles). It is said that Polydeuces stormed into Hephaestus' workshop and forced the smith-god to cut off his hands at the wrist, and then forge him a pair of iron hands. When

these iron hands were clenched into iron fists, Polydeuces alone was worth a phalanx of heavily armed warriors. The twins accompanied Jason on his Argosy and helped him win the Golden Fleece. They were admired by the gods, who valued good fighting men. When they died, Zeus placed them among the stars as the constellation Gemini, the Twins.

Cecrops (SEE krahps): An early king of Attica. Despite the fact that he was half dragon, half human, he proved to be a very pious king. It was during his reign that Athena and Poseidon contended for the overlordship of Attica. A council of gods decided in favor of Athena, and she planted an olive tree on the site of what was to become the principal city of Attica — Athens. According to legend, it was Cecrops who led the people in worship of Athena. It is said also that he substituted barley cakes for human sacrifices in the worship of Zeus. A large and handsome moth, the Cecropia, takes its name from Cecrops.

Celmus (SELL muhs): The son of very old Phrygian gods, and a playfellow of the young Zeus on the slopes of Mt. Ida. Now Celmus and his brothers were the first to smelt iron and were very proud of their skill. He challenged Zeus to a fencing match, each to use his favorite weapon — thunderbolt against iron club. But even in his youth, the dignity of Zeus was too great to brook challenge. Thunder crashed, lightning sizzled. A voltage of the divine rays passed through the iron club, up through the arm of Celmus, and

through his body, so that duelist and club became one weld, an iron statue welding an iron club.

Centaurs (SEHN torz): Legendary creatures, half man and half horse, who roamed the plains of Thessaly. In some tales they combine the best qualities of both species; occasionally, they display the worst characteristics of man and horse. Their legend is echoed by followers of Cortez, who reported that the Aztecs — who had never seen mounted men before the Spanish invasion — thought the Spaniards were divisible monsters who could separate at will into man and horse. Thus the myth of the Centaurs must have arisen when the Thessalian peasants saw their first mounted men, the nomad Dorian invaders from the north. One extremely wise Centaur, Chiron, enters the legends of Heracles, Peleus, Achilles, Jason, and Aeneas. He tutored these heroes, teaching them riding, archery, and the secrets of medicinal herbs.

Cephalus (SEHF uh luhs): A son of Hermes whose beauty troubled the dawn. Eos, the dawn-goddess, fell in love with the beautiful lad and bore him to her castle east of the sun. But he spurned the flame-haired goddess, declaring that he was affianced to Procris, daughter of the king of Athens, and intended to remain faithful. Eos protested, telling him that Procris was false-hearted and unworthy of his love. When he continued to disdain her, Eos changed his appearance and challenged him to return to Procris in his new form and test her faithfulness. Cephalus did so. But this

was an unfair test — for when Eos changed his appearance she had left him with his own personality. Procris, lonely, and confused by the disappearance of her lover, found herself mysteriously drawn to the young stranger, and declared her love for him. Thereupon, Eos allowed Cephalus to resume his own form and he accused Procris of unfaithfulness. The princess was devastated by these events. She ran off into the woods and joined the retinue of Artemis. The moon-goddess was delighted with her new recruit and gave her a spear that could not miss its mark. But Procris promptly took this spear as a love-offering to Cephalus, who was an ardent hunter. He was delighted with the spear; they became reconciled. After they were wed, however, Procris remained jealous of Eos, and suspected that her husband was trysting with the dawn-goddess. Finally her suspicions grew so intense that she followed him into the forest when he went out hunting. She spied on him from the underbrush and he, hearing the leaves rustle, whirled and threw his spear which could not miss. He went into the thicket and saw his wife lying on the ground, transfixed by the spear, bleeding to death. Wild with grief, he went into exile and never returned.

Cerberus (SIR bur us): The three-headed dog employed by Hades to guard the portals of death. One of the heads is turned toward Tartarus to watch that none of the dead escape. Another is turned outward to warn the living from the gates. And the third head is reserved for salvaging any of the dead who try to escape, or any of the living who try to trespass. Only twice has his vigilance

been cheated. Once Orpheus lulled all three heads to sleep by playing beautiful lullabies on his lyre. Heracles overcame him more simply on his expedition into Tartarus. He throttled each of the three necks until the monster lost consciousness. Then, it is said, Heracles brought the dog back to King Eurystheus — for this was his twelfth labor, thus ending his servitude. But the king was appalled by the sight of Cerberus — as Heracles knew he would be — and hid in a ditch. He refused to come out until Heracles, in high glee, bore the beast back to Tartarus, collected a ransom from Hades, and planted Cerberus again before the gates.

Cercopes (sir KOH peez): Two dwarfish larcenous sons of Oceanus, who practiced every species of mischief. Once, coming across Heracles lying asleep, they gleefully began to steal the arrows from his quiver. However, he awoke and caught them. He tied them feet-first to a pole and carried them off, hanging head downward from his shoulder. They were so amused by their unusual posture that they burst out laughing. Heracles, amazed, asked them the cause of their mirth. Instead of answering, they laughed harder. Infected by their laughter, Heracles began to laugh and released them. However, they were audacious enough to practice some of their tricks on Zeus, who was not amused. He changed them into monkeys.

Cercyon (SUR sih uhn): A brutish king of Eleusis whose notion of hospitality was to challenge visitors to a wrestling match

which would invariably end in their death. When Theseus visited Eleusis, however, there was a different outcome. For Theseus, who was small of stature, had perfected the art of turning an adversary's strength against him. The match ended when Theseus seized Cercyon by the ankles, whirled him off the ground, and dashed his brains out against a rock, to the delight of the entire countryside.

Ceres (SEE reez; SIHR eez): The Roman name for Demeter, goddess of the harvest. It is from her name that we derive our word, "cereal."

Cerynean Hind (sur ih NEE uhn HY'nd): Heracles' third labor was to capture this white stag, brother to the four stags employed by Artemis to draw her moon-chariot. These were the most beautiful stags ever seen; they had golden horns and brass hooves. They ran more swiftly than the wind, these moon-stags, but swifter yet was their brother, the Cerynean Hind, the only one swift enough to escape Artemis when, in her girlhood, she had captured the other four. Heracles hunted this stag for an entire year, chasing him to the western rim of the world, then northward beyond the source of the snows, and back again. He was never able to catch him. Finally, he had to string the bow given him by Apollo, notch an arrow, and at more than a mile's distance, drive the shaft through the forelegs of the running stag, pinning the legs so that the beast could no longer flee, without otherwise harming itself. Then Heracles took the stag on his shoulders and bore it back to King

Eurystheus. On the way, however, he was stopped by Artemis, who reproached him for injuring the marvelous stag. But Heracles promised he would return it unharmed, and that she would have it as a fifth stag for her moon-chariot. Whereupon she allowed him to go on his way.

Cestus (SEHSS tuhs): Aphrodite's girdle. A magical garment to which she was supposed to owe her irresistible attractiveness. However, most authorities agree that this girdle was a fiction concocted by other goddesses envious of Aphrodite's conquests, and that her only garment was her fleece of yellow hair. Certainly, all the male gods of the pantheon, scores of demigods, and dozens of heroic mortals were prepared to testify that the love-goddess needed no aid to her own charms.

Ceto (SEE toh): Daughter of the Titans, and mother of monsters. Her union with her brother, Phorcys, produced a frightful brood — including the haggish Graeae, the snake-haired Gorgons, the bat-winged Sirens, the dog-headed Scylla, and the huge-fanged serpent Ladon.

Charon (KAY run; KAHR uhn): The surly boatman who ferried the dead across the river Styx. The dead had to pay for this last ride; Charon demanded a silver coin in fee. That is why corpses in ancient Greece were buried with coins under their tongues. Those souls who could not pay, or whose bodies lay unburied, were

condemned to wander the near shore of Styx for a hundred years — bewildered, lonely, hanging between death and life. Only after such time had passed would Charon consent to ferry them to their final exile in Tartarus. The living he refuses to ferry at all, for they are not allowed in Hades' kingdom. But there were three who crossed nevertheless: Orpheus charmed him with song; Heracles bullied him; and Odysseus tricked him. All three crossed the Styx into Tartarus, and crossed again coming back.

Charybdis (kuh RIB dihss): An underwater monster who had once been a greedy woman, so greedy she would steal the cattle of her neighbors and roast them for her dinner. Zeus, angered by this, hurled her into the sea, where she was transformed into the shape of her own greed; she became a whirlpool sucking down ships that passed too close by, and devouring their crews. She sat on one side of a narrow strait off the coast of Sicily. Opposite her squatted her partner in horror, the dog-headed Scylla. Between them they became the most fearsome perils to navigation along the coasts of the Inner Sea. Ships had to pass exactly in the middle of the strait between Scylla and Charybdis or risk being destroyed by one or the other.

Chione (KY oh nee): A princess of Thessaly who bore twin sons to different gods. One was sired by Hermes, the other by Apollo. Hermes' son was Autolycus, the master thief, whose descendant was Odysseus. His twin, sired by Apollo, was

Philammon, a marvelous musician. But Chione coaxed Apollo to say that her beauty was greater than that of his sister, Artemis. The moon-goddess heard about this and was enraged. She killed Chione with one of her unerring silver arrows, but Apollo, intervening, turned the girl into a hawk.

Chiron (KY ruhn): Wisest of the Centaurs, and tutor to many heroes. He was expert in the arts of music, healing, archery, and the care of animals. Among his famous pupils were Heracles, Achilles, and Jason. He taught Peleus sword-play, and Asclepius a technique for setting bones.

Chrysaeor (kry SAY or): He was son of a monster and father of monsters, but he himself was a handsome warrior, known as the Chieftain of the Golden Spear. He was born from Medusa's blood when Perseus cut off her head. It was said that Poseidon had sired upon her this delayed offspring. Among the many monsters that Chrysaeor fathered was the three-bodied Geryon who enters the story of Heracles.

Chryseis (kry SEE uhs): A Trojan girl whose beauty plagued both Greek and Trojan armies. Captured and enslaved by Agamemnon, she prayed to Apollo whom her father served as priest. Apollo responded with pestilence, shooting fever-tipped arrows into the Greek tents. Nor was the plague lifted until Agamemnon released Chryseis. During her sojourn among the

Greeks, however, she had fallen in love with Diomedes. Later, she betrayed her Trojan lover, Troilus, and brought secrets of the Trojan defenses to Diomedes as a love token. In medieval romances she is called “Cressida.” The story of Troilus and Cressida provided a theme for both Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Cilissa (SY LIHSS uh): A minor character in the tragic story of the House of Atreus. When the usurper Aegisthus thus wanted to wipe out Agamemnon’s line, he decided to murder the infant Orestes. But Cilissa, who was Orestes’ nurse, put her own son in the prince’s crib, and Aegisthus strangled him instead. Orestes lived to kill Aegisthus.

Circe (SUR see): A daughter of the sun’s charioteer, this beautiful demigoddess was skilled in magical spells and magical herbs. But even without the aid of magic, the sorcery of her singing voice and her physical beauty were enough to hold men enthralled. Many men loved her. When she tired of them, she did not dismiss them, but changed them into animals suggested by their personalities and appearances, and kept them as pets on her castle grounds. Her most famous encounter was with Odysseus. He had moored offshore, and sent part of his crew to explore the island. Circe received them royally — then, after she had wine and dined them, changed them into swine, knowing that their captain would come to rescue them; it was Odysseus who interested her. But when Odysseus arrived, he was armed with a counter-spell given

him by Hermes, and was thus invulnerable to Circe's magic. He forced her to return his men to their own forms, and mastered her in every way. However, he too fell under her personal spell, remaining on the island for three years. During that time she bore him a son, Telegonus. Finally, however, his sea-fever returned and he resumed his voyage, but not before Circe had prophesied very accurately the terrible perils he would encounter before reaching his home.

Clio (KLY oh): The muse of history. She descended from Parnassus to visit certain men and fill them with a fever for delving into old manuscripts and searching out people who could tell them about times past. Then, under her patronage, these scholars would inscribe what they believed had happened.

Clotho (KLOH thoh): One of the Fates. She is the Sister of Spindle; youngest of the three. She spins the thread of life; Lacheis measures; Atropos cuts.

Clymene (KLIHM uh nee): A Nereid who was favored by Zeus, and became the mother of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory.

Clytemnestra (kly tuhm NEHSS truh): Adulterous wife of Agamemnon, who murdered her husband when he returned from the Trojan War. She was a daughter of Leda; half-sister to Helen; mother of Orestes, Electra, and Iphigenia. She was killed by her son, Orestes, who thus avenged his father's murder.

Clytie (KLY tee): A daughter of Oceanus who was enamored of Apollo. She could not bear her loss when the god tired of her. She would arise early each morning and stand with her face upturned all day long watching the passage of his sun-chariot across the sky. She grew rooted to the spot, and was transformed into a flower which turns its face always to the sun, the heliotrope.

Comatas (koh MAY tuhss): A goat herd who glimpsed the Muses dancing on a slope of Mt. Helicon. He was so moved by the sight that he sacrificed one of his master's goats. His master did not share his enthusiasm and shut him up in a box. But the Muses rescued him, and employed him thereafter to tend their flocks.

Copreus (KOH pree uhs): A herald of King Eurystheus, whose misfortune it was to carry the orders of the king to Heracles. Displeased by a really irksome assignment, Heracles flung him from the wall and killed him.

Corcyra (KOR sy ruh): A sickle-shaped island in the Ionian Sea. According to legend, it was formed when Cronus flung the sickle with which he had dismembered his father, Uranus, into the sea. Stained with the god's blood, it became a very fertile island, and gained its name from the nymph Corcyra; she was loved by Poseidon, who gave her the island as a dwelling place. It enters other legends. Odysseus' ship was wrecked upon its reef. Jason and

Medea conducted their dark nuptials in one of its caves. This beautiful island is now known as Corfu.

Core (KOH ruh): Another name for Persephone, daughter of Demeter, and Queen of the Dead. “Core” means “maiden,” and Persephone dropped this name after her abduction by Hades.

Cornucopia (kor noo KOH pih uh): The broken-off horn of the goat Amalthea, whose milk nourished the infant Zeus. To honor the goat, Zeus filled this horn with golden fruit and gave it the power to replenish itself when empty. The word “cornucopia” means “horn of plenty.”

Coronis (kuh ROH nuhss): A princess of the Lapiths, who was loved by Apollo and became the mother of Asclepius. Apollo had forced his attentions upon Coronis. When pregnant with Asclepius, she rebelled, and returned to her first love, an Arcadian youth. Apollo’s sister, Artemis, always watchful of his honor, was enraged by this and killed the girl with one of her silver arrows. Asclepius was born during her death throes. It is said that the infant — who was to become the father of medicine — watched the details of his own birth with profound attention, displaying a precocious talent for anatomy. Crows have always been associated with this legend, and take their Greek name from “Coronis.” According to one tale, Coronis was turned into a crow after her death. In another version, Apollo appointed a crow to chaperone

her; when the crow bungled its assignment, Apollo cursed all crows with a curse so terrible it scorched their white feathers. Since then, all crows have been black.

Corunetes (kor UHN uh teez): The cudgel-man. This brute used to prowl the roads of Epidaurus, waylaying travelers and crushing their skulls with a huge brass club. When Theseus traveled that road Corunetes tried to beat his brains out, but the lad seized the cudgel, and served the cudgeler as *he* had served so many others. Theseus kept the brass club as his own weapon.

Corybantes (kor ih BAHN teez): Sons of Apollo and Thalia; addicted to dance. Clad in full armor, they performed at the Winter Solstice, wearing crests of gorgeous feathers, clashing spear on shield to celebrate the mighty birth of Zeus.

Corythus (KOR uh thus): A son of Paris. His mother was the mountain-nymph, Oenone, who Paris deserted when he went in search of Helen. Oenone never forgave him, and tutored her son in the ways of vengeance. She sent Corythus to guide the Greeks past the Trojan defenses, into the city itself. While in Troy, however, preparing his treachery, the youth fell in love with Helen. Jealous Paris, not recognizing his son, killed him.

Creon (KREE uhn): The uncle of Oedipus, who took the throne of Thebes after Oedipus abdicated and Jocasta killed herself. Later, he played a villainous role in the episode of Antigone,

ordering his niece to be buried alive because she had insisted on a decent burial for her brother, Polyneices. Creon was not a bad king and did many worthwhile things, but it is for this cruelty that he is remembered.

Cronus (KROH nuhs): Father of Zeus; son of Uranus and Gaia. Cronus was the father of the gods and gave his name to time. The youngest of the Titan brood, he married his sister, Rhea, and murdered his father, Uranus. He lived in fear of his father's last words which had predicted that Cronus would be as brutally dethroned by his own son. He was eager to disprove this prophecy, and swallowed his children one by one as soon as they were born. After losing five godlings in this way, his wife, Rhea, rebelled. She went off to have her sixth child in secret. Then she returned to Cronus carrying a stone swaddled in baby clothes, which he swallowed. Rhea named the infant god Zeus, and kept him hidden until he had grown into a radiant youth. Then she tutored him in ideas of vengeance, for she was weary of her all-devouring husband. Zeus ambushed Cronus when the old god was out hunting and kicked him suddenly in the belly. Whereupon he vomited forth first a stone, then the five children he had swallowed, still alive, still undigested — for they were destined to live as gods. Cronus fled through the grove and Zeus did not pursue. He was greeted by his brothers and sisters, who immediately named him their leader. Then he led them against the titanic forces of Cronus and a mighty battle raged across the floor of heaven. The young gods prevailed.

Cronus disappeared, never to be seen again. Zeus remained master of the gods. Some say that Cronus and his Titans took refuge in the mountains and are heard there to this day, rumbling and spitting lava, and shaking the earth. Others say that Zeus caught Cronus and slew him according to prophecy, as Cronus had slain Uranus. Those who live near volcanoes believe the mountain tale. Those who live near the sea believe Cronus was slain and flung into the ocean-stream. They believe the ghosts of the slaughtered gods, Cronus and Uranus, wrangle underwater, and move the waters in those vast tantrums called tidal waves. In Roman mythology, Cronus was known as Saturn.

Cyclopes (SY klahps): Giant metal-workers, trained by Hephaestus to forge thunderbolts for Zeus and to do other fine work. They are distinguished by having but one eye each, which they wear in the middle of their foreheads. The most famous Cyclops in legend is Polyphemus, a ferocious specimen, who captured Odysseus' crew, and devoured many of them before Odysseus made him drunk and blinded his single eye. Homer described Polyphemus as being a son of Poseidon. After Odysseus blinded him, he prayed to his father for vengeance. The sea-god responded by hurling storms in Odysseus' path, wrecking his ships and drowning his sailors, thus delaying him for ten years in his return to Ithaca.

Cycnus (SIHK nuhs): A son of Poseidon, who was raised by a swan. Granted invulnerability by his father to spear-thrust and sword-cut, Cycnus became a very formidable warrior on the Trojan side. After slaying many Greeks, he finally encountered Achilles who recognized invincibility in no one but himself. However, Achilles could not wound Cycnus with spear or sword. Finally, Achilles hurled him to the ground and piled rocks on top of him until Cycnus was smothered. Cycnus' father did not allow him to die, however, but changed him into a swan. Since then, all swans have born his name.

Cyrene (sy REE nee): A Lapith maiden who loved to roam the mountain slopes, hunting deer and wrestling lions and bears. Apollo once reined up his sun-chariot to watch her wrestle a lion. He was so struck by her grace and strength that he abandoned the reins of his sun-stallions to his charioteer, Helios, and descended from the sky to begin an ardent courtship of Cyrene. She bore him two sons, Aristeus, founder of cities, and Idmon, wisest man of his time.

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Dactyls (DAK tihlz): Ten demigods, children of Rhea or, some say, of Cybele. They were five males and five females who dwelt on Phrygia's Mt. Ida, and were so enormously skilled at metal work that the ten fingers were named for their deftness. They also acted as guides to the great Mysteries, initiating mortals into the secret rites of Cybele and Rhea. The Dactyls are associated in myth with the armored dancers, the Corybantes. Some tales hold that they are identical. Legends about them, though confused, seem to express the dawning wonder of ancient man in the increasing skill of his hands.

Daedalus (DEHD uh luhs): Master artificer, the greatest inventor of ancient times. He dwelt in Athens, and was particularly favored by Athena, who taught him mechanical principles never before divulged to man. Under her tutelage he invented the sail, the compass, the potter's wheel, and the axe. However, he grew jealous of his nephew, Talos, who worked as his apprentice and was displaying enormous talent. In a spasm of envy he killed Talos, thus forfeiting the favor of Athena and arousing the wrath of his neighbors. He was forced to flee Athens, and took refuge in Crete, where King Minos was happy to employ him, and where he quickly became embroiled in the intrigues of a corrupt court. He

made marvelous toys for the little princesses, Ariadne and Phaedra — parasols that opened by themselves when the sun hit them; tops that would spin in mid-air, and for Ariadne, a ball of thread that could unwind its full length, then reel itself up again. Especially attentive to him, though, was Queen Pasiphae, who desperately needed something that only he could provide. Cursed by Aphrodite, she had conceived a monstrous passion for a white bull of the royal herd. Daedalus contracted a handsome wooden cow for the queen, with glowing yellow eyes and ivory horns, and a musical moo. He hollowed it out so she could position herself inside, and tenderly upholstered it with leather for her comfort. Hidden in this wooden cow, she could approach the bull. Minos knew nothing of this until his queen gave birth to a little monster — half boy, half bull — which a jeering populace dubbed “Minotaur,” meaning Minos’ bull. The king ordered Daedalus to construct a novel open-air prison in his castle garden at Gnosso. It was a maze, full of winding paths that crossed and re-crossed each other, dead ends, and hidden exits. It was impossible for anyone to find his way in or out. Here Minos imprisoned Pasiphae and the Minotaur. Daedalus and his son, Icarus, were also penned up in the labyrinth, for Minos had not forgiven the old craftsman who had made the wooden cow. Daedalus kept himself occupied in a workshop he set up in the labyrinth, and also studied the flight of birds. He was determined to understand why they could fly and man could not. Finally, at the urging of Icarus, he constructed two pairs of wings. And father and

son flew out of the labyrinth. Icarus, however, perished on the journey. Daedalus, very much saddened, took refuge with a king of Sicily named Cocalus, for whom he built impregnable fortresses. The vengeful Minos came to Sicily with an invasion fleet demanding that Daedalus be surrendered to him. But the old artificer had endeared himself to the court, and Minos was killed by the daughters of Cocalus. Daedalus lived the rest of his life in Sicily, but was never quite the same. He missed his adventurous son, Icarus, and was eager to join him in death. Before he died, though, he invented the anchor-winch, the harpoon, and the pulley.

Danae (DAN ay ee): The mother of Perseus. Her father, Acrisius, king of Argos, had been warned by an oracle that he would meet his death at the hands of a grandson. Therefore, he was determined that his only child would bear no children. He imprisoned Danae in a brass tower with no doors and only a single arrow-slit for ventilation. But that arrow-slit was enough to admit a shaft of sunlight. And when Zeus determined to visit the beautiful princess in her cell he transformed himself into a shaft of sunlight, and slid in through the arrow-slit. When Acrisius found that his daughter had managed to become pregnant while in solitary confinement he knew that powerful and mischievous forces were at work. After she bore an infant son, he locked both of them in a wooden chest which he cast upon the sea. But the wooden chest floated like a boat to the island of Sephiros, where it was pulled ashore by a fisherman. The princess and her son were royally

welcomed by the king of Sephiros. This king, Polydectes, fell in love with Danae, and tried to force her to marry him, but she resisted him. Later, when Perseus had gone on his wonderful adventures, and returned with the head of Medusa, he came to Sephiros just in time to interrupt the nuptials that Polydectes had finally forced upon Danae. He turned the king and all his wedding guests into stone, and bore his mother off to safety. Nor did his grandfather escape destiny: The prophecy came true. Perseus competed in a discus-throwing contest, and hurled the discus so far that it landed among the spectators, killing an elderly stranger — his grandfather, Acrisius. His daughter, Danae, did not mourn his death.

Daphne (DAF nee): A nymph who preferred to undergo transformation rather than suffer the embrace of Apollo. Pursued by the sun-god, she called upon her river-god father to help her. He changed her into a laurel tree. Apollo grieved, but honored the tree. He decreed that a wreath made of laurel leaves should be used to crown heroes, poets, and men who win games.

Daphnis (DAF nuhs): A son of Hermes by an unknown nymph. He inherited his father's talent for music, playing the pipes enchantingly, and composing the first song of the fields, called a pastoral. He was an ardent hunter also, and passionately devoted to the care of his hounds. According to legend, when five of his favorite hounds died suddenly of a mysterious ailment, he refused

to eat, and grieved himself to death. Hades was moved to make special disposition of his case. He restored Daphnis' hounds to him, and allowed him to chase spectral deer forever over fields of asphodel in a part of Tartarus that abounds with game.

Deianeira (dee yuh NY ruh): Second wife of Heracles. She did what a generation of the most fearful giants and monsters failed to do — she killed him. She did not mean to kill him, but was used as a pawn by a vengeful centaur named Nessus. This centaur had attempted to assault Deianeira while ferrying her across a river. But Heracles, though half a mile downstream, made one of his famous long bowshots, and pierced Nessus with an arrow whose barb had been poisoned when Heracles had dipped it into the blood of the Hydra. The dying centaur told Deianeira that he repented of the insult he had offered her, and, in apology, offered her a vial of his blood, telling her that it would prove useful if she ever found that Heracles' affection for her was waning. All she would have to do then would be to dip one of Heracles' garments in this blood, and when her husband wore it he would resume all his old feeling for her. She took the vial of blood and Nessus died. Some time later, Deianeira became jealous of a maiden named Iole, in whom Heracles was displaying an interest. Deianeira dipped a shirt belonging to Heracles in the blood of Nessus. When Heracles put the shirt on he was seized with a terrible agony. It was a shirt of fire. When he tried to tear the garment off, strips of his flesh came off with it. He perished in utmost torment. But he did not fall into

the clutches of Hades. For his father, Zeus, transported him to Olympus where he was received among the gods with great honor, and was granted immortality.

Deiphobus (dee IHF oh buhs): A prince of Troy, and Hector's favorite brother. He fought very bravely against the Greeks, and in recognition of his mighty deeds was awarded the custody of Helen after Paris was killed in the last month of the war. He married Helen against her will, but she soon made him pay for it. When the strategy of Odysseus succeeded, and the wooden horse was rolled inside the walls of Troy, Helen — knowing the Greeks — realized that the horse was hollow and that warriors were hidden inside its belly. Thereupon she stole all Deiphobus' weapons as he lay asleep. When the Greeks emerged from the horse in the middle of the night and began to sack the city they found Deiphobus unarmed, and were able to kill him easily. They also set his house on fire. Helen danced with joy when Deiphobus was slain. She danced by the light of the burning house hoping to win back Menelaus, the husband she had abandoned. She was successful.

Delphi (DEHL fy): The earth's navel — site of Apollo's temple, where the priestesses were noted for their gift of prophecy. Actually, Delphi is a system of caves opening out of Mt. Parnassus; the ancients believed it was the very center of the earth. Apollo pursued his mother's enemy, the Python, into one of these caves, and slew him there with his golden arrows. Priestesses of the sun-

god were thereafter called Pythonesses in memory of that combat. These pythoness-oracles sat on three-legged stools straddling fissures in the cave floor which emitted gusts of steam. The oracles chewed laurel and went into a steamy trance — their famed prophetic sleep in which they uttered riddles. When solved, these riddles were supposed to contain secrets of the future...for those with sufficient piety who had paid an appropriate fee.

Demeter (duh MEE tuhr): Daughter of Cronus and Rhea; goddess of the harvest. This stately green-clad goddess strode up and down the land scattering seed and blessing the furrows. Crops were her concern. She presided over the sowing, the cultivation, and the harvest. She was beneficent but moody, and her moods were life and death to mankind. Her happiness was abundance; her wrath was famine. She was much occupied with her brothers. She favored Zeus, who was the father of her beloved flower-princess, Persephone. She never forgave her eldest brother, Hades, for abducting Persephone and forcing her to marry him. For that part of the year which Persephone must spend underground with her husband, Demeter forbade the earth to bear fruit. She also feuded with her brother, Poseidon, who, each springtime, used to swell mischievously, sending tides to flood her fields. But according to legend, they finally forgave each other. Their children, born where the land meets the sea, were the winged horse Arion, and the nymph Despoena. In Roman mythology, Demeter was known as Ceres.

Deucalion (duh KAY lih uhn): The Greek Noah, who survived the deluge Zeus sent upon earth to wipe out wicked mankind. Deucalion was the son of the generous Titan Prometheus, who had braved the everlasting displeasure of Zeus to give man the gift of fire. He inherited his father's nobility of soul, and was farsighted enough to build an ark before the deluge. When the flood came, Deucalion and his wife, Pyrra, sailed away on the ark, taking with them all the animals they could herd aboard. They floated on the raging flood-waters until, finally, the rains stopped, and the water subsided. They had run aground on the slope of a mountain which they later found to be Parnassus. Here were the caves of Delphi wherein dwelt the priestesses of Apollo. Deucalion consulted the oracle, who informed them that the race of mankind had been wiped out. Deucalion asked the Pythoness how man might be restored to earth. Out of her deep trance she answered, "Go with head averted, and throw behind you the bones of your mother." It was a typical riddle-answer of the oracle, and Deucalion and Pyrra spent the night trying to solve it. By morning they had hit upon an answer. Their mother, they decided, must be Mother Earth, and her bones must be the rocks. Thereupon, they walked the mountain slope with heads averted, casting stones behind them. Those that Deucalion cast became men. Those thrown by Pyrra became women. And these new beautiful men and women followed Deucalion and Pyrra in a joyous throng to begin the repopulation of the earth.

Diana (dy AN uh): Roman name for Artemis, goddess of the moon, and goddess of the chase.

Dido (DY doh): A princess of Tyre. She fled the city when her father died and her cruel brother succeeded to the throne. She led a band of Tyrrhian nobles to the north coast of Africa, where she contracted to purchase land, as much as could be covered by a bull's hide. But she tricked the seller by cutting the bull's hide into strips, and claiming enough land upon which to site a city. The Tyrrhians were bold and warlike, and Dido proved herself a resolute leader. The city she had founded became Carthage, capital of a powerful kingdom. Some years later, Aeneas landed there, the only Trojan prince to escape the sack of Troy. Dido welcomed him, and he spent long hours with the Queen, telling her about the war against the Greeks, and the mighty deeds performed before the walls of Troy. He told her of the battles and the deaths...of Helen and Paris and Hector and Achilles, of Troilus and Chryseis, and Odysseus...of women like Hecuba and Cassandra, and the noble Andromache...of challenges and duels and deaths. Dido listened thirstily. She fell violently in love with Aeneas and he loved her in return. But Aeneas was destined to resume his journey to Italy, where he was to found a nation called Rome. Some say that Hermes came to him with a message from Zeus; others say that Zeus wrote his commandment in lightning on a stormy sky. At any rate, Aeneas obeyed the gods, and departed. Dido built an enormous pyre of wood, placed herself on top of it, and bade her

slaves to set it afire. Aeneas, looking back from the deck of his ship, saw a pillar of smoke, and wondered about it briefly, then dismissed it from his mind, for the wind had changed and he had to shift sail. Dido perished in the flames of the pyre.

Diomedes (dy oh MEE deez): There are two mythological characters of this name. The earlier one was a son of the war-god Ares, and the lion-wrestling Cyrene, and he was worthy of such parents. He was a warlike brute, who kept a stable of man-eating mares. He cherished these swift beasts, and fed them lazy slaves, rebellious subjects, and prisoners of war. But then his kingdom was visited by Heracles, undertaking his eighth labor; his task was to yoke these same mares to a chariot and drive them back to King Eurystheus. Heracles informed Diomedes of his intention. Diomedes objected in very violent terms, whereupon Heracles fed him to his own mares, then drove them off in completion of his labor.

The second Diomedes was a figure of much more nobility. He was king of Aetolia, a leader of the Greek forces against Troy, and was counted one of the four best fighters among the invaders — the others being Ajax, Odysseus, and the matchless Achilles. In his most incredible feat, Diomedes encountered the war-god Ares, who had disguised himself and taken the field against the Greeks. Seized with battle-fury Diomedes wounded Ares with a spear-thrust and drove him from the field. He also wounded Aeneas; killed Rhesus, king of Thrace, and stole the Thracian horses of magical

speed. Finally, he was one of those who hid in the belly of the Wooden Horse, to emerge at night and begin the last massacre of the Trojans. Between battles he found time to win the love of Chryseis, who brought him valuable secrets of the Trojan defenses. During the war, his exploits earned the favor of Athena, who was his protectress throughout — once even acting as his charioteer. But he earned the wrath of Aphrodite. Her anger was kindled against him on two counts: He had seriously wounded her son, Aeneas, and had scratched her own beautiful arm with his spear-point, causing her to flee, sobbing, from the field. She retaliated by teaching his wife to be unfaithful. So Diomedes left Aetolia and went into exile. In another legend, Diomedes was preparing to muster his forces against the journeying Aeneas, but Aphrodite foiled him by turning his warriors into birds. Later, it is said, he appeased the wrath of the goddess by naming his strongest city for her. After his death, he was made immortal by Athena.

Dione (dy OH nee): The oak-goddess. Her name crops up in the most ancient legends, those of the great mother-goddess who ruled under various names before invaders came out of the north with their array of patriarchal gods. Her key legend disputes Aphrodite's foam-birth. In this myth, Dione is the mother of Aphrodite; Zeus is her father.

Dionysus (dy uh NY sush; dy oh NIHSH ih uhs): God of the vine, master of revels, bestower of ecstasy. This untamed, ivy-

crowned youth was perhaps the most important of the nature gods, and his legends abound. It is agreed that Zeus is his father, but different stories give him different mothers. Demeter, queen of harvests, is one. The nymph Lethe, whose name means forgetfulness, is another. But in the tale most widely told Semele is his mother. She was a Phrygian princess, priestess of the new moon, whom Zeus courted, invisibly, as the night wind. Unfortunately, however, she suspected that he was other than he seemed, and coaxed him into dropping his disguise. He appeared to her in his own form; she was consumed by the divine fire upon which no mortal can look and live. Dying, she gave birth to Dionysus, who was born among fire. Ever afterward flame ran in his veins giving him his matchless radiance. Zeus wished to keep the infant hidden from the vengeful Hera, and gave him to mountain nymphs to raise. When half grown, the young god fell under the tutelage of Silenus, a shaggy, pot-bellied little woodland deity, said to be the son of Pan — very mischievous, and very wise. It was he who taught Dionysus the secret of the grape and the terrible enchantment cast by its fermented juice. Accompanied by Silenus, he wandered far, visiting all the kingdoms that border the Inner Sea, introducing men to vine-culture. He was followed by a troupe of dancing drunken worshippers — among them the sons of Silenus, the Sileni or Satyrs, and hordes of wild women, called Maenads, who revelled nightly under the moon. Once he was captured by pirates who took him on board their ship, thinking he

was a prince they could hold for ransom. Suddenly the ship stopped, although it was sailing before the wind in deep water. The amazed pirates saw vines sprouting out of the ocean, climbing the hull, twining around the mast. And the oars of the galley slaves turned into sea serpents who wrenched themselves free and swam away. Where Dionysus had been sitting in the bow, a lion stood. The wind in the rigging became the sound of flutes, and the beautiful golden lion raised himself on his hind legs and danced. The terrified pirates jumped overboard and were turned into dolphins. It is told that Dionysus descended into Tartarus to rescue his mother, Semele. This was Hades' kingdom, the land beyond death, from which there is no return. But Dionysus brought a bouquet of flowers for Persephone that was so beautiful and whose fragrance was so intoxicating she could not refuse anything he asked. She permitted Semele to follow her son back to the land of the living. Dionysus then climbed Olympus and persuaded Zeus to make Semele a goddess. She became one of the moon deities. Zeus was so taken with his gorgeous son that he wished to enroll him among the Pantheon, which could not number more than twelve. But modest Hestia yielded her place to Dionysus. He was given a seat at the right hand of Zeus, and was honored among the gods. Nevertheless, he frequently descended from Olympus because of his love for mankind. And the festivals in his honor were so numerous and so joyous that the other gods often disguised themselves as mortals to join in the frolic. The grape, the ivy, and

the rose were sacred to Dionysus; also panther, goat, and dolphin. One of his names is Lysios, the loosener, because his gift of wine unshackles men from the daily round, but, if taken in excess, foolishly loosens their tongues. Dionysus is loved beyond the other gods because he has taught men to escape the narrow bounds of their own personalities and yield to the ecstasy of natural forces, an ecstasy that permits them to know the gods in their deepest mystery.

Dodona (doh DOH nuh): A temple of Zeus in Epirus, and dwelling place of his most ancient oracle. Here, under a giant oak tree, Zeus courted Dodona, the oak-goddess. And here, centuries later, Deucalion landed after the Deluge. In gratitude for his escape from the flood waters he built a temple and dedicated it to Zeus.

Doris (DOR ihs): A lovely green-haired ocean-goddess, who married Nereus, wise old man of the sea. They had fifty daughters, called the Nereids, who inherited their mother's beauty and became court attendants to the rulers of the sea, Poseidon and Amphitrite. The Nereids swam underwater, and broached like dolphins, swimming alongside ships, singing and calling sailors to drown. They emerged at dusk to dance upon the islands. Their lithe forms and sparkling eyes were the essence of the sea's beauty. They were courted by gods, demigods, and also mortals, and enter many legends.

Dorus (DOH ruhs): A grandson of Deucalion, who became an ancestor of the Hellenic tribe called Dorians. This warlike tribe invaded the Peloponnese from the north, overcoming the indigenous tribes who worshipped the mother-goddess, and imposing a patriarchal form of worship centering upon Zeus and the other Olympians.

Dryads (DRY uhdz): Wood-nymphs. These lovely fleet demigoddesses reigned over forest and glen, were custodians of wildlife, hunting companions of Artemis, and — above all — the titular deities of trees. Each dryad dwelt in a tree of her own and perished when that tree was destroyed. They ranged the forests, vigilantly guarding their trees and driving off anyone who carried an axe. In certain legends, they are most specifically associated with oak trees, the most sacred of all trees, that Zeus had adopted as his own.

Dryas (DRY uhs): Daughter of Pan. Unlike her sister wood-nymphs, she was extremely shy and loathed the very idea of men. She fled whenever anything male approached, man or god. Finally, she entered her tree and never came out.

Dryope (DRY oh pee): A nymph on whose caprice the Argosy almost foundered. She inhabited a spring on the island of Pegae where Jason landed to take on water. While there, the beloved companion of Heracles, a youth named Hylas, wandered away, and

knelt to drink of the spring. Dryope, lurking underwater, saw the lad, and fell in love with him. She pulled him into the spring, and never let him emerge. Heracles raged over the entire island, uprooting trees, and killing everything that crossed his path, man and beast. In his blood-lust, he was on the point of slaying all the Argonauts and smashing their ship. But Jason, using all his honeyed arts of persuasion, convinced him that Hylas must surely reappear if given time. Heracles grimly took up his post to wait for the lad — and the Argonauts sailed off, unharmed. But Heracles never saw Hylas again. In retaliation, according to one legend, Heracles rounded up the inhabitants of the island and took them to Delphi to be slaves.

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Echidna (ee KID nuh): A monster, and mother of monsters. She was one of that fearful litter whose parents were Ceto and Phorcys. She coupled with the foul and gigantic dragon, known as Typhon, and bore a terrible brood, including Cerberus, the three-headed dog; the Chimera; and the cannibalistic Scylla. Echidna was half woman and half serpent. In some myths she is described as the mother of the hundred-headed Hydra, and the Sphinx. She was finally killed by another monster, who caught her asleep. Her murderer was the hundred-eyed Argus who never slept.

Echo (EHK oh): A tender-hearted nymph who helped Zeus escape the vigilance of Hera. The goddess learned of this, and punished Echo by wiping her lips of speech, permitting her only to repeat the last words of anyone who spoke to her. This hampered the nymph in her wooing of the handsome, vain Narcissus — who found her conversation boring. She grieved herself into invisibility, and is found now only in certain valleys and vaulted places, where she will answer if you call.

Eileithia (eye ly THY yuh): A minor goddess, who assisted Hestia, goddess of the hearth, and presided over childbirth. She enters the legend of Heracles at its very beginning. When Alcmena was about to give birth to Heracles, who had been sired by Zeus,

the jealous Hera sent Eileithia to delay this birth. She did this to thwart Zeus, who had declared that the first prince of the House of Perseus to be born that night should rule Mycenae. By the “first prince,” Zeus meant Heracles, for his mother, Alcmene, was a granddaughter of Perseus. It was Hera’s design to prevent the birth of Heracles, and allow a cousin of his to be born first that night, and inherit the throne of Mycenae. Therefore she instructed Eileithia to hamper Alcmene in her labor. Eileithia sat before Alcmene’s door with crossed legs and crossed fingers. Alcmene labored but could not bear. Then, it is said, a servant of Alcmene, thinking Eileithia a witch who was casting a spell on her mistress, yelled suddenly — startling the goddess, who leaped up, uncrossing her legs and fingers. And Alcmene gave birth to Heracles...and to a twin, Iphicles, sired by her husband, Amphitryon. Eileithia punished the servant by changing her into a weasel.

Electra (ee LEHK truh): Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, a key figure in the bloody tale of the House of Atreus. She loved her father very much, and vowed vengeance when he was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. On the night of the murder she spirited her younger brother, Orestes, out of the castle, knowing that Aegisthus meant to murder him too. She left Orestes in a neighboring kingdom, and returned to Mycenae, where she pretended to be a dutiful daughter, dissembling her hatred of her mother and her mother’s lover. Then, when Orestes

had grown into a youth, she summoned him from exile, and inspired him with her own hatred. That night he entered the royal bedchamber with naked sword and killed his mother and Aegisthus. In the terrible time that followed, when Orestes was pursued by the Furies, and visited nightly by the howling ghost of his mother, Electra cared for him tenderly, and prevented him from taking his own life. Electra means amber, and amber was the color of her remarkable eyes. Our word “electricity” is derived from the name of this passionate girl, because the uncanny force was first summoned by rubbing amber with silk.

Electryon (ee LEHK trih uhn): Son of a hero, and grandfather of another. Perseus was his father, and Alcmene his daughter. After her encounter with Zeus, Alcmene bore Heracles. Electryon himself, though not of heroic stature, was a brave warrior, and a strong king who extended the frontiers of Mycenae.

Eleusinian Mysteries (ehl yu SINH ee uhn MIHSS tur eez): Annual rites performed by worshippers of Demeter, goddess of the harvest. They took place in Eleusis, a place sacred to her because she had been welcomed there with special reverence while on her heartbroken search for her abducted daughter, Persephone. A key ritual of these Mysteries was a dance-mime of Demeter’s search, and of its conclusion: Persephone is brought back from the Underworld bringing flowers to the earth again.

Elysian Fields (ee LIHZ ih uhn FEELD'Z; ee LIHZ uhn FEELD'Z): That part of Tartarus which was the abode of the blessed. The weather was always fair, and spectral game abounded. There the heroes sojourned after death, as well as men and women of simple virtue. The Harpies and Furies and other demons of Hades were barred from these precincts.

Empusae (ehm PU see): A host of small demons who attended Hecate, queen of hags, as she went about her rounds in Tartarus, tormenting the shades. Each of these scurvy creatures had one donkey's hoof and one brass foot. Their hands were claws, and they had leathery wings. At night, they left Tartarus and flew to the upper world where they haunted the roads, bedeviling travelers. But, for such malicious creatures, they were oddly sensitive and fled before insult. That is why travelers were often heard speaking loudly and hurling abuse, especially at night.

Endymion (ehn DIHM ih uhn): A beautiful youth for whom Artemis broke her vows of maidenhood. She saw him asleep on a mountaintop, and reined up her moon-chariot in wonder. Then she climbed down from the sky and visited him in an amorous dream. Endymion took such pleasure in his dream that he begged Zeus for an eternity of restless sleep, and for eternal youth so that he might continue to enjoy his dreams. Zeus granted his request, and the youth slept through all the ages of mythology, visited every night by the moon-goddess, who bore him fifty daughters.

Eos (EE ohs): Goddess of the dawn. She had white wings and spread them over the sky when she judged that night had run its course...for the first light of the morning is white. Then this beautiful goddess tossed her flame-colored hair, a shimmering gold and red pelt that lit up the sky. Spreading her white wings, tossing her flame-colored hair, her rosy face beaming with smiles, she traveled from east to west to announce the coming of her brother, Helios, the sun-charioteer. Aphrodite, growing jealous of Eos because she was pursued by Ares, god of war, cursed the dawn-goddess with a preference for mortals. And so Eos flew to earth and spirited away various handsome young men whom she carried to her eastern palace in the sky. Being mortal, though, they grew old while she remained young — and she always lost her loves. This was the essence of Aphrodite's curse. She had five children — the four winds, and the Morning Star.

Epeus (ee PEE uhs): A Cycladean chieftain who fought against Troy. He was a formidable boxer, and very good with tools. It was he who actually built the Wooden Horse which Odysseus had designed. According to one legend he was shipwrecked in Sicily on his way home from Troy. The Trojan women he had taken captive burned his ship because they had heard tales of the murderous jealousy of his wife. Epeus, undismayed, stayed in Italy, journeying northward with his retinue to found the city of Pisa.

Epigoni (ee PIG oh ny): Name given to the sons of those warriors who besieged the city of Thebes in an effort to wrest the throne from Creon, and make Polynices king. They became known as the Seven Against Thebes. The Epigoni, vowing to avenge their fallen fathers, also attacked Thebes, and were successful. Thersander, son of Polynices, became king, occupying the throne of his grandfather, Oedipus.

Epimenides (ehp uh MEN uh deez): A Cretan shepherd who was fond of writing poetry. Often, he would sit down to scribble a verse — deaf to the barking of his sheep dogs, and to the piteous bleating of lambs being eaten by a wolf. Once he followed some strayed sheep into a cave, and was so pleased by the cool shade after the hot sun that he lay down and fell asleep, and slept for fifty-seven years. Epimenides belongs to a very ancient group of legends. In one of them he is named as the first to build an altar to the mother-goddess in Crete.

Epimetheus (ehp ih MEE thee us): Brother of Prometheus, and husband of Pandora. His gentleness, like his brother's nobility, was on a Titanic scale. After Pandora had indulged her curiosity, and loosed a box full of eternal trouble on mankind, he simply took the golden box from her, and comforted the sobbing girl.

Erectheus (eh REHK thee us): A king of Athens, who, in a war against the Eleusinians, was told by an oracle that his city

could be saved only if he sacrificed his daughters. These daughters were remarkably courageous girls. Hearing of the prophecy, they decided to spare their father the pain of asking their death — and killed each other. The last one killed herself. The city was saved and the daughters of Erectheus were honored by Athenians forevermore.

Erichthonius (ur ihk THOH nih us): A son of Hephaestus; his mother is unknown. He became the fourth king of Athens. He was of noble character, but frightful appearance. Instead of legs, he was born with two serpent's-tails. However, he had inherited his father's skill with tools and designed the first chariot. Riding in the chariot he was able to conceal his serpentine legs. His image still abides among the stars as Auriga, the Charioteer.

Erinyes (ee RIHN ih eez): The Furies; three hell-hags with brass wings and brass claws. They pounced upon those who had offended the gods and harried them from place to place, never letting them rest — refusing to kill them but never ceasing their torment. They were held in such terrible fear that they were never referred to by their proper name, but were called the *Eumenides* or “kindly ones.” In Roman mythology, Erinyes were known as Furiae.

Eris (AIR ihss; EE rihs): Daughter of Zeus and Hera; twin sister of Ares; queen of contention. She shared many of the amiable

characteristics of her twin brother: riding beside him in his war-chariot, shrieking with glee at the sight of blood. War was her great festival, but she was addicted to strife in any form and ceaselessly fomented it — domestic quarrels, blood feuds, border skirmishes. She was detested by the other gods, but they tried to conceal their feelings, because her anger was deadly and she bore a grudge through eternity. In Roman mythology, Eris was known as Discordia.

Eros (EE rohs; AIR ohss): The archer of love. He is usually depicted as a slender winged youth bearing bow and arrows. These arrows are magical. Any man or woman pierced by a golden arrow fell passionately in love with whomever Eros designated; those pierced with a leaden arrow formed as violent a distaste. In most stories he is described as the son of Zeus and Aphrodite. But it is said that Zeus, fearing Hera's wrath, spread the rumor that Eros was born of Iris, the Rainbow, and that his father was the West Wind. Whatever the truth, he served Aphrodite with great devotion and skill and she used him as her agent for reward and reprisal. His well-aimed arrows made Helen fall in love with Paris, and Medea with Jason. He punished Princess Myrrh by instilling her with a passion for her own father and made Pasiphae conceive a monstrous yew for a Cretan bull. Only once did he disobey his mother, when he accidentally scratched himself with his own arrow and fell in love with Psyche, whom he wed despite Aphrodite's outraged protests. In Roman mythology, Eros was known as Cupid.

Erymanthian Boar (air ih MAN thih uhn BOHR): This huge savage beast roamed the slopes of Mt. Erymanthus in Arcadia, making life a misery to all who dwelt there. To capture this animal alive was Heracles' fourth labor. While pursuing the boar, Heracles was entertained by a centaur named Pholus. Suddenly they were attacked by a raging faction of centaurs who disliked Pholus and anyone they thought might be his friend. Pholus galloped away in terror but Heracles fought off the attack single-handed, killing many centaurs. Unfortunately, one of his arrows hit his old teacher, Chiron, in the knee. The wise old centaur later died of this wound. Thereafter Heracles, in a very bad temper, harried the boar out of his hiding place into a deep snow-drift. Heracles then leaped upon him, wrestled him to the ground, slung him over his shoulder, and returned to Eurystheus. Eurystheus, at the first sight of the boar, hid in a big jar and did not emerge until Heracles had taken the boar away and penned him up in a bronze cage.

Erysichthon (air ih SIHK thuhn): A brawling king of Thessaly, addicted to the battle-axe. In the irksome intervals of peace he would use his wild strength to cut down trees. Once he despoiled a stand of trees in a grove sacred to Demeter, arousing the implacable wrath of the goddess. Demeter summoned her servant, Famine, and bade her enter Erysichthon. Famine obeyed, and Erysichthon was seized by a raging unappeasable hunger. He ate all the food in the castle larder, then sent his servants to scour the countryside, bringing in all the cattle and all the grain they could lay hands on,

which he promptly devoured. Finally, all of Thessaly was laid waste; the gluttonous king had eaten all the crops that grew, all the sheep and goats and beeves, and all the game that could be taken. Then he took his daughter and his axe and went to another land. There, when his gold ran out and he had nothing to buy food with, he sold his daughter to a wealthy merchant. The princess was trained to obey him and went off with her purchaser. But she prayed to Poseidon to grant her sea-change. Poseidon heeded her prayer and gave her the power of transforming herself. Before the merchant could touch her she changed into a gull and flew away. She returned to her father, who immediately sold her again. Again she changed her form and escaped...and returned to her father, who sold her again! He kept selling her and buying food; she kept transforming herself and escaping. Finally, she met a young man who was unlike the other men. He matched her, transformation for transformation. When she changed into a cat he became a tom-cat, and kept courting her. He became a stag to her doe, and outraced her; a lion to her lioness, and wooed her thus. Finally, she changed back to her own form, and stayed with the young man, forgetting all about her father. Erysichthon waited for his daughter...waited and waited. She did not return. Now he had nothing to eat and no money to buy food. He had even sold his axe. He searched for his daughter along the edge of the sea, but did not find her. He shook his fist at the indifferent sky...and was attracted by the sight of his beefy paw. He gnawed at a knuckle, realized in horror what he was

doing, but could not stop. He chewed off his hand, finger by finger. Then he ate his other hand. Hunger grew stronger with every bite; he ate one arm, then the other. He devoured himself completely, except for his lips, then swallowed them, and vanished altogether. After her vengeance was complete, Demeter's natural kindness asserted itself. She favored Erysichthon's daughter and her clever young husband and saw to it that their crops prospered and that their cattle grew sleek and fat.

Eteocles (ee TEE oh kleez): Son of Oedipus and Jocasta; briefly, king of Thebes. After Oedipus discovered that he had been committing incest all the years he had lived with Jocasta, he, in a spasm of horrified guilt, blinded himself. Jocasta, despairing, threw herself off the balcony to her death. Then Oedipus turned in wrath upon his twin sons, Eteocles and Polynices. He accused them of pride and heartlessness, claimed they had failed to support him and Jocasta during their terrible ordeal, and prophesied that they would die at each other's hands. Oedipus went into exile, leaving the throne vacant. The brothers agreed to share the throne, each ruling a year in turn. But Eteocles preferred to reign alone. He began to spread rumors about Polynices, defaming him and claiming that his murderous temper and general instability made him unfit to rule. Eteocles gathered a faction about him and, when the end of his year came, refused to turn the throne over to his brother. Polynices, realizing that his life was in danger, fled the city and went into exile. He made his way to Argos, where he married, and with the

help of his father-in-law, King Adrastus, forged alliances with powerful chieftains. After some years he marched against Thebes at the head of an army. Thus began the famous war known as the Seven Against Thebes. The invaders laid siege to Thebes, but the city held and there was great slaughter on both sides. Finally, Polynices challenged his brother, Eteocles, to single combat. Eteocles accepted the challenge and the brothers fought. They mortally wounded each other and died, according to their father's prophecy, at each other's hand. The invaders dispersed and Creon, brother of Jocasta, crafty uncle of the young kings, seized the throne of Oedipus.

Eumaeus (yoo MEE us): A swineherd of Ithaca, who remained loyal to Odysseus during the twenty years of his absence. He aided the wanderer when he returned, in disguise and in mortal danger from Penelope's rampaging suitors. It was the rude byre of the swineherd that Odysseus used as a hiding place, and where he summoned his son, Telemachus, for a rendezvous. It was here he polished the strategy that was to lead to the massacre of the suitors. Eumaeus aided him every step of the way.

Eumolpus (yoo MAHL puhs): A king of Eleusis and a favorite of Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Under her tutelage he instructed his subjects in vine-culture and animal husbandry. He formalized the worship of Demeter by establishing the Eleusinian

Mysteries, those annual rites that celebrate the bounteous fertility of the goddess with dance, mime, and secret ritual.

Eumenides (yoo MEN uh deez): The word means “kindly ones”; applied to the Furies to divert the wrath of those ferocious hags, who were fond of flattery.

Euphemus (yoo FEE muhs): A son of Poseidon. It was said that he could run over the surface of the water without getting his feet wet, a useful talent in a sailor. And, indeed, he was a valued member of Jason’s crew. He is the central figure in a curious tale of the Argonauts. A mighty storm swept the ship off the sea, hurling it into the middle of the Libyan desert. There they lay, helpless. Euphemus prayed to his father, Poseidon, who sent his half-brother, Triton, into the desert. Triton blew his curly horn and struck the sand with his staff. A channel appeared, leading to the sea, large enough to float the *Argo*. On parting, Triton gave Euphemus a clump of earth, instructing him to throw it into the sea, where, Triton said, it would grow into a habitation for the descendants of Euphemus. Euphemus threw the clod into the sea. It became the island, Calliste, and his descendants did dwell there and were great seafarers. It was they who colonized Thera, an island that became the capital of the last Atlantis.

Euphrosyne (yoo FRAHS uh nee): One of the Graces. Her name is variously translated as “Festivity” or “Joy.” But legends

agree that she was of joyous countenance and festivity followed her wherever she went.

Europa (yoo ROH puh): A princess of Phoenicia. She was a lovely, spirited, playful girl. She took enormous pride in being descended from mighty warriors. She loved tales of adventure and admired courage beyond all things. One morning, playing in the meadow with her maidens, she spied a huge handsome white bull browsing upon the grass. One of her companions dared her to ride the bull. Laughing with joy Europa leaped astride the bull and dug her heels into his side to make him gallop. He galloped. He galloped through the meadow, past the meadow, through fields and groves. Followed by a shrieking troop of maidens, the white bull raced onto the beach, and did not stop at the edge of the sea. Breasting the tide he swam away with Europa still clinging to his back. Bull and rider vanished over the horizon. Now, the bull was Zeus, who had transformed himself for the purpose of abducting the girl whom he had fallen in love with on first glimpsing her the day before. Europa stopped sobbing and began to enjoy the adventure. No girl, she thought to herself, had ever traveled so far, and no girl in the world would ever be able to match the tale she would have to tell when she finally returned to her father's court. But she never returned. Zeus changed into his own form, and took her to the cave where he had been born, an enormous dark pit gouged into the side of Crete's Mt. Ida. His daughters, the Hours, had hung it with rich tapestries, and carpeted it with flowers,

making it a fragrant bridal chamber. There Zeus told Europa that he would honor her beyond all other mortal girls, that her descendants would people an entirely new part of the earth — to be named after her. And so the continent of Europe was named after the princess. She bore Zeus three sons — Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Sarpedon, all of whom became great kings. Under Minos, Crete prospered and became the most powerful empire in the world. And it was the abduction of Europa, and the attempt of her brother, Cadmus, to find her that led Cadmus on his journey through so many strange lands before he founded the kingdom of Thebes. Zeus always maintained a special affection for Europa. He hung a specially wrought chandelier of stars in the sky, naming it in honor of their courtship — the constellation called Taurus, the Bull.

Eurus (YOO ruhs): The East Wind. Like all the winds he was the son of Eos, goddess of the dawn, and the Titan, Aristeus. He was a surly, treacherous fellow, striking suddenly out of fair skies. He was a menace to shipping when his mood was foul and was much feared by mariners. He was especially violent and capricious in the springtime, and seamen were careful then to keep lee shores to the westward.

Eurydice (yoo RIHD ih see): Wife of Orpheus and a key figure in the great legend of a man's stubborn love and a god's treachery. Eurydice died young, bitten by a snake as she ran through a copse to avoid the embrace of Aristeus. Orpheus, greatest

musician of his time, was devastated by her death and determined to retrieve her from the clutches of Hades. He made an incredible journey, doing what no other man had ever done — except Heracles, who was more god than man. Orpheus made his way to the brass gates which bar the entrance to Tartarus, and there was confronted by a hedge of evil teeth as Cerberus swung his three heads menacingly. Orpheus touched his lyre and sang a song of young dogs out hunting on a cool morning when the scent lies heavy on the ground. He sang so sweetly that Cerberus whined and crouched before the gates, weeping as no dog had wept before. And Orpheus passed, unharmed. Then, at the river Styx, the sullen boatman, Charon, refused to ferry him across. Orpheus touched his lyre and sang a boating song out of Charon's long-vanished youth, making him forget the inky Styx and his dismal freight, making him remember sparkling seas and bright skies and colored sails. Charon, weeping great tears, welcomed him aboard and rowed him across the Styx. And so, charming everyone with his lyre, Orpheus made his way through Tartarus — into the black castle itself, past all the guards, into the throne-room of death, where Hades sat on an ivory and ebony throne, and Queen Proserpina sat next to him. Orpheus did not argue his case; he had made a ballad of it. He touched his lyre and sang of Eurydice's youth and innocence and astounding beauty. Of her flight from the ravisher, and of the indifferent brutishness of the serpent who had blotted her light. Finally, he sang of himself, the young husband, but one year wed,

deprived forever. When he ended his song, Proserpina was sobbing and Hades scowling. For the king of the dead, who was an expert at remaining unmoved by piteous tales, knew that his wife would never forgive him if he refused Orpheus. Whereupon he pretended to relent and told Orpheus that he might lead his wife back to the land of the living on one condition: that he, Orpheus, must not look back at Eurydice during their journey through Tartarus. And he warned Orpheus that if he did look back for any reason at all, Eurydice would have to return to the death from which she had come. Orpheus joyfully assented. Eurydice was led out of the shadows and he began his journey back through Tartarus, followed by his beloved wife. Back he led her to the shore of the Styx, and across the dread river. They did not pass through the gates but followed an uphill route given to them by Hades which would lead them through the caves of Avernus. Orpheus walked on, never turning back. His keen musician's ear was tuned to his wife's light footfall and he knew she was following. But Hades had craftily directed them through a forest of pine where the pine needles lay thick, deadening footfall. Just as Orpheus was approaching the Avernian portals to the upper world, the sound of his wife's footsteps vanished. He strained his ears but could hear nothing. In wild fright he turned to look, and saw Eurydice. But even as he looked upon her she grew misty at the edges and hissed away like a plume of steam, never to be seen again.

Eurylochus (yoo RIHL uh kuhs): A cautious member of Odysseus' crew, the only one who refrained from drinking of Circe's enchanted cup — thus avoiding transformation into a pig. But his caution was overcome by hunger at a later stage of the voyage. When the starving voyagers made a landfall on the Isle of the Sun, Eurylochus was the first to kill and eat one of Apollo's sacred cattle, inspiring the rest of the crew to devour the herd. It was their last meal. The enraged Apollo wrecked their ship and drowned every man of them — except Odysseus, who had tried to prevent the sacrilege.

Eurynome (yoo RIHN uh mee): The moon. A startled light arose from the wastes of Chaos and became the goddess, Eurynome. She danced across the edge of nothingness and the path of her dancing became the margins of sea and sky. The North Wind pursued her as she fled, dancing. The West Wind and the South Wind and the East Wind joined the hunt; they surrounded her and became the coils of the Universal Serpent, Ophion. She was a prisoner of these coils and they closed about her. She turned herself into a white bird and flew away. She nested in the sky and laid a clutch of silver eggs...which were the sun and the earth and the planets and all the stars that stud the sky. Upon the earth were trees, flowers, birds, beasts, and man. Eurynome means "far wanderer," the first name given to the moon. Ophion means "moon-serpent." And long before there were any gods, the ancient ones believed in the all-mother, the moon-goddess.

Eurypylus (yoo RIHP uh luhs): A grandson of Heracles, who fought on the Trojan side, wreaking great havoc among the Greeks. However, he lost much sleep because of his hopeless love for Cassandra, who spurned all suitors, including Apollo. Finally, he was killed in battle by Neoptolemus, son of Achilles.

Eurystheus (yoo RIHS thee uhs; yoo RIHS thoos): King of Mycenae, appointed by Hera to preside over Heracles' twelve labors. Actually, Eurystheus was Heracles' cousin, a seven-month child whose birth had been hastened by Hera so that he might inherit the crown of Mycenae. Eurystheus is possibly the most cowardly king in all mythology — whose kings share every vice except cowardice. There is an irony about his legend. This man was frightened by the very idea of Heracles — so frightened that he never dared speak to him in person, but sent a herald to announce each new task. He invariably hid when the hero returned, dragging the carcass of a monster behind him, or carrying some huge beast on his shoulders. Yet this was the man who was Heracles' taskmaster. After the death of Heracles, he was emboldened to attempt the extermination of all the hero's children. But he was balked by their grandmother, Alcmene, whose courage matched her beauty. She spirited the children away to Athens. When Eurystheus led an army in pursuit she persuaded the Athenians to defend her grandchildren. Eurystheus was killed by Heracles' son, Hyllus.

Euterpe (yoo TUR pee): Muse of lyric poetry. She was a wild beautiful goddess addicted to word-juggling and the music of the flute. The distracted air worn by poets was caused by their straining to listen for the sound of her flute — which only they could hear.

Evander (ee VAN dur): An Arcadian son of Hermes, who settled in Italy before the Trojan Aeneas. Evander was a friend of Heracles and entertained him between labors when the hero's journeys took him to Italy. After Heracles' death he raised altars to the hero and organized cults of worship for this matchless son of Zeus. He welcomed Aeneas to Italy and helped him settle there. It was through Evander's teaching that Greek was introduced into this new land and became the father of Latin.

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F

Fates (FAYT'S): Three dread sisters: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, whom, it was said, even the gods must obey. They were the daughters of Themis, the goddess Necessity, and carried out her decrees in this manner; Clotho sat at her spindle spinning out the thread of each life (that is where we get the word "cloth"). Her sister, Lachesis, measured out what had been spun. But most terrible of the three was Atropos, who sat there with her shears, waiting, and snipped the thread when she thought it was long enough. Sometimes she cut it very short. It was the nature of gods and men to struggle against their fate, and this spectacle provided the sisters with much entertainment. In Roman Mythology, the Fates were known as *Morae*.

Furies (FU rihz): Hades' hell-hags. See [Erinyes](#); [Eumenides](#).

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G

Gaia (JEE uh): Earth was the first mother, and her name was Gaia. She bore a son, Uranus, who had no father. Uranus preferred heights; he built a cloud castle which he set on top of a mountain. His beard was like cloud-fleece as he sat on the terrace of his castle brooding down upon his mother. So many clouds brought rain. Where the living rain fell, the earth put forth great meadows of grass and forests of trees. And birds and beasts were born from this first magical wetness. They lived among the groves and fields, and fish appeared to swim in the rivers and oceans formed by the overflowing rain. But not yet man. The first children of earth were giants taller than trees, each with a hundred hands. Next came the rude, twisted, one-eyed Cyclopes who were master-builders and whom earth bore to serve the gods who were not yet born. Then Mother Earth labored and bore the gods — a beautiful troublesome race. Then, finally, man was born — not quite so beautiful as the gods, but even more troublesome. In Roman mythology, Gaia was known as Earth.

Galanthis (guh LAN thuhs): A servant of Alcmene, who shortened the agonized birth-pangs of her mistress. She frightened Eileithia, goddess of childbirth, while she was in the process of knotting Alcmene's labors to delay the birth of Heracles. Galanthis

screamed, startling Eileithia, and Heracles was born. But Galanthis was turned into a weasel for her pains.

Galatea (gal uh TEE uh): The girl who began life as a statue and ended it as the sculptor's wife. Pygmalion, young artist of Cyprus, fell in love with the statue he had made and prayed to Aphrodite to give her life. The goddess was flattered by what she fancied was the statue's resemblance to herself, and granted the young man's request. The statue flushed with life and stepped off its pedestal into Pygmalion's arms. In gratitude, the sculptor carved marvelous wooden dolls of Aphrodite which, centuries later, were found at her altars.

Ganymede (GAN ih meed): Cup-bearer to Zeus. This beautiful lad was a prince of Troy, which was named after his father, King Tros. One morning, Eos, the yellow-robed, rosy-faced goddess of the dawn, peeked into the palace at Troy and saw the boy lying asleep. She snatched him up and bore him to Olympus. There he became a favorite of the gods, cup-bearer to Zeus himself. Now, the high honor of pouring wine for Zeus had belonged to Hera's daughter, Hebe. Hera fell into a rage and resolved to destroy the young Trojan. And Zeus, knowing the range of his wife's spite, thought it prudent to place the boy among the stars — where he still abides, under the name Aquarius. Since then, Dawn arises at midnight to give herself time to make a detour and visit this constellation before beginning her morning rounds.

Gemini (JEHM ih ny): The Twins, Castor and Polydeuces. Also called the *Dioscuri*. See [Castor and Polydeuces](#).

Geryon (G' AIR ih uhn; JEE rih uhn): Antagonist in the tenth labor of Heracles. He was a truly monstrous figure, what might be called a Siamese triplet: three giant bodies joined at the waist and all directed by a malevolent intelligence. His herds were famous — beautiful red cattle that grazed the plains at the western margin of the Inner Sea, the land now called Spain. It was Heracles' task to fetch these cattle, drive them back to Mycenae, and add them to the herds of King Eurystheus. Heracles traveled overland for part of this journey, crossing the Libyan desert. There he became angered at the sun for shining too hotly and unslung his bow, preparing to shoot Helios, the sun's charioteer, out of his chariot. But Helios appeased the hero by offering him a golden goblet — more seaworthy, he claimed, than any ship. Heracles embarked in this goblet and sailed from North Africa to Spain, where he found Geryon tending his flocks. He was immediately attacked by Geryon's dog, a huge and savage two-headed beast. Heracles killed the dog with his club, smashing both heads. Then, deciding that to wrestle the three-bodied giant would be a cumbersome task, he unslung his bow again and shot Geryon dead, using three arrows. But his troubles were not over. Driving the herd eastward, he was deviled by Hera who sent her gadfly, Brize, to sting the cattle, making them stampede. Heracles finally chased the gadfly, rounded up the cattle, and resumed his journey to Mycenae. Eurystheus was

very disappointed at the successful conclusion of this tenth labor. He had been assured by Hera that Heracles would be killed by Geryon. Now, Heracles had originally been assigned only ten labors, and considered this raid upon Geryon his last. When Eurystheus hastily disqualified two of the labors — the Hydra and the Augean Stables — and imposed two other labors in their place, making twelve in all, Heracles flew into a rage. He killed the herald who brought him this news and rampaged over Mycenae, searching for Eurystheus, who was keeping himself well-hidden. But Heracles remembered that he had been forbidden by Zeus to kill Eurystheus, and submitted in time to the two additional labors.

Glaucus (GLAH kuhs): There are several figures of this name in mythology. Perhaps the two most interesting are: (1) A Boetian fisherman who discovered an herb that kept fish alive after he caught them. Thinking such a talent would prove useful in his domain, Poseidon spirited Glaucus away to the depths of the sea and gave him the task of healing wounded fish. Glaucus was very successful at this. Poseidon's flocks prospered. In return, he made Glaucus a minor sea-deity, and gave him immortality. (2) A king of Corinth, father of the hero Bellerophon. This Glaucus was extremely proud of his royal stables where he kept the finest racing mares in all the Peloponnese. So that they might not be distracted by maternity from their business of running faster than other horses, he forbade them to breed. The mares grew furious at this

deprivation, stampeded into the stable-yard and battered the king to death with their hooves.

Golden Fleece (GOHL duhn FLEES): This was the pelt which had become a holy relic in Colchis and the object of the Argonauts' quest. Legends as to its origin vary greatly. According to one, when Zeus was young a great golden ram dwelt among the crags of Mt. Ida. He was the last of that breed of ram worshipped as gods in the mist of time. The young Zeus hunted the ram up and down the mountain and finally slew him. But, before he could take his pelt, he was distracted by a mountain nymph, whom he pursued, leaving the carcass of the ram on the ground. It was found by a shepherd, who skinned it, and kept the golden fleecy pelt for himself. Dancing in it, he found he could call down rain in a dry season. Armed with this power, he made himself king, and his descendants reigned for hundreds of years. Each of these kings dressed the altar of his holiest temple with this fleece. Another legend speaks of a golden-fleeced winged ram sent by Poseidon to rescue the children of Nephele who were being menaced by the jealousy of their stepmother, Ino. The children climbed on the back of the ram, who flew to Colchis. On the way, however, the young boy, who was named Helle, fell off the ram and was drowned — giving that part of the sea the name Hellespont. His sister arrived safely and was welcomed by Aeetes, king of Colchis, father of Medea. It was from Aeetes that Jason stole the fleece.

Gordius (GOR dih uhs): A ploughman of Phrygia in its earliest days. An eagle perched on his plough one day and remained there while Gordius ploughed the field. Greatly puzzled, he consulted an oracle as to the meaning of this sign. For the people of Phrygia believed that their gods were in constant communication with them through cryptic signs and riddling wonders, which had to be unraveled by their oracles, who were young priestesses. The oracle told Gordius that the eagle connoted royalty and that the special attentions of this eagle meant undoubtedly that a son of Gordius would be king of Phrygia. Gordius was so excited by this prophecy that he offered to marry the girl, and was accepted. They had a son named Midas. But the family seemed very far from royal estate and Gordius began to train his son for the plough. Some years later Phrygia was torn by internal strife. The leaders consulted an oracle who told them that their king would come on a wagon. They emerged from the temple, discussing the prophecy, to see a wagon draw up. In it were Gordius and his wife and the young Midas, a stalwart handsome youth. Awe-struck by the speed with which the prophecy was fulfilling itself, they immediately offered the kingship to the young man. He became a very powerful ruler. He ran into some difficulties himself, later, in the matter of the famous “golden touch.” His father, Gordius, who as a member of the royal family could not be allowed to work as a ploughman, found himself with too much time on his hands. He spent the time concocting puzzles

and solving them. Once he tied a knot with concealed ends. Neither he nor anyone else could untie it. The knot was a wonder to the court. In the Phrygian manner, Midas immediately consulted an oracle, who declared that he who finally untied this knot would be Lord of Asia. The legend persisted and the knot was kept in a guarded place. Centuries later, when Alexander came there, he was told of the prophecy. Unable to untie the knot, he drew his sword and cut through it. This was the famous episode of the “Gordian Knot,” after which Alexander proceeded to conquer Asia.

Gorgons (GOR guhnz): Three monstrous sisters who figure in the tale of Perseus. They were once beautiful maidens, but the youngest of them, Medusa, was courted by Poseidon, thus arousing the jealousy of Athena, who changed Medusa into the ugliest creature imaginable. She had a scaly body, bulging red eyes, brass wings and claws, and every hair on her head became a hissing snake. So dreadful was her aspect that anyone who looked upon her was turned to stone. When her sisters protested, Athena changed them into similar monsters. Medusa was finally decapitated by Perseus, who used her head to turn his enemies to stone.

Graces (GRAYs uhz): These gentle radiant daughters of Zeus and Euphrosyne went about among mankind spreading joy and peace. They taught women those amiable arts which, alone, kept men from lapsing into savagery. They were beloved of the gods as well, and together with their beautiful sisters, the Hours, and their

talented half-sisters, the Muses; ornamented every gathering on Olympus. Their names were Aglaia (Splendor), Euphrosyne (Festivity), and Thalia (Rejoicing). In Roman mythology, the Graces were known as Charites.

Graeae (GREE ee; GRAY yee): Their name means “old woman.” Some say they were sisters of the Gorgons, born old. They had but one eye and one tooth among them, which they passed from one to another. They were forced by Perseus to disclose the secret hiding place of the Gorgons. They refused to tell him until he had kidnapped their eye and ransomed it for their secret.

Griffins (GRIHF ihnz): Winged lions, but their heads were eagle’s heads. They lived north of the North Wind where the Hyperboreans dwelt, and there guarded a legendary trove of gold hidden under the snow. They had to keep constant vigil, for their neighbors were the one-eyed Arismapsi, the most thievish folk in the entire world, north or south, and who never stopped trying to steal this gold. In another legend the Griffins’ dwelling place is the northern desert of India, where they spent their time clawing up gold dust. Their neighbors here, however, were more successful at theft. They spread delicious food for the Griffins and, while the monsters were feeding, they filled their sacks full of gold-dust.

Gyges (JY jeez): A Libyan shepherd who found a magic ring which allowed him to become invisible at will. He recognized how useful invisibility might be in a political career and immediately abandoned his flocks and set off for the royal palace. Making himself vanish, he passed the sentries without challenge, entered the throne-room, and declared himself a candidate by killing the king. He married the queen, and became king himself. Despite his abrupt tactics, he proved a better ruler than the one he had supplanted. His descendant, also named Gyges, was the great monarch of Libya, whose armies were victorious everywhere, and who made his kingdom great among the nations.

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Hades (HAY deez): Son of Cronus and Rhea; ruler of the underworld; king of the dead. This eldest brother of Zeus was well-cast to rule the dead. He was somber, loathed change, and was given to slow black rage. He was a very jealous, very thrifty god. He sought always to enlarge his kingdom and forbade his subjects ever to leave his realm. Only Heracles — whose deeds were always unique — was ever able to rescue anyone who had fallen under Hades' rule. Tartarus was the name of his kingdom; it lay far underneath the earth and was girded by black rivers. Its gates were guarded by a three-headed dog named Cerberus, trained to keep the living out and the dead in. It was only rarely that Hades left his domain. Then he drove a golden chariot drawn by four black horses. He attended only the most important tribunals upon Olympus, but when he came he brought rich gifts — for great troves of gems and precious metals lay in his kingdom. What he liked best was to sit on his ebony throne with his beautiful queen, Persephone, at his side, listening to the twittering petitions of the drifting dead (which he always ignored). Cerberus barked in the distance, herding ghosts, and those brass-clawed hags, the Furies, flew overhead; the chiming of the Furies' brass wings was pleasant to him. He valued only death. The bright bustle of life offended him. The weeping of mourners was song to Hades; he drank tears

like wine. He was so loathed and feared by mankind that no one ever referred to him by his right name, but spoke indirectly of him, using a good name to deflect his course. They called him “Pluton,” or the “rich one.” But he was patient, the most patient of gods. He outwaited all strategies and, finally, always caught the one he was waiting for. In Roman mythology, Hades was known as Pluto.

Haemon (HEE muhn): Courageous suitor of Antigone. He was ordered by his father, Creon, for whom young love was distinctly subordinate to affairs of state, to bury Antigone alive — because she had defied Creon’s order against burying her brother, Polynices, who had fallen in an attempt to claim the kingship of Thebes. At the risk of his life, Haemon too defied his father, and spirited Antigone out of the country and made her his wife. According to another legend Antigone was immured alive in a stone tomb and Haemon killed himself. The latter tale seems more in the spirit of that tragic Theban court, stained by incest, and bloodied by feud.

Halirrhothius (hal uh ROH thih uhs): A son of Poseidon who assaulted a daughter of Ares and was killed by the angry god. Poseidon, who stood high in Olympian councils, protested to the other gods, and they called Ares before a court of judgment in the world’s first murder trial. A hill was raised in Athens to be used by the gods as a judgment seat; it was called Areopagus, or Hill of Ares. Poseidon was eloquent at the trial, heaping scorn upon Ares,

calling him hypocrite. He cited the war-god's innumerable assaults upon goddess, demi-goddess, nereid, nymph, and mortal woman, and accused him of using any excuse at all to indulge his taste for homicide. But Ares responded by pleading the immortal right of a father to kill his daughter's ravisher. The gods inclined toward Poseidon's view of the case. But the goddesses voted unanimously for Ares. Since Poseidon was disqualified from voting the gods were outnumbered and Ares was acquitted. For centuries afterward, the Areopagus was used for trying important murder cases. Orestes stood trial there for the murder of Clytemnestra.

Halitherses (hal uh THAIR seez): A gentle Ithacan who had learned the language of birds and spent hours chatting with them. Birds are great travelers, especially the gull family, and they brought him much information. He knew before anyone else that Odysseus was on his way home to Ithaca. He hastened to warn the suitors that they had better cease their depredations before the king returned. But his advice was ignored. And long after the suitors had been killed by the avenging Odysseus, old Halitherses limped among the trees of Ithaca, happily gossiping with the birds.

Hamadryads (ham uh DRY uhdz): A type of wood-nymph. All dryads are concerned with trees and live in them when they are not roaming the forest — but each hamadryad is the spirit of a particular tree. She lives always in this tree and speaks out to warn

woodmen away when they try to set an axe to her tree. When the tree dies, she dies too.

Harmonia (hahr MOH nih uh): Wife of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. She was a goddess, the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, but her husband, Cadmus, had certain godlike propensities too, and they were well-matched. The necklace of Harmonia, centuries later, was used as a bribe in one of the plots that surrounded the war of the Seven Against Thebes. She was the mother of sons and daughters who later distinguished themselves in various ways: Agave, Autonoe, Ino, Polydorus, and Semele. The name of another Harmonia occurs in early legends. Her pedigree is vague. According to some accounts, she was the mother of the Amazons, who were sired by Ares.

Harpalyce (hahr PAHL uh see): A princess of Thrace who was an insatiable huntress. When game was scarce she hunted whatever else she could find — travelers, shepherds, ploughmen, almost anything that moved. Finally, the Thracian folk decided she was going too far, even for a princess. They caught her in a net and beat her to death with sticks.

Harpies (HAHR pihz): They are variously described but a sense of dread and loathing permeates all the descriptions. They seem to have been winged women of beautiful form and ravaged face. They had talons like an eagle and were extremely ill-

tampered. Their chief employer was Hades who sent them to bear away by force and bring to Tartarus those who were unwilling to die. But they also did vengeful errands for the other gods. In a famous Argonaut story they tormented a king named Phineus who had incurred the wrath of a god. They swooped down at his table and snatched his food before he could eat it; they defecated in his plate. Phineus would have starved to death or killed himself but he was rescued by the Argonauts Zetes and Calais, who drove away the Harpies and, some say, killed them. There were three Harpy sisters. Various names are given to them, but the most noted one is Podarge, who, despite her appearance, attracted the notice of Boreas, the North Wind. She bore him a pair of beautiful colts, Xanthus and Balius, who became the fabulous stallions of Achilles.

Hebe (HEE bee): Daughter of Zeus and Hera; cupbearer to the gods. She poured their nectar from a golden goblet and summoned the servants to bring them ambrosia. She was a mistress of rejuvenation and, when properly approached, granted eternal youth to a protégé of a god or goddess. She was often a scapegoat, however, for the wrath of Zeus. When he installed Ganymede as his cup-bearer, he discharged her from her duties, causing her much anguish and moving her mother, Hera, to vengeful intention. At another time, enraged because Hera had tricked him by delaying the birth of Heracles, Zeus seized Hebe by the hair and flung her from heaven. However, she seems to have been remarkably resilient. She always returned to her pleasant duties as cup-bearer

and, as befitting an expert at rejuvenation, grew younger and lovelier each year. When Heracles was accepted into the company of the Olympians, he married Hebe.

Hecate (HECK uh tee): A goddess of the underworld. Some say she was an aspect of Persephone, Hades' queen, in her most deadly phase. But she is usually depicted as a self-sufficient deity, very ancient, very cruel...a torturer of ghosts and mistress of the brass-winged, brass-clawed Furies, whose task it is to torment those who have offended the gods. She was known also as queen of the roads, because, in ancient times, the dead were taken beyond the city walls and buried along the side of the roads. Hecate's cult outlived those of all the other Greek gods. She was adopted by the medieval witch covens as their patroness and was worshipped in their secret rites.

Hecatomb (HEHK uh tahm; HEHK uh toom): A sacrifice of special magnitude to the gods. The word literally means "killing of a hundred," usually a hundred cattle, but sometimes a hundred slaves or prisoners.

Hector (HEHK tur): Son of Priam and Hecuba; crown-prince of Troy. Priam was too old to lead the Trojan forces, so Hector assumed command. He was the natural choice, far and away the mightiest warrior among the Trojans — indeed, mightier than any among the Greeks except for Achilles. His wife was Andromache, a

beautiful, loyal, intelligent princess who, throughout the war, did everything possible to help and inspire her husband. Actually, Hector had been a voice of moderation in Trojan councils, and had done his best to avoid war with the Greeks, advising Paris to return Helen. But when war did come, he was fearless and deadly on the field. It is estimated that he killed more than thirty Greeks in single combat. He fought to a draw in a daylong battle with the gigantic Ajax. While Achilles was sulking in his tent after his quarrel with Agamemnon, Hector led an irresistible charge that broke the Greek line. He had begun to set the invaders' ships afire when Poseidon arose from the sea to drive the Trojans back. But his final victory was to lead to his death, for Patroclus, beloved friend of Achilles, had donned the hero's armor so that the Trojans might think that Achilles had taken the field. This was a plan of Odysseus to blunt the Trojan's relentless attack. But Hector sought Patroclus out in battle and killed him. Maddened with grief, Achilles returned to the war. The night before, Andromache had pleaded with Hector to refrain from battle the next day — the first time she had ever done so. For the first time in his life, he refused her request. For he had been told by an oracle that if he died by the hand of Achilles, his slayer would not outlive him by three days. In the nobility of his soul he was willing to trade his life for the life of so terrible a foe of the Trojans. The next day, he met Achilles in single combat. Achilles fought like a demon. He was completely the master and cut Hector to the ground. Then he tied Hector's heels to his chariot-

axle and drove seven times around the walls of Troy, trailing the dead body in the dust, taunting the Trojans who lined the walls, weeping at the sight. But Apollo, who favored the Trojans, cast a spell upon the body so that it remained intact. That night Priam came to Achilles' tent and pleaded for the return of his son's body. At first Achilles refused, but becoming touched by the old man's tears, relented. Hector was burned with great pomp on a funeral pyre. Later, it is said, his bones were taken to Thebes because the Thebans had been promised prosperity if they maintained those mighty remains as holy relics. Hector was ultimately a loser, but he is an enormously attractive figure in mythology and is remembered with greater affection than the victor, Achilles.

Hecuba (HEHK yoo buh): Wife of Priam; queen of Troy. She bore Priam fifty sons and twelve daughters — among them such noted ones as Hector, Paris, and Cassandra. Her mood was extremely bitter during the war. She seemed to know that all her children would be killed or enslaved. According to one legend, she was given as a slave to Odysseus after the fall of Troy. But there is no mention of her on his voyages. Indeed, it is unlikely that the canny Odysseus would have encumbered himself with the sullen old queen on his voyage home. As it turned out, he ran into sufficient difficulties without her. It is told that she raged and snarled at the victorious Greeks until, by pure power of association, she was transformed into a brindle bitch who ran howling into the hills.

Helen (HEHL uhn): Daughter of Zeus and Leda; queen of Sparta; and known as Helen of Troy. Zeus had courted Leda in the form of a swan, and their daughter, Helen, had the stature of a goddess, the radiant complexion and suave muscularity of a swan, and her mother's enormous blue eyes. Her beauty was matchless. In the words of Christopher Marlowe, hers was "the face that launched a thousand ships." She began her career of being abducted at the precocious age of twelve, when the elderly but inflammable Theseus bore her off to Attica. They were followed by Helen's formidable brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, recognized as the best boxer and the best wrestler in the entire world. This combination tended to make even heroes like Theseus a bit cautious and he allowed Helen to return to Sparta with them. She proved nothing but trouble, however, to her foster-father, King Tyndareus, whose court was thronged with brawling chieftains from every part of the Peloponnese and beyond, each demanding Helen's hand, and eager to fight for it. Tyndareus feared to make a choice; he knew that the rejected suitors would declare war on him and waste his kingdom. Therefore, he heeded the counsel of Odysseus, one of the suitors, who drew up this agreement: Tyndareus would choose one of their number to be Helen's husband — all of them having pledged beforehand to abide by the choice, to keep the peace, and to unite against anyone who might seek to take Helen from her husband. The suitors agreed, and Tyndareus chose Menelaus, an unremarkable fellow, but his brother

was Agamemnon, most powerful warlord in the Peloponnese. Tyndareus made him heir to the throne of Sparta and Menelaus was a contented husband until Paris came. Now Helen had been prepared for the Trojan prince and his rich embassy. Aphrodite visited her in a dream and told her she had been promised to Paris in return for his wise bestowal of the golden apple. Then the goddess schooled Helen in the ultimate refinements of love — those arts which Aphrodite alone knew the secret of, and which she had been careful not to teach anyone else. When added to the already extensive repertoire of the world's most beautiful woman, the result was devastating. After Paris had taken Helen to Troy, it was recognized by all at Priam's court that the result would be war with an extremely powerful enemy. However, by the time the High Council sat, forty-eight of Paris' forty-nine brothers had fallen in love with Helen and they refused to consider giving her up. The only exception was Hector, whose love for Andromache could withstand even Helen's beauty. After the fall of Troy, Helen was reclaimed by Menelaus, who had vowed to kill her. But his resolution melted before her beauty and he took her back to reign again as queen of Sparta. There she was forgiven, one by one, by those of her former suitors who had survived the bloody fighting under the walls of Troy. According to one legend, however, Helen was killed by Orestes, who held her responsible for causing the war that had kept his father away from Mycenae for ten years and led his mother into adultery and murder.

Helenus (HEHL uh nuhs): Prince of Troy; Cassandra's twin. She taught him to read the future, as Apollo had taught her, but without the curse that Apollo had attached to the gift: that is, the prophecies of Helenus were believed. He fought well against the Greeks but turned traitor in the last days of the war. Some say that he was embittered when, after the death of Paris, Helen had been given in marriage to his brother, Deiphobus, instead of to himself. Whatever the cause, he imparted to the Greeks certain secret options of destiny which led to their capture of Troy. He told them that the Palladium should be stolen from Troy, that the inheritor of Heracles' arrows, the archer Philoctetes, should be brought to the battleground. And according to some legends, it was Helenus who gave Odysseus the idea of building a wooden horse. His treachery served him well. The Greeks spared his life during the sack of Troy. He was the only one of Priam's sons to escape the massacre. Afterwards, he married his widowed sister-in-law, Andromache, and they ruled over Epirus.

Heliades (hee LY uh deez): Daughters of Apollo by the nymph Clymene. These beautiful gentle girls took care of the infant Dionysus, at the request of his father, Zeus, and adopted many clever stratagems to protect him from the raging jealousy of Hera. They had a brother, Phaeton, whom they adored. This was the lad who insisted on driving his father's sun-chariot and drove it so heedlessly that he scorched the earth, and startled Zeus, who looked down and saw forests burning and seas drying. Zeus killed

Phaeton with a thunderbolt, and his sisters, the Heliades, grieved so that Apollo turned them into poplar trees — which still drop tears of amber sap.

Helicon (HEHL uhk uhn): There were two mountains sacred to Apollo — Helicon and Parnassus. He sported with the Muses on both mountains, according to the season, but on Helicon the Muses were joined by their beautiful sisters, the Graces and the Hours. Apollo's sister, Artemis, preferred Helicon too, and often stopped her moon-chariot there — unyoked her white stags and let them pasture on the lush grass of that enchanted mountain and drink from the delicious spring called Hippocrene. It is said that shepherds who drink of Hippocrene often find themselves babbling verse, abandon their flocks to the wolves, and wander off, talking to themselves in rhyme and hoping that someone will overhear.

Helios (HEE lih ohs): Son of Hyperion and Thia. His sisters were Semele, the moon, and Eos, the dawn. He himself is variously described as the sun-god, the sun itself, and the Charioteer — who, at Apollo's direction, drove the golden-spoked chariot of the sun across the blue meadows of the sky. After he drove his chariot from east to west, it is said, he embarked in a golden goblet and sailed all night from west to east to prepare for the next day's journey. In one legend, Zeus gave him an island for his own to be called the Isle of the Sun. But Helios named the island after a nymph he had loved there, called Rhodus, and the island today is still known as Rhodes.

The Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the world, was a seventy-foot statue of Helios carved by the Rhodian sculptor, Chares. In all his various personifications as solar deities of one degree or another, Helios was much beloved. One of his names was *Terpsimbrotos*, “he who brings joy to mankind.” But he produced some wicked female descendants: Circe and Pasiphae were his daughters; his granddaughter was Medea.

Hellen (HEHL luhn): Son of Deucalion and Pyrrha; first child to be born in the unpeopled world after the deluge. He ruled Phthia, a region including Mt. Parnassus, where Deucalion’s ark had landed. His three sons, Aeolus, Dorus, and Xuthus, became the fathers of those tribes which made up the Greek nation. The land that Aeolus ruled was called Aeolia; his descendants were called Aeolians. Dorus joined forces with the sons of Heracles and conquered the Peloponnese. The sons of the third son, Xuthus, were named Ione and Acheus; their descendants were the Ionians and Achaeans. The ancient Greeks did not call themselves “Greeks.” They called themselves, collectively, “Hellenes” after Hellen, or “Achaeans,” or, sometimes, “Argives.” That is how Homer refers to them, as do most of the other ancient chroniclers. The name “Greek” occurred later. It apparently arose out of confused legends about the earliest migrations and intermixing of peoples in which some racial memory asserts itself centering on the rituals of the matriarchal tribes antedating the Hellenes. “Greek” was derived from a word meaning “Worshippers of the Gray One.” (“Gray

One” meaning the Arch-Crone, or the primal moon-goddess in her waning stage.)

Hemera (HEHM ur uh): The Day. A deity out of the earliest creation myths. Hemera and Aether, meaning light, were the two radiant children of Erebus and Nyx, or darkness and light. They dethroned their parents and brightened the skies in celebration. The attributes of Hemera were later absorbed by Eos, goddess of the dawn.

Hephaestus (hee FEHS tus): Son of Zeus and Hera; the smith-god. Lord of artificers, patron of crafts. This most industrious of the gods had a troubled childhood. He was born twisted and ugly and Hera hated him on sight. She flung him from Olympus; he broke both legs in the fall and forever afterwards was lame. A sea-goddess, Thetis, found the crippled infant on the beach and took him to her underwater grotto where she raised him as her own. He contrived beautiful ornaments of coral and pearl for his foster-mother and entertained her by setting living jewels to swim in the warm waters; we know them now as tropical fish. Nevertheless, he fretted in exile and resolved to take his rightful place among the gods. He won back his birth-right by a clever ruse. He built a golden throne and sent it to Hera as a gift. She sat upon it, its golden arms clamped about her and she could not rise. She remained a prisoner of the throne until Hephaestus had extracted a promise from the gods that he would be accepted into the

Pantheon. Hera avenged herself upon him by marrying him to Aphrodite, who tormented him with her infidelity. However, Hephaestus loved his wife so much that he found happiness despite his mother's evil design. But he did not spend much time on Olympus; he preferred his workshop in the crater of Mt. Aetna in Sicily. There he stood at a mighty anvil, forging thunderbolts for Zeus and weapons for special heroes. His apprentices were the one-eyed Cyclopes, whom he kept teaching new skills even though they had been born skillful. He patched up his quarrel with his mother and made her many marvelous gifts, among them a table that ran about by itself serving food and drink. Despite his grimy appearance and modest manner, Hephaestus was much revered among mankind. For, in ancient times, the smith was considered a potent sorcerer who could lend magical properties to the tools and weapons he forged. In Roman mythology, Hephaestus was known as Vulcan.

Hera (HEE ruh; HUR uh): Daughter of Cronus and Rhea; sister and wife to Zeus; queen of the gods. Hera's jealousy had such dramatic consequences, so many of the tales of gods and heroes pivot on her spite, that her own legend has become somewhat obscured. But there was much more to Hera than jealousy. She was a beautiful, majestic goddess, chosen wife of Zeus — who had the whole world to choose from — to whom he always returned. Hera's most famous grudge, the one most productive of legend, was aimed at Alcmena, mother of Heracles. Of all mortal women,

Alcmene, Lady of the Light Footsteps, was the most beautiful, and the most wise — and Hera hated her beyond measure. Her loathing extended to the son of Zeus and Alcmene, Heracles. Through his entire career Heracles was tormented by Hera’s venomous wrath. His enslavement by the wicked king Eurystheus, and the ordeal of the Twelve Labors were all imposed by Hera. But it was the accomplishment of these labors that kindled his immortal fame. Hera’s vengeance became his glory. In fact, the name “Heracles” means “Hera’s glory.” In the mighty metaphor of Hellenic belief each god plays a unique role, and Hera’s envious nature is a most significant theme. Her hostility to the hero-brood of Zeus symbolized the hostility of nature itself. And the heroism of heroes was precisely defined by the dimensions of their troubles and by their ability to surmount disaster. As for Hera herself, queen of the gods, she held an invincible advantage over her rivals. Every springtime she bathed in a spring called Canathus; its crystal waters washed away age and fretfulness. She became a young maiden again, lovely as in the dawn of time when Zeus courted her as rain cloud and cuckoo, lovelier by far than any goddess, nymph, or mortal. Then Zeus courted her again. He raised a golden cloud for their privacy and the flowers of earth sent forth an overpowering fragrance. In Roman mythology, Hera was known as Juno.

Heracles (HUR uh kleez): Son of Zeus and Alcmene; greatest of the legendary heroes; and the strongest man who ever lived. Heracles occupies a unique place in mythology. Many of his

exploits resemble those of other heroes, but other of his deeds transcend mortal possibility and signify godlike powers. Indeed, he was the favorite son of Zeus, who took special measures in his procreation so that he might be the mightiest hero of all. Zeus intended that this son be more than a hero; he was to be a god who would spend his life among mortals, much of it in servitude, thus gaining special insight into the human condition. Then, when he finally joined the Olympians, he would bring with him a knowledge of the real world that would aid the gods in their councils. All his life, Heracles was pursued by the vengeful wrath of Hera. It was she who drove him mad in his young manhood, making him mistake a group of his sons for a raiding party of enemies and killing them all with his arrows. It was for this crime that he was sentenced to hard labor — the famous Twelve Labors — at the court of his cousin, King Eurystheus. The Twelve Labors are described elsewhere in these pages under the names of his central adversaries in each labor, but this is a list of his tasks: (1) Kill the Nemean Lion; (2) Kill the Hydra; (3) Capture the Cerynean Stag; (4) Cage the Erymanthian Boar; (5) Clean the Augean Stables; (6) Kill the Stymphalian Birds; (7) Claim the Mares of Diomedes; (8) Pen the Cretan Bull; (9) Seize the girdle of the Amazon Hippolyte; (10) Take Geryon's Cattle; (11) Fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides; (12) Impound Cerberus, hound of hell. Any one of these labors — except the last — might have been performed by Perseus or Theseus, or any of those wonderfully

powerful mortals known as heroes. But other of Heracles' deeds belong to godhead. He offered to shoot Helios out of his sun-chariot and refrained only when given the Charioteer's golden boat. At the age of eight months he strangled two huge blue serpents introduced into his crib by Hera. He attempted to seize the Delphic temple from Apollo and fought the sun-god on equal terms until Zeus parted them with a thunderbolt. He also met Poseidon and Ares in single combat and bested them both, wounding Ares severely. In another episode out of his infancy, Hera was tricked into offering him her breast. Recognizing him, she dashed him to the ground. Whereupon he spewed forth the milk and it spattered across the night sky, forming the Milky Way. All these are the acts of a god, not a man. And the Milky Way story belongs to pure creation myth, in which Heracles is identified with some earlier universe-shaping deity. Indeed, after his death, Zeus summoned him to Olympus where he was received by the Olympians and given immortality. Hera objected at first but was persuaded by Zeus to drop her enmity and to adopt Heracles as her own son. He soon became her son-in-law also for he married her daughter, Hebe. Altars to Heracles were raised in every Hellenic land, and indeed, in all the lands of the Inner Sea which he had visited on his adventures. He was worshipped as a god. In fact, through the cult of Heracles men were brought into more intimate connection with the immortal gods because Heracles had lived among them as a

man and suffered among them. And this too was part of Zeus' plan. In Roman mythology, Heracles was known as Hercules.

Hermaphroditus (hur maf ruh DY tuhs): Son of Hermes and Aphrodite, as his name implies. He was a beautiful modest lad who fled the embraces of a nymph named Salmacis. Inflamed beyond reason by his reluctance, she prayed to the gods that her body be eternally united to his. For some reason, this request was granted. Thereafter, they existed as one organism, named Hermaphroditus, sharing attributes of male and female...to the dismay of his parents, who preferred him as he had been, despite his newly found self-sufficiency.

Hermes (HUR meez): Son of Zeus and Maia; god of commerce; patron of liars, gamblers, and thieves; protector of travelers. Before Hermes was half a day old he had climbed out of his cradle and stolen a herd of cattle belonging to Apollo. Confronted by the angry sun-god, the infant Hermes appeased his wrath by teaching him to play the lyre — which he had found time to invent before he was two days old. Apollo took the precocious babe to Olympus where he endeared himself to Zeus. He was appointed Herald God and charged with the duty of conducting the dead to Hades. It is said that Hermes invented dice, astronomy, taught the gods the use of the fire-stick, and developed the first system of weights and measures. He was the wittiest of the gods by far, and very good company. Zeus used him exclusively on

confidential errands and invariably chose him as a companion for his nocturnal adventures, when he would disguise himself as a mortal and descend from Olympus to mingle among earthlings. Hermes is depicted as a slender beardless young god, wearing a pot-shaped hat and winged sandals, and carrying a herald staff. In Roman mythology, Hermes was known as Mercury.

Hermione (hur MY oh nee): Princess of Mycenae; daughter of Helen and Menelaus. It is said that her father first affianced her to Orestes, but later, when Orestes fell into disrepute, quickly married her to Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. According to some legends, this was one of the reasons for Orestes' subsequent murder of Helen.

Hero and Leander (HEE roh) (lee AN dur): Hero was a priestess of Aphrodite who lived on a windy island called Sestos. Across the Hellespont was another wind-battered island, named Abydos, where dwelt her suitor Leander. Their love had to be kept secret because priestesses were not allowed to marry. Every night Hero lighted a torch in her tower, and Leander, guiding himself by the light, swam the turbulent Hellespont to visit his beloved. With every visit their love increased. They had met in the summertime; by winter they could not do without each other. Despite the vicious winds that piled up mountainous breakers on the waters of the Hellespont, Leander continued to swim across every night. One night, the wind blew out the light. Leander lost his way in the

howling darkness, and drowned. His body was washed onto the beach at Sestos, and Hero discovered it. She hanged herself.

Hesione (hee SY oh nee): A daughter of Laomedon, an early king of Troy who was very reluctant to pay his debts. He cheated Poseidon once, and the sea-god sent a monster to ravage the shores of Troy. The king was informed by an oracle that he would have to sacrifice his daughter to the monster if he wished to save his country. The beautiful Hesione was bound naked to a rock. But Heracles happened along at the time and promised to deliver Hesione if Laomedon would give him the two marvelous stallions which had been given by the gods to Tros, first king of Troy, to compensate him for the abduction of Ganymede. Laomedon promised. Thereupon Heracles dived into the sea, allowed himself to be swallowed by the monster, and proved his utter indigestibility by systematically disemboweling the beast. However, after the monster was killed, Laomedon refused to pay. Heracles then seized Hesione, whom he later married to his friend, Telamon. Laomedon was not to escape so cheaply, however. Heracles attacked Troy with a handful of troops, defeated the Trojans, and sacked the city. This was a full generation and a half before the famous Trojan War. The name Hesione crops up again in connection with that later war. It was allegedly to reclaim his aunt that Paris went to Greece. But this, of course, was only a pretext for his detour to Sparta, where he won the confidence of Menelaus and the love of Helen, preparing the way for the most costly elopement on record.

Hesperides (hehs PAIR uh deez): Nymphs of the west; sometimes called the Apple-nymphs. They were three, these lovely daughters of Atlas, and they lived in the garden at the far western rim of the world where their father stood holding the edge of the sky on his shoulders. It was their task to guard the golden apples that grew on Hera's tree — transplanted to this far garden to keep the apples from Zeus, who used to distribute them as love-tokens. It was lonely there at the western margin of the earth and the Hesperides greeted their rare visitors with great joy. They enter the stories of Heracles and Perseus.

Hesperus (HEHS pur uhs): Son of Atlas; brother of the Apple-nymphs. He was an exceedingly wise and kindly Titan — so beloved by mankind that he aroused the envy of a powerful god — no one knows which one. This envious god sent a mighty wind to whirl Hesperus away while he was out mountain-climbing. He would have been dashed to pieces on the rocks below, but Zeus took pity on him and lifted him into the sky. There he abides, scattering sheaves of light over the night sky — Hesperus, the Evening Star, most beautiful of the firmament.

Hestia (HEHS tih uh): Goddess of the hearth. Cronus and Rhea produced six divine children — Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, and Zeus — but Hestia, the eldest sister, was very different from the rest of her family. She never took part in any of the conspiracies that simmered on Olympus and always shunned

the battlefield, striving to act as peacemaker among gods and men. She was a gentle, benevolent goddess — queen of the homestead, patroness of marriage, and instigator of domestic joys. She never took a husband herself nor bore any children of her own, but was guardian to all orphans and lost children. She was worshipped with a multitude of small fires; in her honor no hearth was allowed to grow cold.

Hippe (HIHP pee): Lovely coltish daughter of the wise old Centaur, Cheiron. She was courted by Aeolus, an early Hellenic chieftain, and bore him a daughter named Melanippe. However, she knew that the clannish Centaurs would kill her if they knew that she had consorted with a mortal. She prayed to Artemis for help, and the moon-goddess responded, placing her among the stars as the constellation of the Horse.

Hippodameia (hihp oh duh MY uh): A princess of Pisa, who married Pelops, and became mother of the bloody-chronicled House of Atreus. Indeed, the details of her courtship were steeped in crime. Her father, Oenomaus, a masterful charioteer, challenged each of her suitors to a chariot race, promising her in marriage to anyone who might beat him, but demanding the suitor's head if he should lose. Thirteen young men raced him; thirteen lost their heads. Finally, one came along who struck Hippodameia's fancy: Pelops, young king of Phrygia. Determined that Pelops should win this race, the girl bribed her father's stableman to saw half-through

the axle of the royal chariot. During the race, a wheel fell off and Pelops won. He killed Hippodameia's father, and then, so there should be no witnesses to the affair, killed the stableman. Pelops married Hippodameia and they became the parents of Thyestes and Atreus whose bloody feuding compounded the family curse and flowered into a multitude of murders.

Hippolyta (hīh PAWL uh tuh): Queen of the Amazons, whom Heracles subdued in his ninth labor, and whose girdle he took in completion of his task. Some legends say he subdued her in single combat with sword and spear. Others say he out-wrestled her. In another legend, Hippolyta falls in love with Heracles and gives him her girdle as a love-token. In still another tale, she becomes the wife of Theseus and mother of the woman-hating, horse-taming Hippolytus. In this last legend her identity seems to have been confused with that of her sister, Antiope — also cited as wife of Theseus and mother of Hippolytus.

Hippolytus (hīh PAWL uh tuhs): Son of Theseus and the Amazon queen, Antiope. He was a solitary young man; his passions were chariot-racing and the training of horses. But then Phaedra came into his life. She was the young wife of his aging father and a hot-blooded Cretan princess. She could not tolerate her handsome step-son's preference for horses and did her best to persuade him toward other pleasures. But he spurned her. In a rage she went to Theseus and accused Hippolytus of assaulting her.

Theseus fell into the trap. Without giving his son a chance to exculpate himself, he stabbed the boy to death with his sword. Or, some say, he upbraided him so violently that Hippolytus went storming off in his chariot, which overturned, sending the horses into panic. They turned on their master and killed him. In any case, the boy was dead. Phaedra, belatedly repentant, hanged herself.

Hippomenes (hih PAHM uh neez): The mild-mannered suitor who succeeded with Atalanta where so many more aggressive young men had failed. Instead of trying to outrace her, he prayed to Aphrodite for help. The goddess of love responded by giving him three golden apples. He dropped them one by one during the race, thus distracting Atalanta. He won the race and a difficult bride.

Hours (OW urz): Daughters of Zeus and Themis, half-sisters to the Fates, but of more pleasing aspect than those stern spinsters. There were three: Eunomia (Harmony), Dyke (Justice), and Eirene (Peace). They regulated the seasons, assuring that summer followed spring, and autumn, summer, in their appointed course...that trees and flowers bloomed in their season. Each year on Judgment Day, Dyke sat at the left hand of Zeus and heard the appeals of those who felt that they had been accused of crimes they did not commit. Zeus trusted her to sentence the guilty, acquit the innocent, and punish judges who had taken bribes. In Roman mythology, The Hours were known as Horae.

Hyacinthus (hy uh SIHN thuhs): A lad whose beauty caused a feud between Apollo and Boreas. But the boy preferred the radiant sun-god, and Boreas, who was the North Wind, went into a fit of jealous sulks. One day, when Apollo was hurling the discus, Boreas puffed spitefully — blowing the discus out of its course. It struck Hyacinthus on the head, killing him instantly. Apollo did not allow Hades to claim the beloved boy, but changed him into a purple flower, the hyacinth, that blooms early in the spring. He also decreed that the people of Sparta celebrate his memory with a spring festival called the Hyacinthia. It became so sacred a ritual the warlike Spartans always suspended hostilities in April so that they might conduct the Hyacinthia.

Hyades (HY uh deez): Seven daughters of Atlas; their mother was Aethra, whose name means light. They had one brother, Hyas, an ardent hunter, whom they loved very much. Hyas was killed by a savage boar and the sisters mourned themselves to death. Now, they were held in high esteem by Zeus, because they had cared for his son Dionysus in his infancy and had adopted many stratagems to hide the godling from the murderous wrath of Hera. Zeus showed his appreciation by setting the seven sisters high among the stars — a wreath of seven bright stars, the constellation called Hyades.

Hydra (HY druh): A hundred-headed monster; hunted by Heracles in his second labor. The hundred heads actually do not

express the ferocity of this creature — for when any head was cut off, two new ones sprouted in its place. At first Heracles struggled in vain against the monster. Its serpentine body enwrapped him; two heads sprouted for each one he cut off. Heads were coming at him from all directions, burying their teeth in his flesh. Finally, he instructed his nephew, Ioleus, to set fire to a tree. He uprooted the burning tree and used it as a torch, searing the stump of each neck so that no new heads could grow. Then he cut off the central head and buried it under a rock. Thus the Hydra was rendered lifeless, despite the belated appearance of a giant crab Hera had sent to aid the Hydra, which Heracles crushed under his heel. The Hydra's hundred heads became a hundred underground springs which ran pure water and gave water its name. As for the crab, Hera was grateful to it despite the failure of its mission. She changed it into a star and hung it in the sky, where it still hangs as the constellation Cancer — the Crab. Killing the Hydra was one of Heracles' most difficult tasks. He was enraged all the more when Eurystheus disallowed it because he had been helped by his nephew, Ioleus!

Hylas (HY luhs): A favorite of Heracles and his companion on the Argosy. He was kidnapped by the Nymphs of the Spring and was never found despite a frantic search by Heracles. See [Dryope](#).

Hymenaeus (hy men NEE us): A poor lad of Athens who played the lyre and sang very sweetly. However, he was forbidden to marry the girl he loved because her father wanted a rich husband

for her. Then the girl was captured by pirates in a sudden raid. They also took Hymenaeus whose delicate features convinced them he was a girl. But Hymenaeus had his lyre with him. He sat on deck and played so enchantingly that the pirates fell asleep. Whereupon he tumbled them overboard and sailed the ship back to Athens. Hailed as a hero, he married the girl and sang at his own wedding — singing so beautifully that the nuptial song was thereafter called a “hymenael.” In another, lesser legend, he is the son of Dionysus and Aphrodite, a minor deity presiding over marriage.

Hyperboreans (hy pur BOH ree uhnz): Those who dwelt in a place beyond the North Wind, perhaps Britain. Apollo sought refuge among the Hyperboreans when he was exiled from Olympus for slaying the Cyclopes. He thereafter returned for a few days every winter to display his affection for those who had welcomed him so warmly. His annual return is still awaited with great eagerness by those who dwell among the mist and cold.

Hyperion (hy PEER ih uhh): First son of Uranus and Gaia, he was the eldest Titan whose name means “the one above.” He married the Titaness Theia, whose radiance, it is said, first inspired men with their love of gold. They became the parents of Helios, Semele, and Eos — or the sun, the moon, and the dawn.

Hypnos (HIP nuhs): The god of sleep. He was the son of Night, little brother of Death, and the father of Dreams. He dwelt in

a cave on the island of Lemnos with his wife, Aglaia, most brilliant of the Graces. Outside the cave was a garden of herbs where the poppy grew, and the lotus, and other flowers which help men sleep. Hypnos was also known as Lord of the Two Gates, these being the Gates of Ivory and the Gates of Horn. Through the Gates of Ivory thronged those false visions which teased folk at night, tempting them into foolish ways. Through the Gates of Horn flew forth true dreams of prophecy and inspiration. In Roman mythology, Hypnos was known as Somnus.

Hypsipyle (hip SIP uh lee): Queen of Lemnos. The Lemnians had been in the habit of raiding Thrace and bringing home Thracian girls whom they preferred to their wives. Finally, the wives lost patience and killed every man on the island, living husbandless for many years. The Argonauts landed there and were tumultuously welcomed. Every woman had a child by an Argonaut. Hypsipyle, who had chosen Jason, bore him twin sons, but he had departed by then and never saw them.

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Iapetus (eye AP ee tus): Son of Uranus and Gaia; one of the primal Titan brood, elder brothers of the gods. He was married to Themis and produced a mighty progeny: Atlas, who bore the sky on his shoulders; Prometheus, who gave fire to mankind; and Epimetheus, husband of Pandora.

Iasion (eye AY zih uhn): A son of Zeus and one of the Pleides. Iasion was a very handsome demigod and Demeter fell in love with him at the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia. They lay all one night on a thrice ploughed field on the island of Crete — which, thereafter, Demeter blessed with fertility. But Zeus was seized by a jealous rage when he learned of this encounter and killed Iasion with a thunderbolt. Demeter sped to Olympus and pled so eloquently that Zeus forbade Hades to take Iasion and granted his son immortality, ranking him among the lesser deities. However, Zeus always bore a grudge against him and never allowed him into the higher councils. There was a cult of Iasion in Arcadia, where, inspired by Demeter, he had taught the Arcadians advanced methods of agriculture.

Icarius (eye KAH rih us): Central figure in a curious legend of Dionysus. Icarius was an Attic ploughman. He and his daughter, Erigone, were the first to welcome the radiant young god when he

came to Attica. They celebrated his advent with a joyous festival. Dionysus was grateful and taught Icarius secrets of vine-culture, how to press wine out of grapes, and how to age the wine. After Dionysus had departed, Icarius followed his instructions and made vats of wine which he shared with his neighbors. The neighbors, however, drank too much, and became drunk. Never having done so before, they thought Icarius had poisoned them. They murdered him and hid his body. Erigone went out with her keen-scented dog, Maera, in search of her father, and the dog found the hole where the man lay buried. When Erigone realized what had happened, she hanged herself. Dionysus learned of this and punished the people of Attica — laying a drought upon the land and filling the women with crazed spite so that they tormented their husbands. Then Dionysus set his friends in a special place among the stars. Icarius became that constellation called the Ploughman and Erigone's constellation was called Virgo. Nor did the god forget the dog, which he placed at the heels of the Ploughman as the dog-star, Sirius.

Icarus (IHK uh ruhs; EYE kuh ruhs): Son of Daedalus, he persuaded his father to make wings so that they might escape from the prison-maze at Gnosso, called the Labyrinth. The great artificer yielded to his son's demands, made the wings, and they flew away. But Icarus, whose imagination always out-leaped his capacities, was so intoxicated by flight that he disregarded his father's warning and flew too near the sun. The wax of his wings

melted and the boy plunged into the sea, thereafter called the Icarian Sea. We derive our own word “Icarian” from him; it means “of bold vaunting imagination.”

Icelos (YS uh luhs; IHSS uh luhs): A son of Hypnos; god of sleep. He changed himself into a different animal every night. There are those who say he was one of Hypnos’ dream-brood — the kind of furry dream with bright bestial eyes that prowls the margins of night.

Idas and Lyncaeus (EYE duhs) (Lihn sooss): A pair of fabulous twins, the only pair to rival the immortal Castor and Polydeuces. Some say that Poseidon fathered one or both of these twins. In any case, they were marvelous warriors. Idas was a master spearman and Lyncaeus had eyes sharper than an eagle’s. After their return from the Argosy, Idas fell in love with a princess named Marpessa. Now, anyone who courted her had to submit to a chariot-race with her father — the loser to lose his life also. Dozens of young men had perished in this way, for Evenus, her father, owned the swiftest stallions in that part of the world. But Idas asked Poseidon for aid and received a chariot drawn by winged horses. So equipped, he easily outraced Evenus, who then hanged himself. Idas married Marpessa and they lived happily together until Apollo took a fancy to the beautiful girl and abducted her. But Idas followed swiftly in his winged chariot and was bold enough to challenge the god, one of the few mortals ever to do so. They

fought a duel with bows and arrows. But Zeus parted them, declaring that Marpessa should decide for herself whom she wished to live with. Unhesitatingly, she chose her husband. In an earlier legend, the twins joined those other twins, Castor and Polydeuces, on a cattle raid. But they quarreled over the spoils and the quarrel developed into a bloody brawl. Castor killed Lyncaeus, Idas killed Castor, and Polydeuces finished off Idas. Only Polydeuces survived and he was unable to live without his beloved twin. Nor did Marpessa wish to live without her husband and she too killed herself.

Idomoneus (eye DAHM ee nooss; eye doh mee NEE us): Son of Deucalion; king of Crete. He led a great expeditionary force against Troy and shared the supreme command with Agamemnon. He fought well during the war and was an exceedingly effective leader. While refusing to dispute Agamemnon's rash decisions, he was always admired for his quietly successful generalship. Sailing homeward from Troy, his fleet ran into a violent tempest. Idomoneus, desperate to save his booty-laden ships and the lives of his men, vowed to Poseidon that if he were allowed to reach Crete he would sacrifice to the sea-god the first living thing he saw. The winds fell and he was able to bring his ships safely home. Upon disembarking, the first person he saw was his own son running joyfully to greet him. Legends differ at this point. Some say that Idomoneus kept his vow and sacrificed his son to Poseidon. Others say that he intended to keep his vow but that Zeus by this time had

grown weary of human sacrifice and decided to put an end to the custom. He sent a pestilence down upon Crete — a swift deadly plague that cut men down where they stood. Idomoneus was forced to abandon the ceremony of sacrifice. He consulted an oracle who told him that he must spare his son and that he would be forgiven by all the gods, including Poseidon, who would accept a ram instead.

Iliad (IHL ih uhd): Homer’s tremendous epic which pivots upon two months in the tenth year of the Trojan War. Achilles and Hector are the central characters but there is a cast of thousands. Homer is loosely credited with all the tales surrounding the Greek invasion of Troy and those who fought on both sides. Actually, most of the accounts of the events leading up to the war, the first nine years of the war, and the events following the sack of Troy, are non-Homeric. But, unlike the other tales and fragments of tales from antiquity, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are integrated, beautifully structured narratives, written in poetry and stamped uniquely by one man’s genius. They are thronged with marvelously developed human beings who are sometimes godlike and with gods who are all too often too human.

Ilium (IHL ih uhm): An ancient name for Troy after its fourth king, Ilus. “Iliad” means “story of Ilium.”

Ilus (EYE luhs): Early king of Troy who actually built most of the first city. His grandfather, Dardanus, had settled the great sea-washed plain and had begun to build a nation. But for three generations no city had been built; the Trojans — not yet called the Trojans, but Dardanians — had been too busy fighting their enemies and extending the boundaries of their new land. According to legend, Ilus, the fourth king, was told by an oracle to follow a cow which had been given to him by a Phrygian king whom he had defeated in a wrestling match. He was to follow that cow until it lay down, and there build his city. He followed it across the Dardanian plain to the hill of Ate, where the cow rested. There he built his city, which was named after him. But it was also called *Tros* in honor of another early king, sometimes described as the grandfather of Ilus, sometimes as his nephew.

Ino (EYE noh): A daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, she led a very eventful and tragic life. She became the second wife of Athamas, king of Boetia, who had discarded his first wife for her sake. Now, this first wife, named Nephele, was a curious phantom goddess who irritated Hera by prowling the garden of Olympus, sobbing out her troubles and disturbing the festive mood of Hera's soirées. Hera, therefore, cursed Athamas for returning Nephele to Olympus and cursed his house for generations to come. It is told that Ino hated the sons of Nephele, Phrixus and Helle, and evolved a plot to rid herself of them. She secretly advised the women of Boetia to parch the seed-grain before sowing it. This, of course,

meant that the seed did not grow and famine struck the land. Athamas, thereupon, consulted the oracles at Delphi, as was the custom. But Ino, as part of her plot, had bribed certain of these oracles, who informed the king that the famine would be lifted only if he sacrificed his sons to Demeter, goddess of the harvest. But Nephele, aware of this, cornered Zeus in the garden, and besought his aid. Whereupon, he sent a winged golden ram to carry Nephele's sons away from Boetia. Hera sent a dream to Athamas, informing him of Ino's plot. Enraged, he killed his son by Ino, a boy named Melicertes, and pursued Ino, intending to kill her also. But she leaped into the sea and Zeus — who had always been partial to Ino because, long before, she had helped care for his infant son Dionysus — changed her into a sea-deity. He changed her name also to Leucothea, meaning the white goddess. She wore a magic white veil that conferred immunity against drowning on anyone who wore it. It was Leucothea who came to the aid of Odysseus when the voyager was swept off his raft by one of Poseidon's spiteful squalls. Ino wrapped him in her magic white veil and he was able to float safely to the island of Drypane where he was welcomed by the lovely Nausicaa.

Io (EYE oh): A princess of Argos; loved by Zeus and loathed by Hera. Zeus knew that Hera had sent her hundred-eyed servant, Argus, to spy upon his meetings with Io. To escape this multiple vigilance he changed Io into a cow — a beautiful black and white heifer with great black eyes and polished horns. Hera, seeing

through the disguise immediately, pretended innocence and asked Zeus to make her a gift of the heifer. He could not refuse. She then sent Argus to watch the cow day and night so that Zeus could not change the cow back to her own form. Thereupon, Zeus entrusted the matter to the infinitely witty and resourceful Hermes. The messenger god sped to the meadow where the unhappy Io was tethered and there found the hundred-eyed Argus watching her with all his eyes. Hermes was god of thieves and supernaturally thievish, but, with a hundred eyes watching, he knew that even he could not escape detection. He began to pipe upon his flute, playing sleepy tunes. The sun was hot and the flute sounded now like bees buzzing in the clover, now like the far sound of cowbells, now like the small wind seething in the grass. One by one, the eyes of Argus closed, until all hundred were closed and Argus lay fast asleep. Then Hermes rose softly, drew his sword, and cut off the head of Hera's sentry. He untethered Io and she wandered off. But Hera had other resources. She sent her demonish servant, Brize, to torment the cow. Brize was an enormous gadfly with a sting as long as a dagger. She flew about Io night and day, savagely stinging her. The anguished heifer rushed across meadow and field and plunged into the sea, which thereafter bore her name — the Ionian Sea. By this time, Hermes had flown to the scene with a golden net. He netted the gadfly and drowned it. Io swam across the sea to Egypt, where, finally, Zeus was able to hide her from Hera. He returned the girl to her own shape. She bore him a son named Epaphus, who become

king of Egypt and father of Libya. It is said that the cult of cow-worship began in those lands upon the arrival of the black and white heifer. Hera, mourning the lost Argus, removed the hundred brilliant eyes from his head and set them on the tail of the peacock, thus making it the most ornamental bird in the world.

Iole (EYE oh lee): A beautiful girl who figured in the mighty legend of Heracles. The hero become interested in her at one point, arousing the jealousy of his wife, Deianeira, who, in an effort to win back his love, dipped his shirt in the poison blood of Nessus, which had been recommended to her as a love-philtre. The shirt of Nessus clung to Heracles, burning like fire; when he pulled it off he pulled away his flesh and died.

Iphicles (IF uh kleez): Son of Amphitryon and Alcmene; Heracles' half-brother, and his twin. Iphicles was a modest honest man who lived for years in the mighty shadow of his brother, doing everything he could to help the hero in his tormented labors and performing many courageous deeds. He was the father of Ioleus, Heracles' favorite nephew, who also attempted to aid the hero in his labors and was of particular help during Heracles' battle with the Hydra. Iphicles was killed during Augeas' treacherous attack on Heracles and was mourned throughout Mycenae.

Iphigenia (if uh jee NY uh): Eldest daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. When the Greek forces were gathered at Aulis,

preparing to embark for Troy, Agamemnon went hunting and killed a white stag belonging to Artemis, which she had unyoked briefly from her moon-chariot. Artemis, enraged, summoned Aeolus and asked him to whistle up the North Wind. The wind blew, and blew directly into the harbor, and the ships could not sail. Agamemnon consulted the soothsayer Calchas, who killed a bird and from its entrails read the wrath of Artemis and the meaning of the tempest. He informed the king that he must sacrifice the most beautiful of his daughters to Artemis if he wished to appease her wrath and calm the tempest. Agamemnon thereupon led his eldest daughter, Iphigenia, to the altar and cut her throat with his own hands. The winds fell and the fleet sailed for Troy. In a more cosmetic version of this myth the sacrifice is prevented at the last moment when Artemis sends another white stag to take the girl's place. But the first version is the one most widely told. The sacrifice of Iphigenia is cited as one of the reasons Clytemnestra, her mother, conceived hatred for Agamemnon and later murdered him.

Iphis (EYE fuss): A warmhearted youth who lived in Salamis and fell in love with a girl named Anaxerete. But he aroused no response in her at all. One night he went to her house and hanged himself from the lintel of her doorway. The next morning she saw him hanging there, but still displayed no emotion. This stony-heartedness displeased Aphrodite who changed her completely into a stone.

Iris (EYE rus): The rainbow-goddess, and Hera's messenger. She flew about on Hera's errands very much as Hermes did for Zeus. However, she was of dazzling good nature and carried messages for other gods as well. She was a natural peacemaker. After a violent storm she sent a many-colored streamer arching across the sky to gladden men's hearts with a promise of fair weather. Her amiability was such that she never raised a word of objection when Zeus, wishing to conceal his dalliance with Aphrodite, spread the rumor that their son, Eros, was in reality the son of Iris and the West Wind. Hera was not deceived by this and savagely upbraided Iris for allowing such a story to be told. Iris did not defend herself. First she wept softly, then smiled at Hera. And that smile, gleaming through tears like the rainbow flashing through storm clouds, was so enchanting that Hera stopped scolding — for the first time in the annals of Olympus.

Ismene (ihss MEE nee): Sister of Antigone; daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. Although not so well-known as her courageous sister, Ismene was of the heroic mold too. For when Creon sought to punish Antigone's disobedience by ordering her buried alive, Ismene declared that she shared her sister's guilt and wished to share her punishment. However, Antigone, wishing to save her sister, denied every statement she made.

Itylus (IT uh lus; EYE tih lus): Victimized child in a bloody tale of jealousy and revenge. See *Philomela and [Procne](#)*.

Ixion (IHK sy uhn; IHK sih uhn): A king of Thessaly whose audacity was immortal and punishment eternal. He actually tried to cuckold Zeus and abduct Hera. Zeus, in one of his complex and puzzling ruses, molded a cloud into the stately form of his wife. He named this cloud Nephele and endowed it with a kind of low-grade vitality. Ixion, deceived, abducted Nephele, who became the mother of the Centaurs — those creatures who are half horse and half man, and gallop through fables, sometimes brutal, sometimes wise. Then Zeus struck with his thunderbolt. He killed Ixion and had Hades prepare him a special punishment after death. Ixion was bound to the spokes of a flaming wheel; as he turns and burns, demons flog him with whips made of serpents. Nephele continued to float mournfully about, sometimes courted by others, but always finally abandoned.

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J

Jason (JAY sun): Leader of the Argonauts in their search for the Golden Fleece. Jason had a valid claim to the throne of Iolchus, a situation which the usurping king, his uncle, Pelias, found intolerable. The yellow-haired prince was very popular and Pelias did not dare to kill him but did the next best thing. He sent him on a mission which had always proved fatal — to retrieve the Golden Fleece from the savage king Aeetes, of Colchis, and his even more dangerous daughter, the witch-princess Medea. Jason, however, was attracted by danger and sent heralds to proclaim his quest throughout the lands of the Inner Sea. The table of their names is the most illustrious roll-call of heroes ever assembled in one spot. Peleus was there, greatest warrior of his time; the invincible twins, Castor and Polydeuces. Atalanta, fleet-footed huntress; and some forty other battle chiefs, the noblest and bravest of their day. Orpheus came to sing his songs and fill their hearts with hope. And Argos, the master shipwright, built them a ship called the *Argo* which gave its name to their quest. Before launching the ship they sacrificed to all the gods. Jason aimed an especially fervent prayer at Aphrodite who had always been his favorite among the Olympians. She resolved to help him by lighting torches of desire in his path, and this incendiary aid was to have very mixed consequences. It was a long hard voyage. They encountered storms,

pirates, man-eating birds, wild women, rocks that pursued them trying to grind their hull to bits, and a tribe of six-handed giants. They were able to beat off their enemies with the formidable assistance of Heracles, who had joined them briefly. But he left the expedition in mid-voyage, to the unspoken relief of his shipmates, who knew that his smoldering temper and wild strength made him almost as dangerous a friend as a foe. When they reached Colchis, Jason with two companions tried a swift night raid on the shrine of the Fleece. But they were captured and condemned to the Ordeal of the Plow — which meant yoking up two bulls and ploughing a field. The bulls were not ordinary, but huge fire-breathing beasts with brass horns and brass hooves. No one had ever lived through the first minutes of this test. Now it was that Aphrodite took a hand. She dispatched her son, Eros, archer of love, to shoot his sweetly envenomed arrows into the heart of Medea, daughter of Aeetes and a high-priestess of Hecate, a powerful sorceress. Driven half mad by her newly aroused passion, she decided to betray her father and use all her demonish knowledge to save the handsome young prisoner. Visiting him secretly in his cell, she made him promise to love her and in return anointed him with a magical oil which would protect him against the flaming breath of the bulls. The next day, made invulnerable by Medea's ointment and using some potent incantations she had taught him, Jason subdued the brass bulls and ploughed the field. While he was taming the bulls and astounding the court, Medea went to the shrine of Hecate where a great dragon

guarded the Fleece. She sang a sorcerous lullaby, casting the dragon into a deep sleep, stole the Fleece, and brought it as her dowery to Jason, who had been freed by Aeetes according to the terms of the Ordeal. The Colchian fleet gave chase but the *Argo* was too swift. Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts scudded safely homeward with the Golden Fleece nailed to the mast. Then Jason, with the help of Medea and his hero-crew, deposed Pelias and seized the throne of Iolchus. But the end of the story was tragic. Jason tired of Medea, and she — mad with rage and jealousy — murdered their two sons. Jason reigned for many years; he had other wives and other sons. And Medea continued her career elsewhere.

Jocasta (joh KASS tuh): Queen of Thebes; wife of Laius; mother and wife of Oedipus. See [Oedipus](#).

Judgment of Paris: See [Apple of Discord](#).

Juno (JOO noh): Roman name for Hera, queen of the gods. See [Hera](#).

Jupiter (JOO puh tur): Roman name for Zeus, king of the gods. This transformation of name from its Greek to its Latin form provides a good example of how one language developed into the other. “Jupiter” is a corruption of the words “Zeus pater,” Father Zeus.

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L

Lachesis (LAK ee sihs): Middle sister of the Fates. She measured out the thread of life which Clotho had spun, then gave it to Atropos, sister of the shears, who cut the thread when she thought it was long enough.

Ladon (LAY duhn): A serpent stationed by Hera in the Garden of the Hesperides to guard her golden apples. He was a special serpent designed for dread. There was no distinction between head and body; his jaws were hinged at the tail. In other words, he was a half mile of living gullet, lined with teeth — each one longer than an elephant's tusk and sharper than the sharpest sword. When Heracles came to the Garden of the Hesperides to fetch the golden apples for the completion of his eleventh labor, he first had to contend with Ladon. The sight of those murderous jaws made even Heracles hesitate. He did not wish to get close enough to use sword or spear, and the serpent's leather hide, he knew, was proof against arrow-shot. He went into the forest; there he sought dead trees where bees like to build their hives. He hung the buzzing hives from his belt and approached Ladon. First, he tossed honey combs to the monster, who snapped them up greedily. Then, Heracles took the hives themselves, full of angry bees, and hurled them one by one into the gaping gullet. The bees swarmed

furiously, stinging Ladon in the only part of him that was vulnerable — his tongue and the inner membranes of his throat. The serpent was stung to death, but in his flailing agonies wasted the orchard — all except Hera's tree of golden apples, which Heracles then picked.

Laelaps (LEE laps): Matchless hunting hound which Artemis gave to Procris. This lithe beautiful dog never lost a scent and would run any game to the ground and hold the beast at bay, no matter how large and fierce it was, until the hunter arrived. Procris gave this dog to her husband, Cephalus. And Laelaps was with Cephalus on that fatal hunt when he accidentally killed his wife. It is said that the dog remained in one spot, howling with dismay, refusing to eat or drink, until Artemis came to reclaim him. See [Cephalus](#).

Laertes (lay UR teez): King of Ithaca, and supposed father of Odysseus. Actually, he was the hero's foster father. He knew that the boy had been begotten by Autolycus, son of Hermes and master thief, who often stole wives from husbands. However, Laertes forgave his wife, Anticlea, and was a good father to Odysseus, recognizing that the thievish craftiness of Autolycus had been transmuted into incredible shrewdness and resourcefulness in his son, and that the boy would be a hero and a great king.

Laestrygones (less TRIG oh neez): Giants who inhabited an island off Sicily and whose favorite food was human flesh. The sight of this island bewildered sailors, for the sun chased the moon across the sky like a hound chasing a deer, and night followed day and day followed night in a matter of minutes. This swift alternation of light and shade confused helmsmen and led to many shipwrecks — which delighted the giant cannibals. Odysseus, unfortunately, chose that island for a landfall. The giants attacked. They stamped two of his beached ships to splinters and ate the crews alive. When Odysseus finally managed to escape with one ship and a battered crew, he was more disheartened than at any other stage of his journey.

Laius (LAY uhs; LAY us): King of Thebes; husband of Jocasta; father of Oedipus. He was killed by his son, Oedipus, in fulfillment of a prophecy that the youth was attempting to flee. Oedipus subsequently married his mother, completing the circle of murder and incest. This myth has echoed down the ages and given its name to the central theme of Freudian psychology. See [Oedipus](#).

Lamia (LAY mih uh): A monster; half woman, half serpent. Once she had been all woman, and a beautiful one, but Zeus had loved her and Hera had retaliated. The goddess transformed Lamia into a hideous creature whose disposition matched her appearance. She lurked along roads at night, it is said, snatching up travelers and devouring them.

Lampetia (lam PEE shih uh): A demigoddess; daughter of Apollo. She was appointed by her father to guard his golden sun-cattle on the island of Thrinacia. Odysseus and his starving crew landed on this island. Odysseus recognized the beeves as sacred and warned his men not to touch them. But hunger was stronger than obedience. They slaughtered the cattle and began to roast them. The hides of the slaughtered cattle arose and began to move about, lowing piteously, attracting the attention of Lampetia who had been on another part of the island. Lampetia immediately sped to Olympus to inform her father. Apollo hurled a vicious squall at the island, wrecking the ship and drowning its sailors as they put out of the harbor. Odysseus alone was spared because he had not eaten of the sacred beef and had tried to restrain his men. He clung to a broken mast, half drowning, and drifted for days until he was swept ashore on Calypso's island.

Laocoon (lay AHK oh uhn): Son of Priam and Hecuba. He was no warrior, but a priest — and a very wise and courageous man. He mistrusted the Wooden Horse on sight, saying, “I fear the Greeks, even bearing gifts.” And he tried to prevent the Trojans from rolling the horse within the gates. But Poseidon, who favored the Greek cause, wished Odysseus' ruse to succeed and wanted the hollow wooden horse with its belly full of armed men to enter the gates. Therefore, Poseidon sent two huge sea-serpents onto the beach at Troy. They seized Laocoon's two young sons and began to devour them. Without hesitation, Laocoon flung himself upon the

serpents and wrestled them with wild unnatural strength. But they wrapped themselves about his body and slowly crushed him to death. The Trojans took this as a sign that Laocoon had been uttering sacrilege and that indeed the wooden horse was a sacred tribute to the gods as well as a great prize. They rolled the horse into Troy. And all of them died that night when the armed Greeks came out of its belly.

Laomedon (lay AHM ee duhn): Fifth king of Troy; father of Priam; and a man very reluctant to pay his debts. Since he tended to have formidable creditors like Poseidon and Heracles, the consequences were painful. See [*Hesione*](#).

Latinus (luh TY nuhs): A son of Circe and Odysseus. He settled in Italy where he carved out a territory for himself and defended it very ably. When Aeneas landed in Italy after the sack of Troy, Latinus welcomed him and allowed him to marry his daughter, Lavinia. Aeneas succeeded Latinus as king of Latium; later their descendants founded Rome. The name Latinus became immortalized by becoming the name of a people and their language — Latin.

Laurel (LOH rehl; LOR uhl): The name given to Daphne after she was turned into a tree while fleeing the embrace of Apollo. The tree became sacred to the sun-god; he made wreaths of its leaves to

crown victors, and his priestesses at Delphi chewed laurel leaves to induce a prophetic trance.

Leda (LEE duh): Paramour of Zeus; mother of Helen, Castor, Polydeuces, and Clytemnestra. Zeus put on the form of a white swan to woo this beautiful young queen of Sparta. She gave birth to quadruplets — Helen and Polydeuces sired by Zeus; Clytemnestra and Castor, whose father was her husband, Tyndareus. Her husband learned this but did not dare complain. Indeed, he took great pride in the exploits of his foster children. All four of Leda's children led extremely eventful lives and had a certain aptitude for involving innocent bystanders in the consequences of their deeds.

Lethe (LEE thee): A river in Tartarus whose waters were oblivion. It took its name from the nymph Lethe, whose name means forgetfulness. She was the daughter of Eris, which means discord. This beautiful sparkling stream was the one first encountered by the dead entering their place of eternal exile. Parched by their long journey, they stooped and drank from this spring. They drank forgetfulness. All memory of their past life fell away. They forgot those they had loved and had left behind on earth. They forgot triumphs and crimes, friends and enemies. Here, at the entrance to Tartarus, at the very threshold of their eternal banishment, on the banks of this sparkling stream, they encountered a first and last kindness. For by forgetting the events

of their mortal life they were able to accept death without rancor or rebellion.

Leto (LEE toh): Zeus loved this maiden, who was known as Leto of the Dark Robe. She bore him two children, the most radiant ever born. Hera flew into a furious jealous tantrum, worse than any she had ever displayed before, because it had been foretold that these twins would outshine all her own children. She had known this even before they were born and had cursed Leto's labors, forbidding her to give birth anywhere the sun had ever shone. Leto wandered the earth looking for a place where the sun had never shone so that she might bear her children but she could find nothing. Finally, Zeus raised an island which had been floating undersea — the island of Delos. Zeus raised it to the surface and anchored it there. Since the sun had never yet shone on Delos it could not be touched by Hera's curse and Leto was able to begin her labors. She bore Artemis and Apollo, who became the gods of the moon and the sun, greater by far than any of Hera's children.

Leucippos (loo SIPH us): A grandson of Perseus who loved the nymph Daphne, also loved by Apollo. The lad put on girl's clothes and joined Daphne's attendants so that he might bathe with her in the river. But his ruse was discovered by Apollo who shot him full of arrows and left him dead in the river.

Leucothea (loo KATH ee uh): Name of the sea-deity who had formerly been the tragic princess, Ino. See [Ino](#). Leucothea ordered a great pit dug near Epidaurus and filled it with prophetic waters. It became a sacred lake. There folk threw barley cakes to test their luck. If the cake sank, it meant good luck. If it floated, luck would be bad. The women of Epidaurus, it is said, developed a heavy hand with pastry.

Libya (LIHB ih uh): Granddaughter of Io; grandmother of Europa. She ruled a large area in North Africa and part of that coast still bears her name. Libya means “falling rain,” and in that dry part of the world, the queen-priestess presided over rain-making rituals — the most significant ceremonies of the year.

Lichas (LY kuhs): A servant of Heracles who brought him the shirt which had been dipped into the poison blood of Nessus. In his death-throes, Heracles seized Lichas by the leg and hurled him off the cliff. But Zeus took pity and arrested the fall, turning him into a rock — which then fell to the beach. For centuries afterward, this rock was seen on the shore of Euboea and was a famous landmark because of its manlike shape.

Linus (LY nuhs); Brother of Orpheus, and also a great musician. He was of mournful bent; his specialty was composing songs of lament for dead heroes, thereafter, called “linus-songs.” In one legend, he was given the task of teaching Heracles the lyre and

reprimanded the hulking lad whose fingers were clumsy on the strings. Heracles responded by smashing the lyre over his teacher's head, but struck too hard, killing Linus. Then his brother, Orpheus, sang a linus-song at his funeral pyre. The departing shade was so gladdened by the pride of authorship, it is said, that he changed his mode in Tartarus and began to sing joyous songs — the only happy sounds to be heard in those gloomy precincts.

Lityerses (liht ih UR seez): A wicked king of Phrygia who would challenge visitors to use one of his enormous scythes in a winnowing contest. When the stranger lost, as he always did, the king cut off his head. However, one of these strangers was Heracles, who hefted the huge sickle, and scythed an entire field with one sweep of his arms; on the back-stroke, he cut off the king's head.

Lotus-eaters (LOH tuhs EE turz): They dwelt upon an elbow of the Libyan coast where the lotus-flower grew, casting sleep upon all who breathed its fragrance or tasted its honeyed blossoms. The folk here ate of this flower and slept, and woke only to eat again, and fall again into a deep sleep laced with mild dreams. Odysseus almost lost the crews of his three ships when he landed in this place. The men ate of the lotus, fell asleep, and awoke only to reach out for the flowers and cram their mouths full, then fall asleep again. Odysseus himself ate of the lotus. But when he awoke, he realized what was happening, and refrained from eating again.

Struggling against sleep, he propped his eyelids open with little splinters of wood. Then he staggered from beach to ship, carrying his sailors aboard one by one. He lashed the three ships together and all alone maneuvered out of the harbor into the open sea while the sailors still slept. When they awoke, the coast of Libya was only a shadow in the distance and they thought it had all been a dream.

Lycaon (ly KAY uhn): A king of Arcadia in very ancient times. The Arcadians worshipped a wolf-god and offered him human sacrifice, usually a child. Participants in these rites could eat of the sacrifice too. It was believed that any man who ate human flesh would turn into a wolf. If, during his incarnation as a wolf, he refrained from eating human flesh, he was transformed into a man again. According to one legend, Zeus visited Arcadia disguised as a mortal. But Lycaon knew who he was and, loath to change gods, challenged the divinity of Zeus. He set before his guest a roasted haunch of child, claiming it was a joint of beef. Whereupon, Zeus dropped his mortal guise and hurled his thunderbolt, killing Lycaon and all his sons, except the youngest, to whom he gave the throne of Arcadia on condition that no human being would ever be sacrificed to the gods.

Lycomedes (ly koh MEE deez): A king of Scyros who harbored the youthful Achilles at the request of Thetis, who was trying to hide the lad from Odysseus and others recruiting for the

Trojan War. The sea-goddess Thetis, with her prophetic powers, knew that her beautiful son would never return from the war if he went and she was determined that he would not go. This was at a time when Achilles was still young enough to obey his parents and he remained in Scyros dressed as a girl among the playful daughters of Lycomedes. However, Odysseus came for him, disguised as an old peddler. He displayed his wares in the chamber of the king's daughters — who all fell gleefully upon the bolts of colored cloth and flasks of perfume and heaps of jewelry. All except Achilles. Still dressed as a girl, he pounced with a shout of joy on a sword that the crafty Odysseus had put among his other wares. Thus, Achilles revealed his irrepressible warlike instincts and Odysseus claimed him for the Trojan campaign...from which he never returned. However, he left Lycomedes a little grandson, born after Achilles' departure, much to the king's surprise. This was Neoptolemus who later joined his father on the Trojan field.

Lycurgus (ly KUR guhs): A king of Thrace who refused to let Dionysus and his followers enter the kingdom. Dionysus, lord of the vine, cast a vegetable madness upon the impious king. Lycurgus imagined himself being overgrown by vines. He seized his axe and cut down the nearest vine, but it was his son, Dryas. His madness deepened. He thought that his own legs were stalks of some menacing plant and cut them off at the knee and died. A new king took the throne. Dionysus and his revelers returned to Thrace.

Lycus (LY kuhs): There are several of this name in mythology. Perhaps the most interesting is Lycus, king of Euboea who, driven from his throne by an ambitious brother, turned from politics to religion. He studied the mysteries of the Great Goddess and was visited by her in dreams. She instructed him in many of her secrets and made him promise to write them down for the enlightenment of generations to come...when men would weary of the brutal Olympians and return to the goddess. He wrote her secrets on a sheet of copper and buried it in a brass urn among a grove of myrtle trees. He was also a soothsayer, and much beloved. Aegeus, king of Athens, grew jealous of this old sage who was gaining so much influence among the people and expelled him from the land. Lycus, thereupon, made his way to Asia Minor where he found a people who revered wisdom. They made him their king and thereafter called themselves Lycians. But the Athenians did not forget him. They raised a temple of Apollo at the place where Lycus had done much of his healing and named it in his honor — the Lyceum.

Lymnades (lihM NAY deez): Water-demons who inhabited lakes, streams, and marshes — hated humans, and had a fatal gift of mimicry. When a traveler approached they would call for help in the voice of the one dearest to him. When he ran to the water's edge, they would pull him in and drown him.

M

Machaon (muh KAY uhn): Son of Asclepius. He and his brother, Podilarius, inherited their father's talent for healing and were rigorously schooled by him. Machaon became a master surgeon; Podilarius was more inclined toward the diagnosis and cure of disease. The brothers joined the Greek expeditionary force against Troy and performed nobly, saving many lives. Machaon gained greater fame because the brutal injuries of warfare call more upon surgery than diagnostics. He was killed by Penthesilea, an Amazon princess who fought on the Trojan side. It is said that the arrow she sent winging toward Machaon killed a thousand and one men — Machaon himself and the thousand wounded men who would have survived had he been there to tend them.

Maenads (MEE nahdz): Women intoxicated by the radiance of the vine-god, Dionysus. They traveled in his train and reveled at night beneath the moon. They were also called *Bacchantes*.

Maia (MAY yuh; MAY uh): Beautiful daughter of Atlas who was loved by Zeus and became the mother of Hermes. She was one of the Pleiades, those whom Zeus placed among the stars after their death.

Maron (MAIR uhn): A grandson of Dionysus. He ruled the Ciconians, whose cities Odysseus raided on the first leg of his fateful voyage from Troy. The Ciconians defended themselves fiercely and the Greeks had to retreat. At one stage of the campaign Odysseus captured Maron in his castle, but impressed by his captive's descent from Dionysus, god of the vine, spared his life. Maron responded graciously, giving Odysseus a skin of wine said to have been pressed by Dionysus himself. This wine-skin later saved Odysseus' life in the Cyclops' cave. The one-eyed giant heretofore had drunk only ox-blood and goat's milk. After Odysseus had given him undiluted wine to drink the monster went into a deep sleep, allowing Odysseus the chance to blind him and lead his men to safety.

Mars (MAHRZ): Roman name for Ares, god of war. See [Ares](#).

Marsyas (MAHR sih uhs): A satyr who played the flute more beautifully than anyone since Pan. His melodies enchanted the forest-folk. Fauns and satyrs and dryads gathered to listen as he sat on a rock, piping, under the first stars of evening. The birds and the beasts gathered too. Wolf stood next to deer, listening...and did not attack. Nor did hawk stoop upon field-mouse as Marsyas played. His listeners praised him to the skies, not realizing how jealous the gods could be, and what terrible forms their jealousy could take. They said that Marsyas played more beautifully than Apollo, the

god of music. When Apollo heard about this he was determined upon vengeance. He challenged Marsyas to a contest. They played on a slope of Mt. Helicon and the Muses sat in judgment. Marsyas played the flute and Apollo played the lyre. A hush fell over the land; only the sound of the flute was heard, then the sound of the lyre. Then Apollo sprang his trap. He turned his lyre upside down and played it that way, singing as he played, and challenged Marsyas to do likewise. Of course, it is impossible to play the flute upside down or to sing while playing it. Apollo declared himself the winner and the Muses were forced to assent. Thereupon Apollo decreed a terrible penalty for the loser. Marsyas was bound upside down to a tree and the skin was flayed from his bones. The dead satyr was mourned by all who loved him. Fauns and satyrs and dryads gathered at the spot and wept...and the birds and the beasts came and wept too. They wept so copiously that their tears became a river and the river was called Marsyas. And, it is said, the sound of its waters is more musical than any other river or stream.

Medea (mee DEE uh): Princess of Colchis; priestess of Hecate; Jason's wife. She had been tutored in the use of spells, incantations, and magic potions by her aunt, Circe, the island sorceress. When she fell in love with Jason, who had come to Colchis seeking the Golden Fleece, she spread a magic unguent over him, making him invulnerable to the fiery breath of the brass bulls he had been condemned to fight, allowing him to overcome these bulls. She helped him steal the Fleece, then eloped with him.

She helped him kill his usurping uncle and reclaim the throne of his native land. However, she was just as passionate in her hatred as she was in her love. When Jason deserted her, she murdered their two children, then made her way to Athens, where she married the aged Aegeus and caused much mischief in that court until expelled by Theseus. See [Jason](#).

Medusa (muh DOO suh): Youngest of the Gorgons. Cutting off her snake-haired head was the climax of Perseus' hero-task. See [Gorgons](#); [Perseus](#).

Megaera (muh JEE ruh): Princess of Thebes; Heracles' first wife. They lived happily together and she bore him three sons. But then Hera, who had been biding her time allowing her vengeance to ripen, suddenly drove Heracles mad. She deranged his vision so that he mistook Megaera and his three children for a raiding party of enemies and slew them all. It was for this crime that Zeus sentenced him to serve Eurystheus and perform any ten labors the diabolical wits of the king might devise. The ten labors became twelve. There are some clues to certain puzzling elements in the enormous body of legend surrounding Heracles. One of these concerns the killing of his sons in the fit of madness sent upon him by Hera. Madness was a classic alibi in ancient times for child sacrifice. This episode indicates that some of the tales of Heracles come from the earliest rudest times before such sacrifice was prohibited.

Melampus (mee LAM puhs): A wise man and healer of Argos. He had always loved animals. Once he discovered a brood of young snakes whose parents had been killed. He took them home and raised them, feeding them milk out of a dish as if they were kittens. One night, as he lay asleep, they came and licked his ears. When he awoke he understood the language of animals. Conversing with animals, he learned many secrets. He learned to read the future by signs that other men disregarded. He learned the medicinal properties of herbs and how to cure ailments that had seemed incurable. He was particularly skillful in curing impotence in men and sterility in women. Once, the daughters of King Proetus mocked at a weather-beaten wooden image of Hera, a very ancient one turned up by a farmer's plough, and the goddess made them go mad. Melampus cured them by secluding them in a temple of Artemis and persuading them to undergo a period of self-examination and meditation. During this time he administered a broth of herbs to strengthen their bodies. They were cured and Proetus rewarded the old seer with a third of his kingdom.

Melanippe (mehl uh NIHP ee): A daughter of Hippe and Aeolus. See [Hippe](#).

Melanippus (mehl uh NIHP uhs): One of the descendants of those men who sprang from the dragon's teeth sowed by Cadmus. Melanippus was one of Thebes' greatest warriors and fought

bravely against the armies of the invading Seven. He killed two of their greatest chiefs and was finally killed himself by Amphiaraus.

Meleager (mehl ee AY jur): Prince of Calydon; Argonaut; lover of Atalanta. All the mightiest hunters and fighters of the age were mustered for the Calydonian Boar Hunt and Meleager was its leading spirit. An enormous savage boar had been sent by Artemis to ravage Calydonia for a fancied affront and, in truth, Meleager welcomed the occasion to hunt so fearsome a beast. Ordinary game no longer offered a challenge to him. For he was a marvelous hunter himself, and with the bold, fleet-footed Atalanta as his hunting partner, he scoured forest and mountain slope for game worthy of his skill. The prince loved this mountain girl passionately and was determined to make her his wife despite the viperish hostility of his mother, Althea. The arrogant queen of Calydonia hated the long-legged Atalanta who could outrace a deer and liked to wrestle bears. In the first blush of his love, and in the vigor of his young manhood, Meleager knew that this hunt for the great boar would be a mighty occasion. Heroes assembled for the hunt: Jason, Theseus, Castor and Polydeuces, Peleus — most of those bold chieftains who later joined Jason on the Argosy...as well as Meleager's two uncles, sour cautious men. It was an arduous hunt. The boar refused to be cornered. It killed many dogs and savaged many hunters. Finally, Meleager and Atalanta, working in tandem, maneuvered the huge beast into a pocket of rock. Atalanta, in a reckless charge, ducked under its horns and cut the tendons of its

back legs. The boar whirled and pinned her under him. But then Meleager leaped in, and with a mighty heave of his shoulders, thrust his spear into the boar's heart. The heroes celebrated the death of the beast and Meleager awarded the hunt trophies to Atalanta — the hide and tusks of the boar. His uncles objected. These tusks were solid ivory; the hide was so tough and so flexible that it would make the best armor ever worn. They scolded Meleager savagely for awarding such a prize to an unknown waif from the hills. They continued to revile Atalanta until Meleager, afire with wrath, stepped between them, whirled his sword, and beheaded them both with a single stroke. Now, these uncles were the favorite brothers of Altheae. When she heard the news of their death, she opened a secret compartment in her chamber wall and drew forth a half-charred pine branch. She had kept this branch in its secret place for twenty-five years — since the day of Meleager's birth. For on that day the Fates appeared in a vision to Altheae and told her that her son would live only so long as the branch burning in the fireplace would be unconsumed. Altheae immediately stuck her hand into the fire, pulled out the branch, and hid it away so no one would find it. Now, crazed by anger, she placed the branch carefully on the fire and watched it as it burned. At that moment, Atalanta, sitting on the edge of a windy cliff with her beloved Meleager, saw his flesh begin to char. A smell of burning meat arose. Horrified, she saw him writhing in agony as he was consumed by some internal fire. She had no way of easing his pain;

she could only watch him die. She ran off into the hills, vowing never to marry. Only a ruse of Aphrodite's made her break that vow. See [Atalanta](#); [Hippomenes](#); [Calydonian Boar Hunt](#).

Melissa (meh LIHS uh): A mountain-nymph who cared for the infant Zeus and hid him from his father, Cronus, who was intent on devouring his progeny. It was she who milked the goat Amalthea, and fed the milk to the child. Wishing to vary his diet, she plundered bees' hives — giving him a permanent taste for honey — which, when he ruled Olympus, he decreed should be fermented to make nectar. But Cronus became aware of the nymph's role in thwarting his murderous design and changed her into an earthworm. Zeus, however, transformed the worm into a splendid queen bee, forevermore to be concerned with honey. *Melissa*, in Greek, means honey.

Melpomene (mehl PAHM ee nee): Muse of tragedy. Her spirit informs those who write the noble cadences of tragic plays and those who speak such lines with sonorous voice and classic gesture.

Memnon (MEHM nuhn): King of Ethiopia and Priam's ally against the Greeks. He was a fierce warrior and had killed Antilochus, son of Nestor. The indomitable old chieftain, Nestor, older by a generation than any other warrior on either side, challenged his son's slayer to single combat, a challenge which Memnon courteously declined because of Nestor's age. He offered,

however, to fight any other Greek who would take up the old man's challenge. Unfortunately it was Achilles who took up the challenge. Like everyone else who fought Achilles, Memnon was killed.

Menalippe (men uh LIHP ee): Beautiful daughter of Cheiron who was assaulted by Aeolus, king of Aeolia. Her father, the wise old centaur, decided that in a world inhabited by such brutal men it would be better for his daughter to drop her half-share of human form. Therefore, he changed her into a mare and she dwelt happily among horses — who are much stronger than men, but much more gentle.

Menelaus (men uh LAY us): King of Sparta; Helen's husband, and Agamemnon's brother. He lived in the shadow of two stronger personalities and his reputation was defined by the amorousness of his wife and the belligerence of his brother. Nevertheless, in his stubborn plodding way, he managed to assert himself very strongly. He was a kind husband, a brave fighter, and a just king. He bested Paris in single combat and would have killed him had not Aphrodite intervened. Battered by storm and menaced by monster on a journey reminiscent of the Odyssey, he proved himself an indomitable captain, and brought his men safely home from Troy. And — not the least of his exploits — he obeyed the best instincts of his nature, forgave Helen, and reinstated her as Queen, braving the disdain of those who called him arch-cuckold. He defied public opinion on another occasion when he offered

shelter to his nephew Orestes, who was fleeing the curse of matricide. He outlived both Helen and Agamemnon, as well as most of his contemporaries. When he died, it is told, Hades reunited him with Helen in the Elysian Fields.

Menoceus (mee NEE sooss): Prince of Thebes; son of Creon, and a great improvement on his cruel and cowardly father. In the war of the Seven Against Thebes, when the city was besieged by superior forces, an oracle spoke, prophesying that Thebes could be saved only if a descendant of the “sown men” would sacrifice his life for the city. These sown men were those who had sprung from the dragon’s seed sowed by Cadmus centuries before. Their descendants were the nobility of Thebes. Unhesitatingly, Menoeceus went to the highest point of the wall and flung himself off in full sight of the enemy. The invaders were driven off and Thebes was saved.

Mentor (MEN tor): A wise Ithacan; trusted counselor of Odysseus. Before embarking for Troy, Odysseus placed Mentor in charge of his affairs. He entrusted the education of his young son, Telemachus, to him, and certain other confidential matters, requiring judgment and acumen. Mentor performed his duties well. Under his tutelage, Telemachus grew into a fine, noble-hearted, clear-thinking young man. He also advised Penelope in the difficult matter of her suitors. According to one legend, it was he who counseled her to delay matters by claiming she could not choose

among the suitors until she had finished a sacred task of weaving an altar cloth she had promised to Artemis. Then, following his counsel, each night she would unravel what she had woven that day. Thus the altar cloth remained unfinished and the suitors were delayed until the return of Odysseus. In the course of the Odyssey, Athena, who had guided the fortunes of Odysseus throughout, often assumed the form of Mentor to counsel him and Telemachus. The word “mentor” has come to mean wise tutor or guide.

Mercury (MUR ku ree): Roman name for Hermes, the messenger god. See [Hermes](#). In its Roman form his name was given to that quick elusive metal. Our word “mercurial” derives from it, meaning “of swiftly changing mood or disposition,” and expresses both the qualities of the god and the metal.

Merope (MAIR oh pee): The lost Pleiad. At first she shared a place in the skies with her six sisters who, after their death, had undergone a radiant transformation into stars. But Merope, filled with unquenchable shame because her husband, Sisyphus, had so gravely offended the gods and had been condemned to so terrible a punishment, withdrew from the constellation and lost herself in the shadows beyond the stars.

Metis (MEE tihs): A Titaness who was courted by Zeus but displeased him when she became pregnant. He devoured her and was forced to give birth to the daughter of Metis, suffering a skull-

cracking headache in the process. For what issued from these cerebral birth-pangs was no naked infant, but a tall maiden, clad in armor and wielding a spear. She was Athena, goddess of wisdom. See [Athena](#).

Metra (MEE truh): Daughter of Erysichthon. Her father had offended Demeter and was punished with ceaseless hunger. Metra received the gift of sea-change from Poseidon. When her father sold her for food she was able to transform herself into bird or animal and escape her purchaser. She then returned to her father, who sold her again. Finally, however, she met a young man whom she wished to remain sold to and her father, unable to find other food, ate himself. See [Erysichthon](#).

Midas (MY duhs): A king of Phrygia who loved gold with so avid a passion that he publicly assailed Apollo for the spendthrift way the sun-god would scatter sheaves of golden light. Apollo punished him with a gift. He appeared to Midas in a dream and offered him his choice of magical aptitudes. Midas requested the power to turn anything he touched to gold. Apollo assented. When Midas awoke, he immediately tested the dream by touching everything within reach. Bedpost, wall, pillow — they all turned to gold. He walked in the garden turning the flowers to gold. They lost their scent and tinkled in the wind. And the plundering bees turned to gold. His little daughter, who was playing in the garden, came running to him. She leaped into her father's arms and he held

a heavy little golden statue. He was very hungry from his morning labors. But when he began to eat, the food turned to gold as soon as it touched his lips. He was tormented by hunger; even worse was thirst. For wine and water turned to gold. Finally, starved and parched, he prayed to Apollo to take back his gift. The god appeared then in the full fire of his wrath and released Midas from the terrible gift of the golden touch. But he punished the king for his foolish avarice and impiety by pinning on him a pair of donkey's ears. The vain king let his hair grow long to conceal the ears. No one in the court knew about them until a servant trimmed his hair and discovered what the king wore under his long locks. The king warned the servant on pain of death not to disclose the secret. But the servant could not contain the news. He did not dare tell anyone. He dug a hole and whispered the secret into it. But the breeze snatched up his words and whispered them through the trees. And birds repeated them. Soon the whole country was buzzing with the rumor...“Donkey's ears...the king has donkey's ears...” When Midas heard this, he knew who had told, and ordered the servant put to death. But the man pleaded and the king relented. Then Apollo appeared again to Midas to inform him that since he had learned compassion, he would be relieved of his donkey's ears.

Minerva (mih NUR vuh): Roman name for Athena, goddess of wisdom. See [Athena](#).

Minos (MY nohss): Son of Zeus and Europa; king of Crete. Legends about Minos bear such different character that it has been claimed there were two Cretan kings of the same name. According to this theory, the first Minos, the son of Zeus and Europa, united Crete, extended its borders, defeated its enemies, and instituted very wise laws. So wise was he, indeed, that after his death he was appointed by Hades to sit as one of the great judges of Tartarus. It was his task to evaluate the quality of the life which had been led by each of the dead and assign punishment or reward. The second Minos would have been a descendant of the first — husband of Pasiphae, father of Ariadne and Phaedra. This Minos was a cruel and vengeful king who shut his adulterous wife and her monstrous son in the labyrinth built by Daedalus, and imprisoned Daedalus in the prison maze also. This would have been the Minos who defeated Athens and demanded a yearly tribute of twelve of its most beautiful youths and maidens — all of whom were placed in the labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur. He persisted in this cruel exaction until Theseus, coming to Crete as one of the Athenian youths, killed the Minotaur, and broke the power of Crete forever. Other authorities claim, however, that the same Minos is the central character in all these tales — and that it is entirely consistent with the nature of power for an all-powerful king to allow his wisdom to erode through self-indulgence, and to become suspicious, cruel, and vengeful.

Minotaur (MIHN oh tor): Monstrous son of Pasiphae and a prize bull. He is usually described as half bull and half man, but this does not convey what Theseus saw in the labyrinth. He was shaped like a man, but an incredibly huge and brutally muscular man covered with short, dense brown fur. He had a man's face, but a squashed bestialized one, with poisonous red eyes, great buck teeth, and leathery lips. Sprouting out of his head were two long, polished horns. His feet were hooves, razor-sharp. His hands were a man's hand, but much larger, and hard as horn. When he clenched them they were great fists of bone. This was the monster imprisoned by Minos who howled in a maze of shadows and waited for his meal of human flesh. But Theseus managed to kill him and find his way out of the labyrinth. See [Theseus](#); [Minos](#); [Daedalus](#).

Minthe (MIHN thee): A nymph pursued by Hades. The lord of the dead, for all his somber preoccupations, was capable of lighter moments. In one of these he courted the lovely meadow-nymph Minthe. But Persephone, his queen, who was well aware of her husband's skill at abduction, distracted him from his pursuit, then changed Minthe into a flowering herb with a spicy scent, which we call "mint."

Mnemosyne (nee MAHS ih nee): A goddess whose name means "memory." She was the mother of the nine Muses, of whom Zeus was the father. The Greeks, who understood the artistic

process very well, were apt at describing it as springing from a union between creative thrusting nature and fertile memory.

Moirai (MOH'EE ruh): A goddess out of the oldest legends who seems to have combined the attributes of all three Fates and who, by her own caprice, directed the destiny of mankind. In later legends her powers are divided among the three sister Fates: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. Indeed, another name for the Fates was *Moirae*.

Mopsus (MAHP suhs): The most remarkable soothsayer of his age. He is the one who defeated Calchas in a fortune-reading contest. See [Calchas](#). Mopsus had shared the rule of a country called Mallus with his friend, Amphilocus. But they each desired sole sovereignty. They quarreled; fought a duel, and killed each other. The funeral pyres were set close together. Their ghosts arose out of the flame and, forgetting the dispute, remembering only past friendship, tenderly embraced each other and resolved on a common enterprise. They founded an oracle which rivaled that of Delphi. The ghosts spoke through the mouths of the priestesses and were infallible in their reading of the future. Sometimes, however, in response to written questions, they did not answer with words, but appeared in the seeker's dreams.

Morpheus (MOR fuhs; MOR fee uhs): A variant name for Hypnos, god of sleep. See [Hypnos](#).

Muses (MUZ): Daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne; nine beautiful goddesses who governed the various arts that ornamented man's hours, quickened his perceptions, and deepened his understanding. They were associated with Apollo, god of the sun, of music, and of healing — and preferred to sojourn on either of his sacred mountains, Parnassus or Helicon. These were their names and realms: Calliope, epic poetry; Clio, history; Melpomene, tragedy; Euterpe, lyric poetry; Erato, love lyrics; Terpsichore, dance; Urania, astronomy and astrology; Thalia, comedy; Polyhymnia, music and geometry. (See each of them listed separately under their names).

Myrmidons (MUR mih duhnz): Warriors whom Achilles led to Troy, and who fought with deadly skill under his leadership. According to legend, they were descended from ants. Achilles' grandfather was the demigod Aecus, son of Zeus and the nymph Aegina. Zeus, to escape Hera's vigilance, had transported Aegina to an uninhabited island protected by rocks and reefs. Aecus, thus king of an empty island, asked his father, Zeus, for company. Zeus sent Hermes with a deed of transformation. Hermes visited every ant-hill on the island and the ants became men. They were fierce, tireless, disciplined fighters, who preferred brown armor. Aecus was the father of Peleus, who became the father of Achilles. When Achilles sailed for Troy, it was these island warriors, the Myrmidons, who sailed with him.

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Naiads (NAY uh deez): Nymphs of those waters which were not the sea. They inhabited rivers, lakes, streams, fountains, and springs. They were the spirits of these places and brought the bounty of their waters to trees and plants. Because of this, they were considered harbingers of fertility, and it was an ancient custom to sprinkle the bridal bed with spring water to ensure a large crop of children. Usually identified as daughters of the local river-god, they are invariably described as beautiful. They abided underwater by day and were rarely seen by mortals. But sometimes, on special nights, they arose from moon-dappled waters to trouble men's dreams. Naiads were believed to have special powers of healing, which they bestowed upon those waters called curative springs.

Narcissus (nahr SIHSS uhs): A youth so vain that he spurned the beautiful nymph Echo in favor of his own reflection. Aphrodite was enraged by this insult to love and rooted him to the river bank where he sat admiring his face in the water — and transformed him into a yellow and white flower which still likes to bow to its image in pool and stream and is still called narcissus.

Nauplius (NAH plih uhs): Son of Poseidon; an Argonaut. He was regarded by Jason as perhaps the most valuable member of the

crew because his father, the sea-god, had taught him secrets of wind and current and he had become a remarkable helmsman.

Nausicaa (nah SIHK ay uh): Central figure in Odysseus' last adventure before reaching Ithaca. She was daughter of the king of Phaeacia, a fleet-footed fanciful girl whose beauty drew many suitors to the island. Though many of them were handsome and all were brave, she refused them all. She wanted a man whose wit was as quick as hers and who would have her same vivid response to things that others overlooked. She persuaded her father she was still too young to marry and remained happily on her island, roaming its beaches, swimming in the sea, playing the lyre, and singing songs she had made up herself. One day she and her maidens were at play on the beach, flinging a leather ball to each other. One of them ran after the ball and shrank back, shrieking; a bloody naked man was crawling out from behind a rock. It was Odysseus, just awaking from a swoon after being hurled battered and half dead upon the rocky shore. Ino's veil had kept him afloat but could not protect him against the rocks. Among the shrieking girls, Nausicaa alone was unafraid. She commanded them to silence and approached the man. Although he barely had strength enough to speak, Odysseus had wit enough to address her as the goddess Artemis, and thank her for taking him to one of her moon-shoals after his death, instead of letting Hades claim him. Nausicaa was much pleased by this. She commanded her maids to bring the stranger clean raiment. Then she bound up his wounds with her

own hands and led him back to the castle as an honored guest. Her parents were not pleased. For just that morning, as it happened, an oracle had warned the king against shipwrecks, strangers, and storytellers. Then Nausicaa came to the king, aglow with excitement, telling him of the shipwrecked stranger who had been astounding her with tales of people who ate flowers and fell asleep, of one-eyed giants, of cannibals as tall as trees, and sorceresses who turned people to pigs. The king knew that this newcomer combined all that the oracle had warned against, a shipwrecked stranger telling wild tales, and he resolved that the man should die. The laws of hospitality forbade the king to kill a guest, no matter how unwelcome, but there was nothing to stop him from dropping an unspoken hint to his young courtiers. The young men invited the stranger to enter their games, planning that some mis-thrown discus or spear would rid them of the fellow — who stubbornly refused to tell his name — while preserving the appearance of accident. However, Odysseus was an old hand at such tactics. When one of the young men threw a discus, and challenged him to throw farther, he picked up a chariot wheel and hurled it against the castle wall, breaching the rampart. Then he invited any of them who wished to fight him with spear, sword, or simply to wrestle. They were prudent enough to decline. Displeased to find his guest still alive, the king was constrained, nevertheless, to give a banquet in his honor. After the feasting, Nausicaa, who had been trying to unriddle the stranger's identity, took the harp from the minstrel's

hand and sang a song that she made up as she went along. She sang of heroes, of Jason and his Argonauts, of the Seven Against Thebes, of those at the Calydonian Boar Hunt. She sang of such famous exploits, watching Odysseus narrowly all the while. She sang of Troy, and of its heroes on both sides, and of Odysseus, king of Thaca, who so many times had taken over the leadership from Agamemnon and kept the Greek army together in face of defeat. She sang of how Odysseus had persuaded Achilles to enter the fray and defeat Hector. Finally, she sang of the great ruse of the Wooden Horse and of the men who hid in its belly. Now the guests were amazed to see the hard-bitten sailor put his head in his arms and weep. He raised his streaming face and said, "Pardon; oh king, this unseemly display, but I am Odysseus of whom your lovely daughter sings." Then there was a great shout of welcome, for no name in all the world shone more brightly than that of Odysseus. Nevertheless, the king and queen were determined that this honored guest make a speedy departure. They feared their daughter was falling in love with him and they knew he had a wife in Ithaca. They showered gifts upon him and hurried him aboard a vessel already rigged for sailing. Nausicaa watched from the beach until the sail disappeared. But of all the beautiful Titanesses and nymphs and naiads that Odysseus met on his voyage, and who attempted to enchant him away from thoughts of home, none, it is said, affected him so deeply as this black-eyed girl who ran so swiftly along the beach and sang so wonderfully songs of her own making. As for

Nausicaa, one legend says she never married, but became the first woman minstrel, traveling from court to court singing hero songs, especially songs of Odysseus and his adventures among the terrible islands of the Middle Sea. Some say she finally came to the court of Ithaca and married Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Others say she fell in with a blind poet who took all her songs and wove them into one huge tapestry of song. Whatever the case, she had a special place in the weather-beaten heart of the great voyager.

Neleus (NEE loos): A king of Megara. He refused to administer rites of purification to Heracles, who wished to expiate a hasty murder. Enraged by the king's refusal, Heracles lengthened his list of homicides by killing Neleus and twelve of his sons, sparing only Nestor, who became the most venerable chieftain in the Trojan War.

Nemean Lion (NEE mee uhn LY uhn): Heracles' first labor was to kill this dread beast. This lion was as large as an elephant, its teeth were ivory daggers, its claws like razor-sharp baling hooks, and its hide could not be pierced by sword, spear, or arrow. Its favorite prey was man. It roamed the Nemea mountains feasting unchallenged upon goats and sheep and cattle. At night it entered the villages to devour whoever dared leave his house. Heracles was ordered by Eurystheus to kill this lion and bring its carcass home to Mycenae. He had no need to track the lion for it was always ready for combat. Heracles found it waiting upon a mountain trail. He

unslung his bow to notch an arrow. As fast as he could pull arrow from quiver he launched the bolts against the lion. These were shafts with barbed heads which Heracles could drive through a stone wall three feet thick. They bounced harmlessly off the animal and clattered harmlessly to the ground. Heracles hurled his great spear. It glanced off the beast's shoulder and hit an ash tree which it split in two. The lion yawned and prowled closer. Heracles raised his club, which was a single uprooted oak tree with the twigs trimmed off, and smote the lion with all his might. The club shattered; the lion shook his head. Now, it was very close. Heracles knew he had only one chance against this monster. He closed with the lion, wrapped one mighty arm around its head in a wrestler's grip, braced his legs, and twisted. Now in actual contact with the enemy, Heracles' blood boiled with the joy of close combat. He felt the voltage of the thunderbolt brandished by his father, Zeus, coursing through him as he twisted and strained. He felt the head turn in his grip. The lion sank to its knees. He swiftly shifted his grip and wrapped both arms around the lion's neck. His flesh was shredded where he had been raked by the terrible claws, but he ignored his wounds, and squeezing harder, strangled the beast. Its hide had been invulnerable to weapons, but no bone or sinew could withstand that unearthly pressure. Heracles broke off one of the lion's claws and skinned the animal, for no other blade could cut that hide. Then, wearing the skin as an armor, and the great skull as a helmet, Heracles strode back toward Mycenae with the flayed

carcass over his shoulders, while the people came out of the villages rejoicing and strewing flowers in his path. When Eurystheus, who was watching from the sentinel tower of Mycenae, saw what looked like a two-legged lion approach with a bloody bundle on its back, he fled into the city, leaped into a brass jar, and hid there until Heracles had gone on his way. Eurystheus was in such terror of Heracles that he had his men bury that brass jar in a pit. And every time Heracles came near, he would hide in the jar, relaying his orders through a herald. After that, Heracles wore his lion-skin armor on special occasions. He made ivory daggers of its teeth which he gave to his friends, and he used its claws for arrowheads.

Nemesis (NEHM uh sihs): A sister of the Fates. Two younger daughters of Necessity helped the Fates maintain control over human destiny. They were Nemesis and Tyche. Tyche's job was to distribute luck, but she was a tricky irresponsible wench who acted only according to her own strong preferences. When she liked someone she heaped him with good fortune; those she disliked did not seem to prosper, no matter how able, industrious, or virtuous. But Tyche's caprice was countered by the divine sense of justice which moved her sister, Nemesis. For if anyone favored by Tyche bragged too loudly of his accomplishments, or refused to share his fortune with others, then Nemesis intervened and cast this man down from the heights. Sometimes, too, she would seek out a gifted person whom Tyche had condemned to obscurity and

humiliation. Nemesis inspired him with an unearthly energy which allowed the unfortunate to break the shackles of misfortune and rise to the eminence he deserved. This beautiful daughter of Themis carried a wheel made of applewood to signify turning, and wore a whip at her belt to scourge the arrogant. Those who had suffered at her hands tended to identify her as the goddess of vengeance, but this was a coarse and partial view. She was a divine arbiter of justice, distributing both rewards and penalties.

Neoptolemus (nee ahp TAHL ee mus): Son of Achilles. He arrived in Troy one day after his father had fallen to the arrow of Paris. Now, since he was begotten at the court of Scyros where the young Achilles had been hidden by his mother, Thetis, and since the infant's mother Deidama, daughter of the king, did not give birth until after Achilles had departed, and since Achilles was killed in the tenth year of the war, Neoptolemus could have been only ten years old when he came to Troy. Nevertheless, he is depicted as a fearsome fighting man, very much his father's son. However, time tends to be elastic in myths and whatever the timing of it, Neoptolemus did come to Troy, and did avenge his father's death in a number of ways. He killed Priam, king of Troy, with his own hands. He snatched Astyanax, son of Hector, from his mother's arms, and hurled him from the wall. Then he enslaved the mother Andromache, and took her back to Greece, where she bore him three sons. Later he married Andromache off to her brother-in-law, Helenus, the soothsayer who had predicted that Troy would not fall

until Neoptolemus appeared on the field. He then married Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus. This, however, according to one legend, led to his death. For Hermione had been promised first to her cousin, Orestes. Neoptolemus was challenged to single combat by Orestes and fell before that avenging sword which had already tasted the blood of Clytemnestra and Helen.

Nepenthe (nee PEHN thee): A magic potion made by adding one drop of Lethe water to a cup of nectar. It eased fatigue and pain and made the drinker forget his troubles...for a while. Helen of Troy learned the recipe from the queen of Egypt when she and Menelaus were stranded there and she was riven by grief for all the men whose deaths she had caused. She kept the recipe. And when young Telemachus, searching for his father, Odysseus, came to her court in Sparta, she brewed him a cup. He drank it, was eased of his grief for a space, and was able to learn of his father's deeds before the walls of Troy.

Nephele (NEHF uh lee): Counterfeit Hera whom Zeus carved out of a cloud. See [Ixion](#); [Ino](#).

Neptune (NEHP toon): Roman name for Poseidon, god of the sea. See [Poseidon](#).

Nereids (nee REE uh deez): Sea-nymphs who took their name from their father, an old sea-deity. He fathered fifty daughters upon Doris, a lovely nymph, and the daughters were as beautiful as their

mother. They were mermaids who swam in flashing shoals underwater and served as ladies-in-waiting to their sister, the sea-queen Amphitrite.

Nereus (NEE ruhs): Son of Oceanus and Gaia, or the sea and the earth; called the wise old man of the sea; husband of Doris; and father of the Nereids. He was reputed to know all secrets, all hiding places, and was constrained by destiny always to speak the truth when questioned. Thus, he was always being hunted in the depths of the sea by those who wished to learn secrets. The only way he could defend his privacy was to change his shape, which he did with enormous skill. He enters the legend of Heracles because he was the only one who knew where Hera had planted her tree of golden apples. When Heracles came seeking him he transformed himself into one sea-shape after another...eel, seal, shark, gull. But Heracles followed Nereus through these changes and the old man of the sea was finally obliged to resume his own form and tell Heracles what he wanted to know.

Nessus (NEHS uhs): The vengeful centaur killed by Heracles, whose posthumous ruse caused the death of the hero. See [*Deineira*](#).

Nestor (NEHS tur): Son of Neleus; only one of the family to survive the wrath of Heracles. Later he fought in the Trojan War, eldest of all the chieftains on both sides. He was much beloved among the Greeks because of his fair-mindedness and knowledge

of human nature. He took part in the highest councils. Although his companions were often irked by his long-windedness they generally heeded what he had to say.

Nicippe (NY sih-p ee): Queen of Mycenae, who owns the dubious distinction of producing the most cowardly son in all mythology...Eurystheus, king of Mycenae and the small-minded taskmaster of Heracles.

Nike (NY kee): Called Bestower of Victory. She was a winged goddess who flew about the battlefield choosing the winners and rewarding them with glory and the chance for further battle. However, it is claimed that she did not actually bestow victory herself, since this critical decision was made by the Fates and by the more powerful gods. But she was a swift messenger of destiny and her winged form was the last thing a loser saw through his bloody haze and the first sight that fledged itself out of the winner's joy. Her body was like alabaster, her wings white as snow, and her hair of fiery gold. In both death and glory she was a beautiful apparition.

Niobe (NY oh bee): Daughter of Tantalus and granddaughter of Atlas. She was queen of Thebes; mother of seven beautiful sons and seven beautiful daughters. She was very proud of her children and boasted that she was more fortunate than Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis, because Leto had only two children, not

fourteen, and that each of her fourteen was more radiantly beautiful than either of Leto's two — although they happened to be sun-god and moon-goddess. This was the kind of remark calculated to evoke prompt and cruel reprisal, and it did. Apollo and Artemis flew to Thebes. Apollo took seven golden arrows from his quiver and slew the seven sons of Niobe. Artemis drew seven silver arrows from her quiver and slew the seven daughters. Niobe began to weep and never stopped. Leto, still angry, but somewhat repentant, changed Niobe into a rock whose tears became a sparkling spring which still flows near Thebes.

Nisus (NY suhs): King of Egypt and father of a daughter named Scylla — not the infamous sea-monster, but sufficiently monstrous in her own way. She fell in love with King Minos, who was besieging Nisus' capitol. Knowing that her father was protected by the Fates as long as a lock of his red hair went uncut, she decided to offer her father's life as a love-token to Minos. She crept into his chamber as he lay asleep, cut off the lock of red hair, and brought it to Minos — who then led a charge that breached the walls of the city. He found Nisus and killed him. Afterwards, Minos deserted Scylla and sailed for Crete. She leaped into the sea to swim after his ship, whereupon Aphrodite, in pity, changed her into a gull.

Notus (NOH tuhs): The South Wind. It blows warmly at times. At other times it brings pestilence and the destruction of

crops, especially in autumn when it carries rain and savage hail that can scythe down a field of grain in a single night.

Nymphs (NIHM' fs): Daughters of the gods; eternally young and eternally beautiful. There are many kinds of nymphs: Dryads, or wood-nymphs; naiads, or river-nymphs; nereids, or sea-nymphs. There are the Nyseides who sported with Dionysus; and the Oreades who ran with Artemis. Flowers twined in their hair, they race through legend after legend, pursued by god, satyr, and demigod, encountering mortals in grotto, copse, and lake, bringing unique pagan color and fragrance to the Greek myths, and becoming mothers of gods, demigods, and heroes. Identified as they are with field, stream, forest, and sea, they personify in a larger sense the natural sensual joys — not shameful furtive pleasures, but parts of the great rhythm of nature. In Greek the word *nymph* originally meant “bride,” but was extended to mean “young girl.”

Nyx (nihks): Darkness; mother of light. She was described as the dark-robed goddess of night; a daughter of Chaos. While her nature was gloomy and violent, she had changes of mood. Sleep traveled in her train and brought an interval of rest to man's care.

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Oceanus (oh SEE uh nuhs): The eldest Titan; son of Uranus and Gaia. He came to personify that unimaginably vast stream of water which, according to ancient belief, girdled the disk earth. He married his sister, Tethys, who bore three thousand daughters, the Oceanids — all of them minor goddesses, some of them giving their names to land masses and rivers like Asia and Styx.

Odysseus (oh DIHS uhs; oh DISH ee uhs): King of Ithaca; son of Sisyphus; grandson of Autolycus, thus great-grandson of Hermes. He was the wisest strategist among all the Greek chieftains who fought against Troy; the most indomitable voyager of all time; and, possibly, the most interesting single personality, god or mortal, to emerge from Greek mythology. After spending ten years fighting at Troy, he spent another ten years trying to get home. Poseidon, who in general had favored the Greeks, took an intense dislike to Odysseus and plagued him throughout his voyage with every variety of maritime disaster in the enormous repertoire of a sea-god's malice. Each of these adventures is briefly described in these pages under the name of its chief actor — Circe, Calypso, Cyclops, Sirens, etc. But there are many marvelous legends about Odysseus that are not related in Homer's *Odyssey*, nor in the *Iliad*, where Odysseus figures as the most important character next to

Achilles. He was a remarkably complex personality for an age in which heroes tended to be simple and single-minded. He could be treacherous and cruel as well as noble and brave. His treatment of Palamedes and Ajax reveals the grasping dark side of his nature. See [Ajax](#); [Palamedes](#). In appearance too, he was unlike the ideal hero, being described as short-legged and red-headed. Perhaps what makes him unique in mythology, however, is that he survived his terrible ordeals, overcoming formidable monsters, and thwarting deadly conspiracies not so much through physical strength, magically bequeathed, as through intellectual superiority. In Roman mythology, Odysseus was known as Ulysses.

Odyssey (AHD ih see): Literally “story of Odysseus,” Homer’s great epic that is a companion-piece to the *Iliad*. It relates the wanderings of Ulysses on his homeward journey from Troy to Ithaca. See [Odysseus](#). It has been called “the first novel ever written, and perhaps the best.”

Oeax (EE ax): Brother of Palamedes, the Greek chieftain who was killed because of a plot organized against him by Odysseus. Oeax vowed vengeance against all the leaders who had abetted the conspiracy, and his father, Nauplius, joined him in that vow. They lighted signal fires among the rocky reefs of the Peloponnesian coast so that returning ships might be tempted too close to the rocks and be wrecked. But Oeax engaged in more specific mischief. He visited all the wives he could of the Greek chieftains

and informed them that their husbands had taken captive scores of beautiful Trojan maidens whom they had forced into concubinage. Many of these wives were inflamed by this tale; many of them took lovers, others swore reprisal against their husbands. Among them, it is said, was Clytemnestra, who added this to her many other grudges against Agamemnon, whom she eventually murdered.

Oedipus (EHD uh puhs): A king of Thebes who murdered his father and married his mother. Warned by an oracle that he would be killed by his son, Laius, king of Thebes, snatched his newly born child from its mother, Jocasta, drove a nail through the infant's feet, and ordered that it be exposed on a mountain. But the crippled child was found by a shepherd who took him home and raised him as his own, naming him Oedipus, or "swollen-foot." Later, the youth made his way to Corinth where King Polybus reigned. King and Queen were struck by the young man's beauty and, being childless, adopted him and made him heir to their throne. However, on a visit to the Delphic Oracle, Oedipus was told that he would murder his father and marry his mother. Thinking that he was being warned about his adopted parents, for he had never known any other, he refused to return to Corinth, where he had been so happy, and became an exile and a wanderer. Leaving Delphi by a narrow mountain road, he found his way blocked by the chariot of King Laius. The king, in a rage, ordered his charioteer to run the traveler down. But Oedipus avoided the rush of the horses and killed both charioteer and king. The young

traveler proceeded toward Thebes, ignorant not only that he had killed its king, but that that king was his real father. On the way he encountered a monster called the Sphinx — a daughter of the Chimaera, even more terrible than her mother — part woman, part lion, part serpent, and part eagle. The monster lay astride the road to Thebes devouring everyone who could not answer her riddle. But Oedipus guessed the riddle, killed the monster, and was acclaimed king of Thebes by a grateful populace. Since he was now king, the widowed Queen Jocasta became his wife. They lived very happily for some years until a pestilence descended on the land. Oedipus, determined to cleanse Thebes of this plague, consulted an oracle who told him that he himself was the cause — that Apollo had shot fever-tipped plague arrows into Thebes because he, Oedipus, the king, had broken the oldest taboos by murdering his father and marrying his mother. When he learned the truth the horrified Oedipus tore out his eyes and left Thebes to become a homeless beggar blindly wandering the roads. But his loving daughter, Antigone, followed him, though he wanted no company, and led her blind father to a grove called Collonus, near Athens, where he finally died. He was buried by Theseus with great honor.

Oenone (ee NOH nee): A fountain-nymph and daughter of a river-god; she owned prophetic powers, and knew that her love for Paris, son of Priam, would lead to great misery. But passion overcame prophecy and she pursued Paris, a simple shepherd, on the slopes of Phrygia's Mt. Ida before the lad was recognized as a

Trojan prince. After Paris had been appointed judge in the tricky affair of the golden apple, and had awarded the prize to Aphrodite, receiving in return her promise of the most beautiful woman in the world for his lover, Oenone prophesied again, telling him that if he claimed Helen, he would lose his life. His father and his forty-nine brothers would also lose their lives, thousands of others would be slain, and Troy would burn. Nevertheless, this prophecy too was ignored and Paris went off in search of Helen. Later, Oenone tutored her son, Corythus, in vengeance and sent him to lead the Greeks by secret ways into Troy, a plot that failed. See [Corythus](#).

Oenopion (ee NOH pih uhn): A son of Dionysus and Ariadne. He was taught vine-culture by his father; his name means “rich vintner.” He was king of Chios and had a beautiful daughter named Merope. Now, Merope was courted by a gigantic handsome son of Poseidon, named Orion, greatest hunter of his age. Oenopion did not wish to give up his daughter. Seeking a pretext, he informed Orion that he could wed Merope only if he first killed all the wild beasts that infested Chios. This seemed to be an impossible job, for wolves, lions, bears, and huge serpents abounded. Nevertheless, Orion went hunting and killed every one of the wild beasts or drove them into the sea. Fishermen, tacking around Chios, were amazed by the sight of bears and lions swimming straight out to sea. Orion then claimed his bride. Oenopion pretended to comply and gave him a nuptial cup of undiluted wine, the most potent ever brewed. Orion fell asleep, Oenopion put out his eyes, and had him carried

out of the castle onto the beach. The blinded giant, thrashing about bewildered, was told by an oracular gull that he could regain his eyesight if he traveled to the east and turned his sightless sockets upon the sun rising naked and blazing from its eastern couch. He did so. Sight was restored in a joyous blaze of color. He came raging back to Chios to avenge himself upon the treacherous Oenopion. However, this king had prepared himself for Orion's recovery. He had built himself an underground burrow, luxuriously furnished, and dwelt there comfortably until Orion, unable to find him, had taken Merope and left the island. See [Orion](#).

Olympus (oh LIHM puhs): Dwelling place of the great gods whose king was Zeus. It is a mountain in northern Greece, the highest in that part of the world.

Omphale (AHM fuh lee): Queen of Lydia whom Heracles was condemned to serve as a slave to expiate the murder of Iphitus. Omphale was a masterful mistress. It is said she compelled him to wear women's clothes and do women's work, while she strutted about in his lion-skin and staggered under the weight of his club. He kept a leash on his terrible temper, for the decree of servitude imposed by Zeus had been absolute. He wore his gauzy robes uncomplainingly and wielded spindle and distaff with his huge hands. Soon, however, Omphale had to call on his masculine attributes. A powerful cabal of enemies had been planning to take her throne. Raiding parties struck out of the forest, making off with

cattle and killing her men. Heracles donned his lion-skin, took his club, and went into the forest. In a matter of days he swept the kingdom of her enemies. Whereupon Omphale decided she preferred him in that role and drafted him as her consort. Legend says she bore him three sons.

Ophion (oh FY uhn): The universal serpent. In the beginning was a storm of nothingness which clotted into the form of the serpent, Ophion, who had no eyes because there was nothing to see. Yet he slithered this way and that among the vast rubble of space, called Chaos, searching for something that was not there. And the rage of his blind searching moved invisibly as wind. The pack of searching winds coursed like hounds and blew so hotly that they kindled a corner of Chaos and set it aflame. From this flame was born the moon-goddess, Eurynome, upon whom Ophion sired sun, earth, stars, and all living creatures.

Orestes (oh REHS teez): Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; prince of Mycenae. The curse which had been fastened upon the House of Atreus for so many generations came to crisis and conclusion in the fury-wracked career of Orestes. On that terrible night when his mother and her lover murdered his father, Orestes was spirited out of the castle by his sister, Electra, who knew that Aegisthus would seek to kill off every male member of the royal house so that he could take the throne. See [Electra](#); [Aegisthus](#). Electra took him to the court of his uncle in Phocis,

where he lived like a brother with his cousin, Pylades. They never altered in their friendship for each other through every species of disaster. But all through his boyhood Orestes kept his father's murder in the front of his consciousness and never abandoned the vengeance he had vowed when he was ten years old. When he had grown enough to handle weapons, he and Pylades made their way back to Mycenae disguised as beggars. With Electra's aid they were introduced into the castle. Orestes drew his sword from under his rags and slew first Aegisthus, then Clytemnestra — who recognized her son, and pleaded for her life, but fell before his sword nonetheless. Now, Orestes had been encouraged in his vengeance by Apollo, whose oracles had told him that he must kill those who had killed his father. But even Apollo's patronage was not enough to protect Orestes from the bat-winged, brass-clawed Furies who flew ravening out of the shadows to tear at his flesh and to scourge him with their barbed whips. Although they flogged him until the flesh hung in strips from his bones, the physical agony was not the worst. For, as they tormented his body, they shrieked, "Matricide! Matricide! You killed the mother who gave you life. You shall be tortured through eternity!" Only Electra, his sister, and Pylades, his friend, were able to afford him comfort. They did their best to ward off the terrible hags. They bound his wounds and anointed him with oil. They kept him alive, but they could not keep him sane. The Furies finally drove him mad. He raced about from place to place performing ancient rites of purification. He drank

pig's blood, washed in running water, and shaved his head. But still the Furies hunted him and his madness deepened. Then Electra appeared with a bow of horn given to her by Apollo. With this horn bow, Apollo had told her, the youth would be able to beat off the Furies or at least thwart their worst attacks. He was able to try it that very night when the hags screeched down at him again. He did beat them off, but not without suffering fresh wounds. However, his madness had burned itself out. The deep tenderness and understanding shown by Electra and Pylades finally soothed his flayed nerves and reason returned. But a new trial was approaching, a formal one. He was summoned before the Judgment Seat of the gods at the Areopagus to stand trial for matricide. The gods were evenly divided. Clytemnestra's crime was recognized but matricide was a primal taboo. However, Apollo acted as counsel for the defense. And Athena, who had been born from her father's head and had little instinct for motherhood, argued eloquently for Orestes. They swayed the judges and Orestes was acquitted. In his new-found legitimacy he decided to settle some old scores. He killed Helen, his aunt by marriage, because he blamed her for causing the war that had taken his father from Mycenae. Then, he killed Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, who had married Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menalaus, a lovely girl who had been Orestes' childhood sweetheart. He married Hermione, then returned to Mycenae and reclaimed his throne. After his grandfather's death he also became king of Sparta. To his

great joy, Electra and Pylades married each other. And the family curse, which had begun with Tantalus, seemed to have become a cinder of memory and the stuff of legend.

Orion (oh RY uhn): Giant son of Poseidon; said to have been the handsomest man alive. He was a great hunter, not only of animals, but of women. Mortal women, goddesses, demigoddesses, nymphs and Titanesses — he pursued them all and usually caught them. However, exceptions were the fiercely virginal Pleiades, daughters of Atlas. They fled from him across hill and valley, through field and copse, until Zeus snatched them up and placed them among the stars where they became the constellation Pleiades. Next, Orion wooed the lovely Merope, daughter of Oenopion, who treacherously blinded the giant. But Orion regained his sight and forced the false king into perpetual hiding. See [Oenopion](#). Then, Orion consorted with Eos, goddess of dawn, and visited her in her eastern castle, amusing himself at the chase while she was out heralding the day. It is said the dawn shortened during this episode as Eos hastened back to Orion. But Artemis, goddess of the moon, riding in her silver chariot, grew curious as to what was hastening the dawn and went spying about the eastern castle. She saw Orion and fell in love with him. Being goddess of the hunt as well as of the moon, she offered irresistible attractions for the great hunter. He abandoned Eos and went hunting with Artemis and they led each other on an enchanted chase for a year. But Apollo grew jealous of his sister's preoccupation, for she had formerly

scorned men and reserved all her love for him. Apollo determined that Orion should die. He went to his grandmother, Gaia, earth goddess, and convinced her that Orion was depopulating her realm of wild animals by his ruthless hunting. Gaia sent a giant scorpion to kill Orion. He fought the scorpion with arrow, torch, spear, and battle-axe, but the insect's huge jointed body was plated with an armor beyond any that mortals wore and Orion's weapons were useless against it. However, Orion fought so well that the scorpion was not able to inflict a mortal wound. Finally, Orion leaped into the sea and swam away, knowing that scorpions hate water. Now began the second step of Apollo's plot. He led Artemis to the shore of the sea and pointed to a head bobbing in the water. It was Orion's, but too far away for Artemis to recognize. Apollo informed her that the swimmer was a brutish brigand who had assaulted one of Artemis' nymphs and had leaped into the sea at Apollo's approach. The chastity of her attendants was very important to Artemis. She strung her silver bow, notched her unerring silver arrow, and sent the shaft winging over the sea through Orion's head. The giant sank beneath the waves. When she learned the truth, Artemis snatched Orion from the depths of the sea and made him immortal. She placed him in the vault of heaven, in a place where he might follow his favorite pursuits among the starry realms. For the constellation, Orion, pursues the Pleiades. The dog, Sirius, hunts with him. And the Scorpion, also a

constellation, crawls far behind, nipping vainly at the hunter's heels.

Orpheus (OR foos; OR fee uhs): Greatest poet and musician of his time. He invented the seven-stringed lyre and drew such ravishing melodies from it that trees would pull themselves out of the earth and hobble on their roots to follow him as he played. Wild beasts and gentle beasts came out of the forests to stand in a listening circle at peace with each other. His most famous adventure was his journey into Tartarus to reclaim his wife, Eurydice, from the dead. See [Eurydice](#). However, there are other legends equally significant. For Orpheus was a great religious leader and an innovative mystic. It was he who formulated the notion of the soul as a separate entity. He coined the word "soma" for body, and "sema" for tomb, a play on words meaning that the body was the tomb of the soul, which, when released from the corruption of earth, would soar to empyrean heights and abide among celestial harmonies. In a brutal age he was prematurely compassionate and paid for it with his life. He preached vehemently against the custom of human sacrifice. He provoked further antagonism among the followers of Dionysus by arising at dawn, climbing a hill, and hymning the sun as it climbed out of the horizon, celebrating it as the source of life. This the Bacchantes took as an affront to Dionysus whose great rival was the sun-god, Apollo. And, according to one legend, the Bacchantes, maddened beyond scruple, pursued Orpheus and tore him to pieces. However,

his head was preserved and was placed in a Lemnian cave where it spoke prophecy, such accurate prophecy that Apollo found his own oracles at Delphi cast in the shade, and decided to bury the head. Where the head of Orpheus was buried, trees grew, and the movement of the wind through these trees is more musical than anywhere else. Also, nightingales abide there and sing more sweetly than birds anywhere else. Apollo, however, finally made Orpheus immortal. He set his lyre among the stars. And, it is said, those gods who particularly loved music often tethered their chariots in that part of heaven. Many of those animals too, who used to sit in a silent circle, eyes gleaming, listening to Orpheus, became lesser stars, and still sit in a circle about the Lyre, listening. “Zodiac” in Greek means “circle of animals.”

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Palamedes (pal uh MEE deez): A prince of Euboea; among the best of the Greek leaders who fought against Troy. He was an extremely able tactician, rivaling Odysseus, and was credited with innovating many military maneuvers, such as the posting of sentries and the instilling of close-order discipline among foot-soldiers, enabling them to act as one unit in close combat. However, Palamedes was unfortunate in having earned the enmity of Odysseus. It was he who thwarted the Ithacan's attempt at draft-dodging. An oracle had warned Odysseus that if he went to Troy, he would not return for twenty years, and would come back then a beggar and outcast. However, when he heard of Helen's abduction, he knew that he would be summoned to fight, especially as he had been the author of the agreement which bound all former suitors of Helen to go to the aid of Menelaus if Helen were taken from him. When Palamedes and Agamemnon came for Odysseus, he feigned madness. Yoking an ox and a donkey to a plough he sowed the furrows with salt, singing foolishly as he ploughed. But Palamedes tested his sanity by placing Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in front of the plough. When Odysseus reined his animals up short and leaped to save the child, Palamedes accused him of seeking to break his pledge and demanded that he come to war. Odysseus did sail to Troy, of course, and played a pivotal role in that conflict. But he

never forgave Palamedes. His vengeance took this form: He wrote an anonymous letter to Agamemnon accusing Palamedes of appropriating a huge store of gold intended for the troops' pay. Then he planted bags of gold in Palamedes' tent. When Agamemnon's men came to search, they found the gold and Palamedes was accused of theft. Despite his impeccable reputation and his protests of innocence, Odysseus swung too much weight and Palamedes was stoned to death. This deed has always stained Odysseus' reputation. Homer, who wished to preserve intact his hero's image, makes no mention of this episode. But many other mythographers have related the tale. Palamedes' murder was avenged by his brother, Oeax, and his father, Nauplius. See [Oeax](#).

Palladium (puh LAY dih uhm): A statue of Athena, most sacred of her relics. It took its name from her old playmate, Pallas, daughter of Triton. Once, when the young goddesses were engaged in a mock duel, Athena accidentally killed Pallas. She felt so keen a grief that she added her friend's name to her own, and was thereafter called *Pallas Athena*, and her statues were called Palladium. The most famous of these statues stood in the sanctuary at Troy. According to prophecy, Troy could not be taken so long as the Palladium stood there. It was one of the great exploits of Odysseus to disguise himself as a beggar, make his way within the walls, and carry off the Palladium.

Pan (PAN): God of shepherds and goatherds. He resembled a goat himself with his pointed beard, shaggy legs, and cloven feet. He was goatlike in his habits too, pursuing every nymph he saw — diving into the river to swim after naiads, and searching the groves for dryads. His parentage is uncertain although Hermes is often claimed to have been his father. Other stories say he is the eldest god of all, the original nature god, older than Zeus, and he has been named as father of all fauns and satyrs. One legend says that it was he, not Hermes or Apollo, who invented music; that one day he pursued a nymph named Syrinx, who fled from him across the field and down to the river bank and changed herself into a reed. The bank was thick with reeds and Pan did not know which one she was. He picked a bunch of reeds and cut them into the first Panpipe upon which he blew enchanting melodies, inspired by the sound of the wind moving among the river reeds. Later, it is said, Hermes stole this pipe from him and sold it to Apollo. Pan was useful to Zeus and the young gods in their fight against Cronus. For Pan had a war cry which paralyzed whoever heard it. At a critical point in the battle he shouted, freezing the Titans with fear, and tipped the odds in favor of the Olympians. The fear inspired by his cry gives us our word, “panic.” For this deed, Zeus forgave Pan much mischief. In Roman mythology, Pan was known as Faunus.

Pandareus (pan DAIR ee uhs): A prince of Miletus rash enough to steal a golden dog from the temple of Zeus in Crete. Now, this dog was dear to Zeus because it had guarded the goat

Amalthea, whose milk had nourished the infant Zeus. When the dog grew too old to fight off wolves, Zeus had given it the light task of watchdog for his temple. Zeus punished Pandareus by chaining him to the roots of a mountain but denying him death, so that he rotted underground forever. The daughters of Pandareus became servants of the Harpies.

Pandarus (PAN duh ruhs): A Trojan chieftain who broke the truce which was to prevail while Menelaus and Paris met in single combat to determine victory for one side or the other — thus sparing thousands of lives. But Athena did not wish the war to end so soon; nor did Hera. Athena appeared to Pandarus, counseling him to launch an arrow toward Menelaus, promising him eternal fame as an archer if he killed the Greek. Pandarus shot his arrow; he wounded Menelaus and broke the truce. The armies attacked each other just as Athena and Hera had planned. Pandarus later figures in another legend. He carried messages between Troilus and Chryseis, abetting their secret love affair. Our word “pander” derives from this.

Pandora (pan DOH ruh): Her name means “all-gifted.” She was so named because she was the first mortal woman to whom all the gods gave gifts: Hephaestus molded her of clay and gave her form; Zeus breathed life into her; Athena gave her sagacity and skill at spinning and weaving; Aphrodite gave her radiant physical beauty; Apollo gave her a lovely singing voice and a gift for

healing; Demeter instilled her with a passion for gardening; Artemis taught her certain important secrets concerning the moon; Poseidon gave her the power of sea-change. Hermes saved his offerings for last; he gave her a curiously carved golden box, telling her never to open it because it contained a forbidden mystery. Then Hermes gave her...curiosity! Actually, all this was part of a terrible plot. Zeus, still smouldering with rage because Prometheus had succeeded in teaching mankind the use of fire, had evolved a long-range plan to subdue man's pride. The creation of Pandora was the first step in this plan. The second step was to marry the beautiful gifted girl to the Titan, Epimetheus, ostensibly to compensate him for the loss of his brother, Prometheus, who had been condemned to eternal punishment. They were married and lived happily for some weeks. But Pandora could not forget the golden box. She kept gazing at it by day and dreamed of it at night. Finally her curiosity, spiced by taboo, proved irresistible. She opened the box. Out rushed a throng of hairy, fanged creatures, all the troubles that have plagued mankind since — disease, poverty, crime, and so on. But the cruel plan of Zeus was not quite fulfilled. For Pandora slammed shut the lid of the box, trapping one creature inside, *foreboding*, the final spite. If it had flown free, everyone in the world would have known exactly what misfortunes were to happen to him throughout his life. No hope would have been possible and the race of man would have perished off the earth. For while it is possible to

survive disaster, it is impossible to live without hope. But foreboding was trapped, and man still lives.

Paris (PAIR ihs): Youngest son of Priam and Hecuba; prince of Troy. His abduction of Helen was the prime cause of the Trojan War, although there were others. According to legend, he seems to have been a better lover than warrior. He lost a duel to Menelaus and would have been killed if he had not been rescued by Aphrodite. He was usually to be found in Helen's chamber rather than on the battlefield, much to the displeasure of his warlike brothers, Hector and Deiphobus. However, he was an excellent archer, skillful enough to send an arrow into Achilles' one vulnerable spot, the tendon above his heel, although he was very careful to shoot from ambush. See [Apple of Discord](#); [Helen](#); [Menelaus](#); [Achilles](#).

Parnassus (pahr NASS uhs): One of Apollo's two sacred mountains; the other was Helicon. The caves of Parnassus housed Apollo's Delphic Oracles. The Muses danced there when they were not dancing upon Helicon. It was a favorite haunt too of Dionysus, who often led his revelers there when Apollo was elsewhere.

Pasiphae (puh SIHF uh ee): Daughter of Helios; wife of Minos; mother of Ariadne, Phaedra, and of that monstrous offspring, the Minotaur. She offended Aphrodite by comparing her own beauty to that of the goddess. Aphrodite retaliated by instilling

her with an inconvenient love for one of her husband's prize bulls. The product of their passion was the Minotaur. See [Daedalus](#); [Minos](#); [Minotaur](#). Minos imprisoned her in the Labyrinth, also constructed by Daedalus, and she died there.

Patroclus (puh TROH kluhs): Achilles' dearest friend and a key figure in the events of the *Iliad*. According to some legends, he was Achilles' elder cousin. In any case they were raised together and tutored together by Cheiron, who taught them hunting, woodcraft, and the arts of healing. When Achilles sailed for Troy, Patroclus sailed with him as second in command of the Myrmidons. Later, when Achilles retired from the fray because of his quarrel with Agamemnon, Patroclus also quit the field. But he was stricken to the heart by the Greek disasters, for after Achilles stopped fighting, the Trojans were everywhere victorious. Thus he was easily persuaded by Odysseus to don Achilles' golden armor and appear on the field in the guise of that invincible hero, so that the Trojans might be discouraged. Although Achilles did not easily accede to this plan because he had a foreboding of disaster, Patroclus finally persuaded him. He put on Achilles' golden armor and entered the battle, fighting exceedingly well and routing the Trojans, until Hector sought him out and killed him. Driven half mad by the death of his beloved friend, Achilles re-entered the battle, killed Hector, and caused the final defeat of the Trojans — all of which had been part of Odysseus' plan. See [Achilles](#); [Hector](#). Achilles, however, outlived his friend only by a few days. Their

funeral pyres were erected side by side and their shades glided off to dwell together through eternity on the White Isle raised for them by Achilles' sea-goddess mother, Thetis.

Peirene (py REE nee): A spring sacred to the Muses. It was formed when their flying horse, Pegasus, struck the ground with his hoof. The spring that gushed forth from that deep hoof-mark was of crystal clear musical waters, said to inspire anyone who drank from them. Poets came there to drink and all claimed inspiration.

Peirithous (py RITH oh uhs): King of the Lapiths; son of Ixion; and life-long friend of Theseus. His nature was as daring as that of his father, who had attempted to abduct Hera, and had been condemned to eternal punishment. See [Ixion](#). Peirithous went campaigning with Theseus and they had many amazing adventures together. They raided the Amazons; they fought the Centaurs, and defeated them. Most amazing of all, however, they made a pact each to marry a daughter of Zeus. First they abducted the fifteen-year-old Helen, Zeus' daughter by Leda. They cast lots for her and Theseus won. But Helen was soon reclaimed by her formidable twin brothers, Castor and Polydeuces. Then, it is said, they decided to raid Tartarus and abduct Persephone, wife of Hades and Zeus' daughter by Demeter. However, the three-headed dog, Cerberus, was vigilant. He raised the alarm, barking furiously. Hades mustered his demonish hosts, the Harpies, as well as the Empusae and various other bestial troops, who captured the two heroes.

Hades had them chained to two rocks where they were tormented by relays of demons. There they remained until Heracles came to raid Tartarus. This mighty hero put the forces of Hades to flight and struck the shackles from Theseus. But it is said that when he attempted to bear off Peirithous, the man's feet had grown into the ground and the earth shook when he was lifted. Heracles had to abandon him and bear Theseus to the land of the living unaccompanied by his old friend. But Theseus never forgot Peirithous. He commanded the Athenians to grant him semi-divine honors and mourned him to the day of his own death.

Pelasgus (peh LAZguhs): The first man created by the gods, according to the most ancient myths. He was entirely mortal and ruled the land later to be known as Arcadia. The gods instilled him with enough rudimentary wisdom to raise his people out of barbarism. He taught them to erect wooden shelters and sew the skins of animals into garments. He is the ancestor of those people later called the Pelasgians, who made up the pre-Hellenic tribes inhabiting the Peloponnese and the islands of the Inner Sea, and who worshipped the great mother-goddess. In Crete they became a sea-faring nation and sent raiding parties to the eastern shore of the Inner Sea, to Phoenicia, and to the arc of land to the south of Phoenicia. It is thought that the names *Philistine* and *Palestine* derive from "Pelasgian."

Peleus (PEE loos; PEE lee-uhs): King of Phthia; great warrior; and an Argonaut. But his greatest claim to fame was as the father of Achilles. Peleus was an extraordinarily handsome man and extraordinarily brave. Thetis, the sea-goddess, loved him, and amazed the other gods by declaring that she meant to marry him, although he was mortal and she was bound to outlive him by centuries. The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was the most glittering fête ever to be held on Olympus. The groom received splendid gifts. Hephaestus gave him a suit of golden armor and Poseidon gave him those immortal stallions, Xanthus and Balius, whom Achilles later inherited. It was at this wedding that the seeds of the Trojan War were planted when Eris, rankling because she had not been invited, tossed her Apple of Discord onto the banquet table. See [Apple of Discord](#). Peleus outlived both his son, Achilles, and his grandson, Neoptolemus. It is said that when he finally died, Thetis, unreconciled to losing her husband, prevailed upon Zeus to make him immortal and allow him to join the shades of Achilles and Patroclus on her White Isle.

Pelias (PEE lih uhs): Jason's uncle, who usurped the throne of Iolchis and dispatched Jason on a quest for the Golden Fleece — an expedition which he hoped would be fatal. Pelias was later killed by his own daughters whom Medea had befuddled by certain magical spells.

Pelops (PEE lah'ps): Son of Tantalus; king of Phrygia. In his infancy he unwittingly became the instrument of his father's eternal punishment. For Tantalus, a son of Zeus, also had an incorrigible yen to offend the gods. When Zeus visited him, he killed his infant son, Pelops, had him roasted, and served him to Zeus. Zeus recognized the flesh as human, and condemned Tantalus to unique torments. See [Tantalus](#). Zeus then resurrected his grandson; and since the child's shoulder had been consumed by the cooking fire, he fashioned him an ivory shoulder. Pelops grew to be an extremely beautiful youth. Later, he courted Hippodemia and became the father of those ill-fated twins, Thyestes and Atreus. See *Oenomeus*; [Atreus](#). Pelops was a king out of very early times. The southern peninsula of Greece, the Peloponnese, was named for him.

Penelope (pee NEHL oh pee): Queen of Ithaca; model wife of mythology. She waited patiently for her husband, Odysseus, who was away for twenty years — ten years fighting at Troy, ten years trying to sail home in the teeth of Poseidon's hostility. During that time, Penelope was besieged by suitors, one hundred and eight of them, the most powerful of those chieftains who had not gone to Troy or who had returned earlier. They believed Odysseus to be dead. Each of them wished to become king of Ithaca and they were also drawn by Penelope's great beauty. They were a brawling rambunctious lot, these suitors; many of them became very obstreperous, threatening to abduct her and take Ithaca by force of

arms. However, she followed the advice of her wise old counselor, Mentor, and adopted her famous weaving ruse. She claimed that she had vowed an altar cloth to Artemis and that she could not choose a suitor until she had finished that gift for the chaste goddess. Each night, however, she unraveled what she had woven that day. The altar cloth was never finished and the suitors were forced to wait. See [Mentor](#). In one legend, it is told that Oeax, brother of Palamedes, seeking to avenge his brother's death at the hands of Odysseus, came to Ithaca and told Penelope that Odysseus had been killed. Penelope flung herself off a cliff into the sea. But Thetis, the sea-goddess and mother of Achilles, sent a flock of ducks to swim alongside Penelope and support her so that she could not drown. Then Thetis herself appeared and told her that Odysseus was still alive. In another touching incident, Odysseus summons her from her chamber after he has slain all the suitors. But she had not seen him for twenty years, and was not sure that she recognized her husband in this blood-stained voyager. However, he recalled to her the construction of their marriage-bed — how, conforming to her wish that they use a bed never before used, he had gone into the forest and cut down a pine tree and fashioned headboard and footboard. Upon hearing this she flung herself into his arms, weeping tears of joy. All in all, Penelope emerges as one of the most attractive personalities in Greek myth, man or woman, god or goddess, a unique wife for a unique hero.

Penthesilea (pehn thuh sih LEE uh): Daughter of Ares; queen of the Amazons. She led a detachment of her sisters-in-arms to Troy after Hector had been killed by Achilles, and attacked the Greeks so fiercely that she almost brought victory again to the Trojans. But Achilles finally sought her out. They fought a savage hand-to-hand combat. It is said, however, that Achilles was so much struck with the beauty of this warrior-girl that he fought less effectively than usual. Penthesilea was more single-minded; she remained undistracted by Achilles' beauty and took advantage of his lapses in concentration to strike some blows he was barely able to parry. Finally, his reflexes took over, and he killed her. However, when he saw her lying there on the battleground he was struck again by her superb beauty and he wept for what might have been had they met at another time, in another place. He was observed in his grief by Thersites, a great scoffer among the Greeks, a misshapen, foul-mouthed man. Thersites jeered at Achilles, who turned, and killed the scoffer with one blow of his fist. It is said that Zeus, who had been watching the battle from Mt. Ida, was so moved by this episode that he had Hephaestus carve upon his Olympian throne a bas-relief of the dying Amazon in Achilles' arms.

Pentheus (PEHN thoos): A king of Thebes who refused to acknowledge Dionysus as a god and sought to expel him and his followers from the kingdom. Dionysus took a terrible vengeance. He provoked curiosity in Pentheus, making him wish to spy upon

the secret revels of the Bacchantes. The king put on women's clothes and joined the throng of moon-intoxicated revelers who rushed up the hill. Then he hid behind a tree to watch the secret rites. He saw with dismay that his own mother, Agave, was among the revelers, as well as his two sisters. Then, Dionysus raveled skeins of moonlight, deranging the vision of Agave, who screamed that she saw a lion in the underbrush. In her ecstatic fury she rushed upon her son — whom she took to be the lion — followed by her daughters, and tore him to pieces. It is said that Agave's madness persisted throughout the night and that she carried Pentheus' head home on a pole, thinking it a lion's head and wishing to show the trophy to her son. Never again was Dionysus' divinity denied in Thebes.

Periclymenus (pehr ih KLY mee nuhs): King of Elis; and an Argonaut. His grandfather, Poseidon, had bestowed upon him the power of transformation, enabling him to turn himself into any animal or tree he wished. He captained the forces of his father, Neleus, in a campaign against Heracles. He engaged the hero in single combat, changing himself into a bull; Heracles broke off his horns. He changed himself into a lion and Heracles broke his teeth. He changed himself into a huge serpent and attempted to enwrap Heracles, who knotted him around a tree trunk. Finally, Periclymenus turned himself into a bee, not an ordinary bee, but one as large as an eagle with a barbed stinger longer than a spear. Heracles dived into the river, pursued by this fearsome creature.

When the bee swooped too close, Heracles reached out of the water and pulled the bee in, drowning him. Death was Periclymenus' final transformation.

Persephone (pur SEHF oh ne): Daughter of Zeus and Demeter; wife of Hades. Beloved daughter of the harvest-goddess, she led an enchanted life among the growing fields. Her mother gave her a magic paint-box, which she took among the spring flowers, coloring them according to her fancy and drawing them faces that they have worn forever. One morning in April as she was dipping her brush into a shadow of special blueness that she needed for a gentian, she heard a strange rumbling sound that seemed to be coming from beneath the field. The field opened. Out of the pit surged six black horses drawing a black chariot, driven by a tall, black-bearded, black-robed figure. Before she could call for help, she was snatched into the chariot, which plunged again into the pit. Then she saw that her abductor was her uncle, Hades. She did not know what he wanted of her. Then he showed her. His dark lips drank her tears, as the stallions thundered down the passage to Tartarus. But she was stubborn, this young goddess. She refused to accept her captivity. She refused to eat, refused to speak to her captor. In Hades' kingdom lay the world's troves of gold and silver, of diamonds and rubies and sapphires. He heaped her with jewels and had his slaves spin her gowns of silver and gold thread. He called out the nimblest acrobats, the most graceful dancers, the most eloquent actors, and the sweetest singers from among his

shades to provide her with entertainment. Still she would not speak to him; still she would not eat. During this time, her mother, Demeter, was coursing the earth like wildfire, searching for her abducted daughter. At first she could not discover what had happened to the girl. Then, in Eleusis, she heard birds gossiping. Piecing together their chirps, she realized that it was her brother, Hades, who had taken her daughter. She rushed to Zeus for justice. But Hades had bribed Zeus with a wonderful volt-blue, zig-zag lightning shaft, more beautiful than any thunderbolt he had ever owned. And Zeus informed Demeter that Hades wished to marry Persephone and that she, being a goddess, would have to marry within the family if she were not to lower herself. Demeter refused to accept the judgment of Zeus, and raged. Her rage was famine. Crops failed, the earth parched, cattle died, people died. Hunger stalked the land; death stalked behind. Finally, Zeus had to yield. He informed Demeter that she could reclaim her daughter so long as Persephone had eaten nothing during her sojourn underground. But if she had accepted food, then, under the ancient Law of Abode, she would have to be considered a guest, not a captive, and must remain as Hades' bride. As Demeter rejoiced, Hermes flew off on his winged sandals to fetch Persephone. But just before Hermes arrived in Tartarus, a treacherous gardener, who hated Demeter because the goddess had once changed him into a lizard for laughing at her, tore a succulent pomegranate in half, and offered it to Persephone who was suffering from hunger and thirst. Before

she could stop herself she had plucked six of the juicy red seeds and eaten them. Just then she heard Hermes' bright herald cry and saw his lithe form swooping toward her, and knew that she was saved. But not quite. Hades had already sped to Olympus and claimed Persephone as his bride under the Law of Abode, because she had eaten the seeds. Whereupon Demeter decreed that no crops would grow if her flower-princess had to become the bride of Death. Zeus compromised, and his judgment was final. Persephone would have to spend six months with Hades, a month for each seed. The other half of the year she could spend with her mother. But Demeter kept her word too. For those six months that her beloved daughter spent underground, no crops grew. In the spring, when Persephone returned, the fields could flower again, and the trees bear fruit. In Roman mythology Persephone was known as Proserpina.

Perseus (PUR soos; PUR see uhs): Son of Zeus and Danae; first king of Mycenae. He was the earliest of the seven great Greek heroes and there is a unique dawn freshness to his legend. Quite literally, he was the golden boy of mythology. He was engendered by a golden shaft of sunlight, which was the guise adopted by Zeus for visiting Danae in her prison cell. He and his mother were penned in a wooden box and cast out to sea by his grandfather, Acrisius, but the box floated ashore on Sephiros. When the lid was lifted, golden sunlight poured in and Danae rose from the box in such radiance, holding her infant son, that the king of that place fell

madly in love with her. Later, the king, Polydectes, tried to get rid of Perseus, now grown into a youth, by sending him to fetch Medusa's head, believing he must perish on the mission. But Perseus, not at all afraid, though Medusa was a dreadful monster, climbed a hill at dawn to hymn the rising sun, feeling himself fill with its golden power. Hermes appeared then, and Athena; they gave him golden gifts. Athena's was a shield of gold, polished to such a high gloss that it could be used as a mirror. She warned him that he must look upon Medusa only mirrored in this shield, for the direct sight of her would turn him to stone. Hermes' gift was a new-moon sword of pale gold, the only blade sharp enough to cut off Medusa's head. Hermes also gave him a pair of gold-winged sandals, called *talaria*, which would allow him to fly faster than an eagle. But there were two other pieces of equipment he would need to complete his mission, Hermes told him. And they were lodged with the Nymphs of the West, whom Hermes had visited once, and whose hospitality had so pleased him that he had left them magical gifts. However, these nymphs dwelt in a secret place, and only the three gray sisters, called the *Graeae*, knew the secret which Perseus would have to extract from them. Perseus shouted with joy, thanked the gods, seized the golden shield and the golden sword, and flew away upon his gold-winged sandals. Glittering, he flew into the mist...down, down into mist-shrouded regions to the ice-floe upon which the three gray hags dwelt. They owned but one tooth and one eye among them, and passed them from one to the

other so that they could see and bite. Perseus asked them where he could find the Nymphs of the West but they refused to tell. Whereupon he seized their eye and their tooth and refused to return them until the secret was revealed. Pleading for their return, the hags told him that the nymphs lived in the Garden of the Hesperides, where Hera's tree of golden apples grew and where Atlas held the western rim of the sky on his shoulders. Perseus leaped into the air and flew to the golden orchard where the nymphs, who did not see a stranger from one century to the next, greeted him with great joy. When he departed they gave him the gifts Hermes had left with them: a helmet which cast darkness about its wearer, making him invisible, and a wallet woven of golden thread called a *kibesis*; only this magic wallet could contain the strong poison of Medusa's snake-haired head. Perseus climbed into the golden air again and sped over sea and land to a place of dreadful gloom. He descended into a giant swamp full of the stench of rotting things, a place where no light penetrated except the weird green fires that flickered off the putrescent marshes. He followed a stinking stream until he came to three figures lying asleep. They were huge, with brass scales and brass wings, and he knew he had come to the place of the Gorgons. Looking into the mirror of his shield he examined the image of each head in turn. The last one was horrid; each hair was a hissing snake. Stepping carefully, keeping the reflection of the head centered in his mirroring shield, he raised his new-moon sword and slashed downward. The head

rolled. A fearful shriek rent the air as the Gorgons awoke. He scooped up the head, stuffed it into his golden wallet, and flew away. The Gorgons gave chase, but he outdistanced them. On his way home, he used Medusa's head to turn a sea-monster to stone and rescue Andromeda, who became his wife. See [Andromeda](#). Then he returned to Sephiros just in time to interrupt his mother's forced marriage to Polydectes. Again he drew the snake-haired head from his golden kibisis, and turned the groom and all the wedding guests to stone. See [Danae](#). Perseus lived to a great old age, founded Mycenae, and became its first king. It is said that he gave the Medusa-head to Athena, who attached it to her shield. Others say, however, that he wished to rid the world of so horrid an object and threw it in the sea, where it still moves upon the tides, making coral as it rolls.

Phaea (FEE uh): A robber-woman; one of those bloodthirsty bandits who infested the mountain road from Troezen to Athens, which the young Theseus had to travel. She was exceedingly savage with her victims. After depriving them of their wallets, she would take their lives. In addition to her other charms, she had the habit of turning herself into a wild white sow when too closely pressed. Theseus encountered Phaea on the mountain road and battered her so with the brass club he had taken from Corunetes that she took refuge in transformation. She became a white sow and attacked him with her murderous tusks. But he was ready with his club and battered the sow to death.

Phaedra (FEE druh): Daughter of Minos and Pasiphae; third wife of Theseus. Her thwarted love for her husband's son, Hippolytus, caused the death of the young man and herself. See [Hippolytus](#). In general, any relationship with Theseus was apt to be fatal for any member of the royal house of Crete. Theseus broke the power of Minos, killed the Minotaur, abandoned Ariadne, and became Phaedra's widower.

Phaeton (FAY uh thuhn): A son of Apollo, who persuaded his father to let him drive the sun-chariot. Apollo demurred; the sun-stallions were of titanic strength and needed a god at the reins. But he had promised the boy and could not refuse. However, he made Phaeton agree to drive the chariot at moderate speed across the blue meadow of the sky, not too high, and not too low, but keeping always to the middle of the way. The lad promised and sped off in the sun-chariot. At first, he kept the middle way and the fire-breathing stallions trotted easily, the whirling golden spokes of the chariot wheels casting daylight upon the earth below. But when Phaeton reached his own village he felt an overwhelming desire to impress his playmates, who had never believed he was Apollo's son. He urged the stallions downward till they hovered over the roofs of the village, which immediately burst into flame. The fields caught fire, the forests broke into flames, rivers and lakes turned to steam. The sun-stallions, frenzied by the commotion, rushed up, up, up, until the earth was gripped in a paralyzing frost. The salt sea itself froze, and ships were stuck in the ice, motionless. People and

cattle froze to death. Phaeton pulled on the reins desperately, trying to swerve the stallions downward. They rushed toward earth again. The icy waters melted making great floods, threatening to drown the earth completely. Zeus, on Olympus, heard the cries of grief arise from earth. He looked down and saw the runaway chariot of the sun, with a strange youth in the driver's seat. He hurled his thunderbolt, killing Phaeton instantly, and Apollo flew down to take the reins. The earth still bears marks of Phaeton's wild ride. He left great scorched places when the chariot dipped too close. The Sahara Desert is one and there are smaller deserts too. Our word "phaeton," meaning "light swift carriage," is derived from the name of Apollo's reckless son. See [Heliades](#).

Philammon (fih LAY muhn): Son of Apollo and Chione; noted musician and sweet singer. See [Chione](#).

Philoctetes (fihl uhk TEE teez): A remarkable archer whose career spanned two generations. In his youth he was a companion of Heracles and was entrusted by him to erect his funeral pyre and to set the torch to it with his own hands. Heracles considered his manner of death — poisoned by the shirt of Nessus — to be a disgrace, and he wished no one to attend his last rites. Philoctetes did everything Heracles asked. In return, Heracles gave him his own wonderful bow and those arrows which had been dipped in the Hydra's blood and meant instant death to anyone they pierced. Philoctetes kept that bow and used it in many battles. Only Apollo,

it was said, was a better archer; but no mortal could rival Philoctetes. Later, he sailed for Troy but, while on the island of Lemnos, accidentally scratched himself with one of the envenomed arrows. His wound festered and would not heal. The stench that arose from it was unbearable to his comrades. Nor did they wish to listen to his moans of pain. They were not in a compassionate mood, these Greek chieftains; they were afire with battle-lust and wild to reach Troy. And so they abandoned Philoctetes on the island of Lemnos, where he lived, in pain, for ten years. However, in the tenth year of the war, it was foretold by an oracle that Troy could not fall until the bow of Heracles appeared on the field. Odysseus and Diomedes went to Lemnos to ask the aid of the man they had treated so vilely. But the ordeal had refined rather than coarsened him; he did not indulge his grudge, but went to Troy. There, it is said, his wound was healed by the great Machaon, son of Asclepius. The next day, Philoctetes strung the bow of Heracles and killed Paris. A few days later, Troy fell.

Philyra (FIHL uh ruh): A lesser sea-deity who attracted the notice of Cronus. But his attentions were unwelcome. She turned herself into a mare and galloped away. He turned into a stallion and galloped after. She bore him Chiron, half man and half horse, wisest of the centaurs and the only one not sired by Ixion. She grew weary of being a mare and was not particularly fond of Chiron. She petitioned Cronus to change her shape, telling him she wished to

dwell modestly in solitude, and without irksome care. He changed her into a linden tree.

Phlegethon (FLEHG eh thuhn): One of the rivers that flowed through Tartarus. But it ran with fire, not with water. It was of special dread to sinners for they were often thrown into it.

Phlegyas (FLEHJ joos): A king of the Lapiths; father of Ixion and Coronis. Now, Coronis was the abducted maiden who became the mother of Asclepius, and was later killed by Apollo in a jealous rage. Her father attacked Apollo's temple at Delphi and destroyed it. He was killed by Apollo and condemned to eternal torment, which took this form: He was shackled hand and foot under a rock suspended by an invisible thread in mid-air; it perpetually threatened to fall and crush him. Thus, three generations of the Lapith royal house defied the gods and incurred unique penalties after death. Phlegyas himself; his son, Ixion, who attempted to abduct Hera and was chained to a flaming wheel for eternity; and his grandson, Peirithous, companion of Theseus, who tried to abduct Persephone, and was shackled forever to the roots of a mountain in Tartarus. See [Ixion](#); [Peirithous](#).

Phoebe (FEE bee): The word means "bright," and is sometimes applied to Artemis as goddess of the moon.

Phoebus (FY buhs; FEE buhs): Masculine form of "Phoebe." It is often attached to the name of Apollo, the sun-god.

Phoenix (FEE nihx): A legendary bird without parent and without offspring, it nurtured itself on sunlight and sea spray. When about to die, it drew new life from those primal elements of fire and water and was born again. Its feathers were gold and red and blinding white as the sun; its eyes were green as the sea. It is sometimes described as building its nest in the form of a funeral pyre, setting the nest afire, and then, when consumed, rising from its own ashes.

Phorcys (FOR sihs): Brother and husband of Ceto; and father of monsters. See [Ceto](#).

Pittheus (PIHT thoos): King of Troezen; son of Pelops and Hippodamia. He was the only virtuous one of the criminal brood sired by Pelops. When an oracle told him he was destined to become the grandfather of a great hero, he gave his daughter, Aethra, in marriage to Aegeus, king of Athens. Aethra became the mother of Theseus. Some legends claim, however, that Poseidon was his father, not Aegeus. But Aethra was indisputably the hero's mother and Pittheus his grandfather.

Pleiades (PLEE uh deez): Seven daughters of Atlas who became a constellation after their death. Pursued in life by the hunter Orion, they are still pursued by him across the arch of heaven — for he too is a constellation. See [Orion](#); [Merope](#).

Pleisthenes (PLIHS thuh neez): A son of Atreus whom his father killed in error, one of the few inadvertent homicides by this bloodthirsty king of Mycenae whose killing was usually intentional.

Pluto (PLOO toh): Variant name for Hades, king of the dead. It is a form of the Greek word “Plouton,” meaning “rich,” and was used as a term of flattery for Hades by those who wished to placate the stern god. There is no evidence, however, that Hades was ever flattered out of his somber intentions. See [Hades](#).

Podilarius (poh duh LY rih uhs): Son of Asclepius; and master diagnostician. He and his brother, Machaon, the great surgeon, went to Troy, where their skill allowed thousands of the wounded to survive. See [Machaon](#).

Polites (poh LY tee): Last of Priam’s fifty sons to be killed during the sack of Troy. He was cut down by Neoptolemus. Only one of Priam’s sons survived: Helenus, who had aided the Greeks.

Polycaste (pahl uh KAS tee): A sister of Daedalus; mother of Talos whom Daedalus killed in a jealous rage because he was displaying an inventive talent to rival his own. When her son was killed, Polycaste was transformed by a compassionate god into a bird — some say a gull. And this gull shrieked with joy when Daedalus’ son, Icarus, fell to his death because the sun had melted the wax from his wings. See [Icarus](#)

Polydectes (pahl ih DEHK teez): King of Sephiros. His attempt to force Danae into marriage caused him to be ossified by her son, Perseus, who had brought him Medusa's head as a wedding present. See [Perseus](#); [Danae](#).

Polydeuces (pahl ih DOO seez): Son of Zeus and Leda. Brother of Castor and Helen. See [Castor and Polydeuces](#).

Polyhymnia (pahl ih HIHM nih uh): Muse of song; and of geometry. This may seem an unlikely combination, but the goddess of the lovely voice taught those who make song that the most exquisite contrivances require an inner order for their structure. There has always been an affinity between mathematics and music.

Polyneices (pahl ih NY SEEZ): Son of Oedipus and Jocasta; brother of Eteocles and Antigone. His perpetual rivalry with his twin brother as to who should rule Thebes led to plot, counterplot, war, and murder. See [Antigone](#); [Eteocles](#).

Polyphemus (pahl ih FEE muhs): A Cyclops; outwitted and blinded by Odysseus after he had devoured many of the voyager's crew. See [Cyclopes](#).

Polyxena (poh LIHK see nuh): Lovely daughter of Priam and heroine of a non-Homeric legend about the Trojan War. Achilles, it is said, while battling the Trojans, allowed his attention to be distracted by the sight of a beautiful maiden watching from the

wall. He immediately decided that the maiden must be his and killed the man he was fighting, so that he could open negotiations without delay. Discovering that the girl was Priam's daughter, he sent envoys to the king. Priam tended to approve this match for, if Achilles were neutralized by becoming his son-in-law, then the Greeks would have to retreat; without Achilles, they could not win. However, Hector opposed the match. After several years of fighting, he now hated the Greeks — particularly Achilles. Paris supported Hector. He was afraid that any truce would mean that he would be forced to yield up Helen to her husband. A courteous refusal was sent to Achilles who, soon afterward, quit the fighting because of his quarrel with Agamemnon. But he kept prowling near the walls trying to glimpse the beautiful maiden. And Polyxena formed the habit of walking the walls at night so that she might be glimpsed. Then occurred the combination of bloody events which ended the war. Patroclus was killed by Hector and Hector was slain by Achilles, who bound his body to the axle of his chariot and dragged it seven times around the walls of Troy. Priam went to Achilles to plead for the return of his son's body. According to ancient belief, unless a body was burned decently on a funeral pyre, or buried with proper ceremonies, its unquiet ghost would roam forever. Achilles at first refused to listen to Priam's pleading until a cloaked figure that had accompanied the king drew the cloak from its face and Achilles saw that it was Polyxena. The sight of this lovely tear-stained face melted Achilles' cruel resolve and he

allowed Priam to take his son's body back to Troy. But he told the king he now intended to press his suit for the girl's hand and that this time he expected a favorable reply. When king and princess returned to their castle, Paris craftily pretended to change his mind. He suggested to Polyxena that she arrange a tryst with Achilles at a certain grove sacred to Apollo, just outside the Trojan walls. Polyxena joyfully sent a message to Achilles, who came to the grove the next day. Paris, hiding in ambush behind a statue of Apollo, launched the arrow that severed the tendon above Achilles' heel — his one vulnerable spot — thus killing the hero. Polyxena, maddened with grief by the death of the only man she had ever loved, took up the arrow and stabbed herself in the heart. According to some legends, when Thetis transported the shade of Achilles to the White Isle she had raised in the sea as his eternal home, he refused to dwell on that isle unless his mother would bring the shade of Polyxena there. Thetis demurred, but the shade of her son threatened to leave the isle and take his chances in Tartarus. So Thetis brought Polyxena to the White Isle where the two shades embraced and dwelt together through eternity.

Porphyryon (por FIHR ih uhn; por FY rih uhn): Leader of the race of Giants who were the offspring of Gaia and Uranus, and younger brothers of the Titans. Embittered because Zeus had defeated and imprisoned their elder brothers, the Giants launched a sudden attack. Now, these Giants were fearsome creatures, huge as Titans, possessed of volcanic strength and incredibly savage

dispositions. According to some legends, their legs were serpents. The Giants uprooted two mountains, piled Pelion on Ossa, and scaled Olympus. It had been foretold that the gods could defeat the Giants only with the help of a lion-skinned mortal. Zeus decided that this must be his son, Heracles, and sent Hermes speeding through the twilight to find him. While the Giants were scaling Olympus, their mother, Gaia, who favored their cause, was searching for a certain herb she knew would confer invulnerability upon her sons and make their victory certain. Zeus, however, realized what his grandmother was planning, and commanded Helios to keep his sun-chariots stabled and the dawn-goddess, Eos, to keep out of the sky. Darkness held upon the earth and Gaia groped about without finding the magic herb. Now, the battle was joined. Porphyron led his Giants in a wild charge. Many of the gods were injured. They retreated. Just then, Hermes returned with Heracles, who beat back the first wave of Giants with his brass club, then fell to one knee and launched arrow after arrow. Each one found its mark, killing a Giant. The gods rallied. Hecate wielded her scorpion whip. Hephaestus hurled ladles of hot lead. Athena thrust valiantly with her spear. Apollo shot arrows of golden fire; Artemis shot arrows of silver fire. But the gods could only wound the Giants; in each case Heracles, conforming to prophecy, had to deal the death-blow. But Porphyron could not be killed. Wounded, battered, but still ablaze with ferocity, he led the remnants of his Giants down off Olympus, vowing that he would

return one day after Heracles had died, and seek vengeance. And, it is said, that is why the gods did not accept Heracles' death, but resurrected him as a god, and took him among the company of the Immortals. As for Porphyryon, no one knows exactly what happened to him but there are those who say that it is his festering grudge that is behind all the secret malice of nature, which occasionally erupts, causing slaughter and destruction, and shaking mankind's faith in itself and in its gods.

Poseidon (poh SY duhn): Son of Cronus and Rhea; god of the sea. Green-robed, wearing a crown of pearl, he whirled over the sea in a dolphin chariot, shaking storms out of his beard, raiding the shoreline with his legions of white-maned combers, sending waterspouts high, feuding with his brothers and sisters, making claim on land and air. This was Poseidon, gigantic brother of Zeus, most fearsome of the Olympians, whom men spoke of in hushed voices as the "earth-shaker." He was a very changeable god, hot-tempered and loving, cruel and kind. His bounty supported generations of sailors and fishermen; then, all of a sudden, his mood would change — his smiles would turn to rage, a storm would boil out of the blue sky, wrecking fleets, drowning those who had dared the sea on ships. He was generous. His underwater domain held riches beyond calculation. And he was inventive with forms of life. He liked to surprise nymphs with monsters, and concocted the octopus, the blowfish, and the seapolyp for their entertainment. Once, to appease the jealous wrath of his wife,

Amphitrite, he thought up the dolphin and gave it to her as a gift. But his handsomest creation was the love-token he contrived for Demeter. The harvest queen had always repulsed his rude wooing, and fled him down inland ways, until one day he presented her with the most beautiful creature ever seen on earth. It was the horse, which delighted the goddess and made her change her opinion of Poseidon. It had taken him many trials to make the horse and he cast aside his unsuccessful attempts: camel, hippopotamus, giraffe, donkey, zebra. Poseidon was revered by those who lived near the sea and feared by inland folk as well — for his floods reached far. Travelers sacrificed to him before each voyage, petitioning him as “Grantor of Safe Passage.” The horse was sacred to him; also the pine tree — father of ships. In Roman mythology, Poseidon was known as Neptune.

Priam (PRY uhm): Father of the fifty princes who fought the Greeks at Troy; the son of Laomedon; husband of Hecuba; and last king of that fabled city — Troy. He had ruled for many years before the war struck and had rebuilt the city and the treasury ruined by his father, Laomedon. He was finally killed by Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, during the sack of Troy.

Procne (PRAHK nee): Wife of Tereus, king of Thrace, and sister of Philomela. See *Philomela*.

Procrustes (proh KRUHS teez): Most infamous of those monstrous brigands who made life miserable for travelers along the mountain road from Troezen to Athens. He kept an inn in which there was a special bedchamber with a very special bed. Guests who sought repose there found themselves shackled to the bed frame. If they were too short for the bed, he attached ropes to their ankles and stretched them until their bones cracked. If they were too long for the bed, Procrustes lopped off their feet or their head. In any case, he always ended by killing his guests and appropriating the contents of their wallets. His final guest was Theseus who, dismayed by the pile of bones that lay about the inn yard and further dismayed by the bloodstained bed frame, decided not to lie upon the bed — but suddenly pushed Procrustes upon it. Thereupon he treated his host as his host had treated guests. Procrustes was too long for the bed, so Theseus cut off his head. And that short stretch of the road became safer for travelers.

Proetus (proh EE tuhs; PREE tuhs): Twin brother of Acrisius, thus great-uncle to Perseus. He and his twin began fighting while still in their mother's womb and this dissension continued throughout their lives. Acrisius shared the kingdom of Argos with Proetus, but then suspected him of designs upon his daughter, Danae, and succeeded in expelling him. Proetus then became king of Tiryns, where he entertained the hero Bellerephon, and plotted his death. He had three daughters who were sent mad by Hera for mocking her image but were cured later by the wise Melampus. All

in all, he emerges as a vile petty-minded character and was much loathed by his subjects.

Prometheus (proh MEE thee uhs; proh MEE thus): Noblest of the sons of Uranus and Gaia; arch-rebel; and friend to man. Prometheus belonged to the race of Titans who were cousins to the gods. One day he looked down upon the earth and did not like what he saw. Men and women crouched in dark caves, cold, almost naked. They used tools chipped out of stone and ate their meat raw. They were dulled, brutish, speaking to each other in grunts. Prometheus went to Zeus and said:

“Why, oh Thunderer, do you keep the race of man in ignorance and darkness?”

“What you call ignorance is innocence,” said Zeus. “What you call darkness is the shadow of my decree. Man is happy now, and will remain happy until someone persuades him he is unhappy. Do not meddle further with my designs.”

“I know that everything you do is wise,” said Prometheus. “Enlighten me with your wisdom. Tell me why you refuse man the gift of fire?”

“Because hidden in man is a pride that can destroy us. Give him the great servant called fire, and he will try to make himself as powerful as the gods. Why, he would storm Olympus. Go now and trouble me no further.”

But Prometheus was still not satisfied. The next morning he stood tiptoe on the mountaintop and stole some fire from the

sunrise. He hid the spark in a hollow reed, then went down to earth. Zeus looking down later could not believe what he saw. Everything was changed. Man had come out of his cave. Zeus saw huts, farmhouses, walled towns, a castle. He saw men cooking their food, carrying torches to light their way at night. Forges blazed; men were beating out ploughs, keels, swords, spears. They were raising white wings of sails and daring to use the fury of the winds for their voyages. They were wearing helmets, riding out in chariots to do battle like the gods themselves. Zeus was infuriated. He knew whom to blame. He ordered Prometheus to be seized and bound to a mountaintop in a place where it always snows and the wind howls ceaselessly. There the friend of man was sentenced to spend eternity, chained to a crag, two vultures hovering about him, tearing at his belly and eating his liver. He could not die because he was immortal, but he could suffer. And suffer he did through long centuries for giving man the gift of fire. Finally, another hero was born brave enough to defy the gods. He struck the chains from Prometheus and killed the vultures. But that deed belongs to the story of Heracles.

Prosperina (proh SUR pih nuh): Roman name for Persephone, daughter of Demeter, and Hades' queen. See [*Persephone*](#).

Protesilaus (proh tehs ih LAY uhs): A king of Thessaly who sailed with forty ships against Troy. When the Greek ships were

drawn up at their moorings and the Trojan army was ranked on the beach ready to meet the invaders, the Greeks, it is said, hesitated. No one wished to be the first to charge that hedge of spears. Protesilaus leaped from the deck of his ship, shouting to his men to follow, and was the first Greek to set foot on the Trojan shore. His war was a brief one. He had not advanced ten paces before Hector came charging out of the ranks and transfixed him with his spear. Now, the wife of Protesilaus, who was named Laodamia, was inconsolable when she heard of her husband's death. She prayed to Hermes, who conducted the dead to Hades, to come and fetch her so that she might join her husband. Hermes came, was struck with compassion, and made her an unprecedented offer: He would bring her husband home from the Land of the Shades for three hours each day so that she might converse with him! She accepted this offer. Each day, Hermes made the journey to Tartarus and conducted Protesilaus to Thessaly, withdrawing while the dead king conversed with his wife, and then conveying him back to Hades. Finally, however, Laodamia could not bear these daily farewells. She pleaded with Hermes to allow her to accompany her husband to the Land of the Dead and abide there with him forever. Hermes agreed to do so.

Psyche (SY kee): Youngest daughter of a king who had three daughters; she was so beautiful that Aphrodite grew envious. The goddess of love dispatched her son, Eros, to pierce Psyche with one of his arrows and instill her with a passion for her father's

swineherd, or perhaps for one of the swine, this being Aphrodite's notion of what a girl deserved who dared be as beautiful as herself. However, when Eros approached the sleeping girl with his arrow notched, he accidentally scratched himself, fell in love with Psyche, and bore her away to be his bride. Now, god may marry mortal only on condition that the god remain invisible — for the sight of the naked god can consume a mortal with the divine fire, as happened to Semele when Zeus appeared before her in his own form. Therefore, Psyche never saw her husband, nor any of his servants. Her way was lighted by torches carried by invisible hands. Invisible servants brought her food and drink. Trees were pruned by invisible gardeners. At night, all torches were extinguished; her husband visited her in total darkness. She received him joyfully, but never saw him. When morning came, he was gone. She was very happy for a while, but then decided to invite her sisters to the castle so that they might see her in her happiness. The sisters came and immediately began to instill the poison of suspicion in her mind, drop by drop: one suggesting that her husband must be a monster too ugly to allow himself to be seen; the other suggesting he might be a dissolute prince with a different castle every ten miles, and a different bride in each. The sisters departed but the evil doubts they had brewed did not. They remained lodged in her thoughts and festered there. Finally she could stand it no longer. One night when her husband was asleep she arose, lighted a wax taper, and bent to look at him. There, lying

on the bed, was a youth more beautiful than any she had ever imagined...marble-skinned, with hair the color of pale flame, and a pair of large, white, smoothly feathered wings. A drop of hot wax fell from the taper onto his shoulder. He awoke. He looked at Psyche, but not with anger, his eyes were filled with such grief and pity that she fell into a swoon. When she awoke the castle was gone. The courtyard was gone. She stood among weeds and brambles. All the good things that had belonged to her had vanished with her love. From that night on she roamed the woods, searching. And some say she still searches the woods and dark places. Some say that Aphrodite turned her into an owl that sees best in the dark and cries, “Who...who...?” Others say her husband forgave her, finally, and took her up to Olympus. It is her special task to undo the talk of the bride’s family, and the groom’s. When mother or sister visit bride or groom and say, “This, this, this...that, that...Better look for yourself, seeing’s believing” — then she whips them away and she herself, invisible, whispers that none but love knows the secret of love, that believing is seeing.

Pygmalion (pihg MAY lee uhn): A young sculptor of Cyprus so talented that his fame reached Olympus and Aphrodite herself came to pose for him. He was inspired by the beautiful goddess and carved a masterpiece, a statue so beautiful he fell in love with it as though it were living. He could not work or eat or sleep — he just sat in his studio looking at the marble girl. “If I can’t have her,” he said, finally, to himself, “I don’t want anything. I shall jump off the

cliff into the ocean, and die before nightfall.” Aphrodite heard him. She appeared and said: “I have come to help you. What do you want?”

“Her,” said Pygmalion, pointing to the statue. “Nothing else, only her.”

“Highly irregular,” said the goddess. “But I admire your taste; she looks like me. Put your hand in hers...”

Pygmalion took the statue’s hand and kissed its lips. Immediately the cold marble flushed into life. A rosy girl stood there on the pediment; her hair, yellow as daffodils, hung to mid-thigh. “Her name is Galatea,” said Aphrodite. “Be happy...” In gratitude, the sculptor spent the rest of his life making images of Aphrodite for her temples all over the world. See [Galatea](#).

Pygmies (PIHG meez): A race of Egyptian dwarfs, one cubit high — a cubit being twenty-two inches, or the length of a man’s forearm between fist and elbow. The word “pygme” in Greek means “first.” Once a mortal girl of normal size came to live among them; they were so impressed by her stature that they worshipped her as a goddess. When Hera learned of this she became incensed, as was the habit of gods when they heard of mortals worshipping each other. Hera changed herself into a crane. This long-legged, long-beaked bird stalked over the marshes into the Pygmy village and began to peck the little creatures to death. When she had killed a sufficient number to sate her rage, Hera departed — but thus began an annual war between cranes and

pygmies. Each spring when the Nile floods, the cranes come and attack the pygmies, who do their best to fight them off. Once, Heracles came to Egypt. Weary after his bout with Antaeus, he fell asleep on the banks of the Nile. The pygmies, confused by his name, and identifying him with their enemy Hera, besieged the recumbent hero as if he were a city — placing ladders against him, scaling them, and swarming over him with their needlelike swords. Heracles awoke, gathered them up in his lion-skin, and carried them home in a bundle to Eurystheus. They were the only creatures on earth, it was said, that the king did not fear. They were too small.

Pylades (PIHL uh deez): Beloved companion of Orestes; and husband of Electra. See [Orestes](#).

Pyramus and Thisbe (PIHR uh muhs) (THIHZ bee): A young couple whose parents disapproved of their love. They could speak to each other only through a crack in the wall that divided their gardens. Finally, however, they decided they must see more of each other and arranged a tryst outside the city under a certain mulberry tree. Thisbe arrived first but was frightened by a lioness prowling out of the shadows. She fled, dropping her veil. The lioness tore the veil and stalked away. Pyramus arrived, saw the torn veil, and thought Thisbe had been devoured by a wild beast. He drew his sword and killed himself. Thisbe returned and saw Pyramus lying there, dead. She picked up his sword, stabbed herself and fell

across his body. From that time on, mulberries — which had been white — have been red as blood.

Pyrrha (PIHR uh): Daughter of Pandora and Epimetheus; and wife of Deucalion. She survived the great flood with her husband and became the mother of a new race of man. See [Deucalion](#).

Pyrrhus (PIHR uhs): Variant name for Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. See [Neoptolemus](#).

Python (PY thuhn): The enormous serpent sent by Hera to harry Leto from one end of the earth to the other. For Hera knew that Leto had been loved by Zeus and that the children she would bear were destined to outshine any of Hera's own. The serpent hunted Leto ruthlessly. Night and day it glided after her displaying its great fangs. Night and day she saw its scaly coils writhing after her, the glare of its poisonous red eyes. She could find no safe place to lie down and bear her children. Finally, Zeus raised an island from the depths of the sea, chaining it to the bottom, and placed Leto upon it. Then he flung reefs and rocks about the island and giant sharks among the reefs so that the python might not approach. There, upon this island called Delos, Leto bore the divine twins, Apollo and Artemis, who, indeed, did outshine Hera's children: they became sun-god and moon-goddess. When Apollo had grown, his first act was to hunt the Python. He pursued the monster across the Peloponnese, until it took refuge in the deep

caves of Delphi. Apollo followed it into the cave, stringing his golden bow. The blackness of the cave was brightened by the flight of his golden arrows — until the Python was pierced in a hundred places and lay dead. This place, Delphi, became sacred to Apollo. There he built his temple where his oracles dwelt. This story is significant because it illustrates the elegant mechanism of Greek metaphor, which never moralizes and is never coarsely sententious, but in which ideas become action. In the tale of Apollo and the Python the exquisite process reveals itself in the nomenclature. *Python* in Greek means “rot.” Apollo was the sun-god; his arrows were shafts of sunlight. Now it is an axiom of medical science that rot breeds in the dark — that sunlight and ventilation arrest the festering process and heal the organism. Thus, when Apollo followed the Python into the darkness and slew the very body of putrescence with his golden bolts of sunlight, he was not only avenging his mother and establishing his godhead, but also setting into motion those remedies which became sovereign to him as god of medicine. The temples of Apollo, incidentally, were the first hospitals. The treatment followed in these sanctuaries is interesting in the light of contemporary notions. The patients underwent a regime of hydrotherapy — that is, they bathed daily in running water. They did light work each day in the sun, subsisted on a diet of herbs, and spent hours in contemplation of the divine mysteries.

R

Rhadamanthys (rad uh MAN thuhs): Eldest son of Zeus and Europa. His legend is confused. Some say he shared the kingship of Crete with his brother, Minos, and was finally expelled by Minos, taking refuge in various Aegean islands. Others say he lived at peace with Minos, acting as counselor to the king and conducting himself with such wisdom and discretion that Minos, following his advice, was able to give Crete a model set of laws. At any rate, in his later years, Rhadamanthys did leave Crete and go to Boetia, where he fell in love with Heracles' mother, Alcmene. When she became a widow, he married her. After his death, Hades, who had been very much impressed by the help Rhadamanthys had given to Minos, made him one of the three great judges of the dead.

Rhea (REE uh): Daughter of Uranus and Gaia; sister and wife of Cronus; mother of Demeter, Hera, Hestia, Poseidon, Hades, and Zeus. She outwitted her child-devouring husband, Cronus, and was able to save Zeus from his father's monstrous appetite (teaching him also how to rescue his brothers and sisters); finally, he deposed his father as king of the gods. See [Cronus](#). Rhea reigned as earth-goddess during the sovereignty of the Olympians and, while seldom meddling in their affairs, was always ready with help or advice.

Rhesus (REE suhs): A king of Thrace who owned the swiftest stallions in the world, except for the magical steeds of Achilles. It had been foretold by an oracle that if these stallions of Rhesus were ever to drink from the river Scamander, which cuts across the Trojan plain, then the city of Troy would never fall. Priam sent for Rhesus, who came with forty ships and his marvelous white stallions. However, the Greeks were aware of this prophecy. The night that Rhesus debarked, Odysseus and Diomedes put on dark clothing, blackened their hands and faces, and made a daring night raid through the Trojan lines to the king of Thrace's encampment. They killed Rhesus and made off with his stallions, which they never allowed to drink from the Scamander. This was in the tenth year of the war. Shortly after, Troy fell.

Rhoecus (REE kuhs): A young woodsman who spent much time searching hollow trees for beehives because his old mother was toothless and ate nothing but honeycombs. Thus, he incurred the enmity of bees who swarmed angrily about him. But like all the best searchers for honey he had trained himself to ignore bee stings. One day he came upon another woodsman, a huge burly fellow who was preparing to cut down a beautiful old oak. Rhoecus, who was very fond of that oak, forbade the stranger to put his axe to it. Wordlessly, the stranger attacked him. They fought with axes and Rhoecus drove the intruder away. Out of the tree came a lovely dryad who embraced the young man and thanked him for saving her home and her life. For a dryad dies when her

tree dies. The dryad told him that she loved him, but had to hurry off to go hunting with Artemis, an engagement she dared not break. However, she said, she would meet him the next day, sending him a messenger to tell him when and where. She glided away among the trees. Everything that had happened to Rhoecus that afternoon seemed so beautiful that he thought he was dreaming. He returned to his mother laden with honeycombs. Now, the messenger the dryad had chosen to send to Rhoecus was a bee. Dryads often sent bees on errands. This bee, like all bees, hated Rhoecus, and therefore took him no message. Later, the bee returned to the dryad and informed her that he had, indeed, borne her message to Rhoecus — but that the man had laughed scornfully and brushed the bee away. The dryad could not believe this to be true. She hurried to the trysting place; she waited and waited but Rhoecus did not appear. In a fury of thwarted love she turned herself into a wasp whose sting is more envenomed than that of a bee. She sought out Rhoecus and stung him to death. Then she stung herself to death. But Artemis, Lady of Wild Things, took pity on the pair of misguided lovers and changed them into bears so that they might go about the forest together searching hollow trees for honey.

Ripheus (RIHF oos): A Centaur of enormous size and extremely vicious temperament. He appeared, uninvited, at the wedding of Peirithous, the dear comrade of Theseus. Ignoring the ceremony taking place, he seized the bride and galloped off with

her. But Theseus raced after him and caught and killed him. The bride was returned and the nuptials were resumed.

Rumor (ROO mur): She is not widely recognized but, according to some legends, was the youngest daughter of Gaia and Uranus, a swift-footed, barb-tongued demon, full of malice. Her greatest pleasure was to dart about whispering tales to all who would listen and almost everyone would. She did not care whether the tales were true or false as long as they could harm someone.

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S

Salmacis (SAL muh sihs): A fountain of dubious waters. Whoever drank of this fountain — men or women — found themselves seized with a sudden preference for their own sex. According to legend, the fountain acquired its properties when its titular deity, the nymph Salmacis, found herself attracted to the beautiful youth Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite. She prevailed upon a powerful god — whose identity varies from myth to myth — to unite her body forever with that of her beloved. The god assented and their bodies were joined as a single organism, sharing the attributes of male and female. See [Hermaphroditus](#).

Salmoneus (sal MOH nee uhs; sal MOH nuhs): King of Elis. He was a brother of Sisyphus and shared his elder brother's contempt for the gods. Salmoneus grew so arrogant that he commanded his subjects to address him as "Zeus." To validate his claim to divine honors he clanged iron pots together, calling it thunder, and hurled torches into the night sky to mimic lightning. Zeus, of course, viewed such pretensions with enormous displeasure, which he expressed by hurling a thunderbolt at Salmoneus, killing him instantly. After his death, Salmoneus was consigned to a part of Hades near where his brother, Sisyphus, was undergoing his own special torment. As Salmoneus observed his

brother's ordeal, turnspit demons were basting him over a flame, so that he sizzled through eternity as his brother eternally rolled his rock.

Sangarius (sang GAHR ih uhs): A river-god whose daughter told him one day that he was soon to become a grandfather. When Sangarius demanded to know the name of her lover, she declared that she had never had one, but had become pregnant by eating an almond. Her father found this hard to believe and was about to fall into a murderous rage when his daughter also told him she had been visited in a dream by Aphrodite and was told that her grandson would be an immortal hero, shedding luster upon all his ancestors. Such dreams were taken seriously in those days and Sangarius found himself quite willing to become the ancestor of an illustrious hero. And so it came to pass. The child born to the river-god's daughter was Hecuba, who became Priam's wife, and the mother of Hector. The almond part of the story has never been properly explained; but then, no one pressed for an explanation.

Sarpedon (sahr PEE duhn): Third son of Zeus and Europa. He was a bellicose youth. His brother, Minos, recognizing in him a potential rival for the throne and a fomenter of civil war, exiled him from Crete. Sarpedon then sailed for Troy with many ships and fought valiantly against the Greeks. He was finally killed by Patroclus, dearest friend of Achilles. Of the three sons of Zeus and Europa, he was the only one whom Hades did not think wise

enough to appoint as one of the three great judges of the dead. Minos and Rhadamanthys were two of the judges; Aecus, father of Pelops and grandfather of Achilles, was the third.

Saturn (SAT urn): Roman name for Cronus, father of Zeus. See [Cronus](#).

Satyrs (SAT urz): Goat-footed, goat-horned woodland deities, descendants of Pan and followers of Dionysus.

Scamander (skuh MAN dur): A river-god, titular deity of the river that flowed over the Dardanian plain. This river was fed by two springs, one warm, one cold — imparting variety to its waters. They were luxuriantly warm in winter and refreshingly cold in summer. Also, it was said, they conferred a marvelous luster to the skin and hair of all who bathed therein. Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite made sure to swim in the river before appealing to the judgment of Paris in their competition for the golden apple. Scamander, the river-god, intervened in the Trojan War on behalf of Hector. Andromache had bathed in the river the night before Hector was to meet Achilles. She pleaded with Scamander — who was very partial to beautiful women — to help her husband by drowning Achilles. She promised that she would persuade Hector to lead Achilles to a bend in the river so that Scamander might hurl his fathoms upon the Greek hero. The battle between Scamander and Achilles is one of the epic struggles of the war. Scamander was

unable to drown Achilles, the son of a sea-goddess and undrownable. Achilles emerged from the flood waters to pursue Hector and slay him. See [Hector](#).

Sciron (SY ruh): One of the bandits whom Theseus encountered on his journey to Athens. It was Sciron's habit to force travelers to wash his feet. He extorted such attentions while seated on a natural throne of rock at the edge of a cliff. When his victim finished the foot-washing, Sciron kicked him off the cliff into the jaws of a giant turtle, who waited beneath and whose patience was always rewarded. Sciron accosted Theseus in the same manner. Theseus knelt before him, took his foot, and then, using the brigand's leg as a lever, threw Sciron over his shoulder into the jaws of the turtle — who was without prejudice in such matters and ate his master with impartial gusto.

Scylla (SIHL uh): A sea-monster who devoured six of Odysseus' crew. She had not always been a monster. Once she had been a beautiful sea-nymph, but had been loved by a sea-deity named Glaucus who, in turn, was much admired by the island sorceress Circe. Now Circe, mistress of transformations, was a very dangerous rival. She brewed a broth of poison herbs and poured it into the tidal pool where Scylla bathed. The water boiled and bubbled and Scylla was hideously transformed. From the waist up she remained a beautiful nymph, but the lower part of her body became six ravening dogs. Whenever a ship passed too close these

dog-heads would dart out, seize sailors, and devour them. Scylla dwelt on one side of a narrow strait off the coast of Sicily. Right across from her, on the other side of the strait, was the monster, Charybdis, once a greedy woman whom Zeus had changed into a gross bladderlike creature who drank the tides and everything that floated upon them. Between them, Scylla and Charybdis became classic navigational hazards. Odysseus had to sail between them. His only chance was to sail exactly in the middle of the strait. If the ship swerved inches to one side or the other it would either be swallowed by the whirlpool or its crew devoured by Scylla. The ship was too wide, so he had to make a choice. He steered closer to Scylla, choosing to sacrifice some of his crew rather than lose the whole ship. The dog-heads reached out and devoured six sailors — but Odysseus was able to shear off two of the heads. See [Charybdis](#).

Selene (suh LEE nuh): Variant name for Artemis, moon-goddess. See [Artemis](#).

Semele (SEHM uh lee): Lovely daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia who was visited by Zeus and became the mother of Dionysus, god of the vine. She was consumed by divine fire when Zeus appeared to her in his own guise. See [Dionysus](#).

Seven Against Thebes (THEE'BZ): Classic name for the campaign led by Polyneices against his twin brother, Eteocles, who

had usurped the throne of Oedipus. The war led to the death of Eteocles, Polyneices, and their sister, Antigone. See [Eteocles](#); [Antigone](#).

Sibyls (SIHB uhlz): Mortal women, endowed with unearthly powers of prophecy, in whom the gods confided secrets of the future. Under certain circumstances they shared these secrets with mankind, but were not always believed. According to legend, there were ten of these prophetic women in ancient times. Cassandra was possibly the most famous of them. Others deny that she was a Sibyl at all. Sibyls were sometimes believed, but Cassandra never. Sibyls enter Roman as well as Greek legends.

Silenus (sy LEE nuhs): Bald, pot-bellied, merry-hearted son of Pan, who became tutor to the young Dionysus. He is usually depicted as vine-clad, riding on a donkey, attended by nymphs and satyrs. His own descendants, the Sileni, were very much like satyrs themselves, except that they were hornless, and their nethers were like horses instead of goats. But their antics were similar.

Sinis (SY nihs; SIHN uhs): A giant who dwelt in the forest; and first brigand encountered by Theseus on his journey to Athens. He would seize travelers and, after divesting them of their moneybags, tie their feet to a pine tree he had bent to the ground, and their arms to another pine tree similarly bent. Then he would release both trees, which would fly up, tearing the victim in half.

Theseus grew suspicious as he followed a path through that forest, because the trees bore dreadful fruit; bloody bones hung from their branches. Thus, when Sinis approached, Theseus was prepared. He allowed his arms to be tied to one bent pine, but then, as Sinis was bending the other pine, Theseus kicked free suddenly. The pine whipped up and he kicked Sinis under the jaw with all the enormous elasticity of the springing tree adding force to his kick. The brigand's neck was broken. Theseus was about to go on his way when he saw a beautiful girl vanishing into a copse. It was the daughter of Sinis, Perigune, who concealed herself in an asparagus bed. She whispered to the tall stalks, promising that if they would protect her from the man who had killed her father, she would never pick asparagus or burn its thorns. However, when she took a closer look at Theseus, she freely came out of hiding. Theseus stayed with her in the pine forest a few days and she later bore him a son, Melanippus, who became a runner of legendary speed. The inhabitants of that place, forever afterward, viewed the asparagus as a sacred plant.

Sinon (SY nuhn): Son of Sisyphus; half-brother to Odysseus. He owned his share of the family craftiness and proved a great help to Odysseus in carrying out the ruse of the Wooden Horse. After the Greeks had built the Wooden Horse and hidden their warriors inside, they boarded their ships and sailed around the headland, pretending to depart for Greece. Sinon remained on the shore as if abandoned by his comrades. The Trojans took him prisoner and he

told them that the Wooden Horse was sacred to Athena, and that if the Trojans brought it within their gates, the goddess — who had opposed them throughout the war — would forevermore protect them from the Greeks. The Trojans followed his advice. Later that night he slipped his bonds, opened a door in the horse's belly, and allowed the armed men inside to emerge and begin the sack of Troy.

Sirens (SY rehnz): Three sisters; half women, half birds, who enter the story of Odysseus. They were beautiful girls, but with birds' wings, and voices that combined all that was loveliest in the voices of singing birds. It was their custom to perch upon rocks along a coast and, when a ship passed, sing seductively to the sailors. The men, forgetting everything as the enchanting melody poured over them, would allow their vessel to drift closer and closer until it was wrecked on the rocks. Odysseus had to pass that way, but he had been forewarned by Circe of the Sirens' powers. He ordered his men to stuff wax into their ears so they could not hear, and he had himself bound to the mast. When he heard the beautiful voices, however, and saw the lovely creatures beckoning, he was filled with such desire that he tore the mast out of the deck and tried to jump overboard. Fortunately, however, his comrades were able to subdue him until the ship was safely past. It is said that the thwarted Sirens threw themselves off their rocks and drowned themselves. According to other legends, however, their

voices did not die with them, but still abide upon certain land winds in certain seasons and still call sailors to death by drowning.

Sisyphus (SIHS ih fuhs): King of Corinth. He earned the enmity of Zeus by informing an angry father that the king of the gods had carried off his daughter, Aegina, who was to become great-grandmother to Achilles. Zeus decided that Sisyphus must die, but did not wish to honor him by sending Hermes to conduct him to Tartarus. He sent a lesser messenger, Thanatos, whose name means “death.” However, Sisyphus, a man of infinite resource and courage, succeeded in binding Thanatos in chains, and returned calmly to take his place among the living. After some time Thanatos was released and sent again to Sisyphus. This time, however, Sisyphus made another plan. He instructed his wife to omit any funeral rites and to offer none of the special gifts to Persephone which were supposed to placate that goddess of the underworld and ease the passage of the one who had died. Persephone, thus, had no knowledge of Sisyphus’ death and, when confronted by him, was persuaded that he had been conducted to Tartarus by mistake. She ordered him to be freed. So Sisyphus again escaped Tartarus and resumed his life. Now, Zeus was determined that there should be no third escape. Sisyphus was taken again to Tartarus under strong guard and his impiety was blazoned forth for all to know. Once in Tartarus he was condemned to a unique punishment: to roll a huge rock up a hill; just as the summit is reached, the rock rolls back, and he must resume his task

at the bottom of the hill. He was sentenced to roll this stone up the hill through eternity. In another legend, Sisyphus appears as the father of Odysseus. Indeed, the great voyager displayed the same kind of cunning and resourcefulness but never bent them to impious deed.

Smyrna (SMUR nuh): Also called Myrrha; princess of Phoenicia, who conceived a passion for her father, Cinyaras, and made him drunk enough to forget that she was his daughter. When she became pregnant he, maddened by the horror of incest, pursued her into the forest, where he killed her with his axe. She was changed into a myrrh tree and Adonis was born from the tree in the odor of myrrh. See [Adonis](#).

Somnus (SAHM nuhs): Roman name for Hypnos, god of sleep. See [Hypnos](#).

Sphinx (SFIHING'Kx): A monster who resembled a winged lion with a maiden's face and a serpent's tail. She entered the legend of Oedipus, having been sent by Hera to ravage Thebes. She crouched upon the roadway and devoured every traveler who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus did answer the riddle, then killed her. An admiring populace made him king of Thebes — an honor he would have done well to decline. See [Oedipus](#).

Stentor (STEHN tor): A brass-voiced warrior whose war cry was louder than the shout of sixty men, and struck terror into his

foes. However, he was rash enough to challenge Hermes, the herald-god, to a shouting match. Hermes borrowed noises from his brother gods: wind-screach from Aeolus; breaker-crash from Poseidon; weapon-clash from Ares; volcanic rumbling from Hephaestus; they all entered his voice and he easily out-shouted Stentor who, in humiliation, fell on his own sword and entered silence. We derive our word “stentorian,” meaning “loud, reverberating,” from the name *Stentor*.

Sthenelos (STHEHN uh luhs): Son of a hero and father of a coward. His father was Perseus, first king of Mycenae; his son was Eurystheus, third king of Mycenae, and Heracles’ taskmaster. Eurystheus was frightened out of his wits by his formidable servant, hiding in a brass jar buried in a pit whenever Heracles approached. Sthenelos, however, was a brave man, a good warrior, and a wise king.

Stymphalian Birds (stihm FAY lih uhn bur’dz): Except for a possible dragon or two, these were the most terrible winged creatures in the world. They were like giant cranes in appearance, with long, lancing, iron beaks that could pierce armor, shield, or helmet. They ate everything in sight — other birds, cattle, goats — but their favorite food was man. To rid the earth of these birds was Heracles’ sixth labor. The task was made more difficult by the fact that the birds inhabited a marshland hill of mud that sucked like quicksand. In preparation for his labor, Heracles borrowed a huge

rattle from Hephaestus, a rattle with a terrible brassy sound. (It was used by the smith-god to wake the Cyclopes from their slumbers so they could resume work at the forge; thus, it had to be loud enough to be heard over the crash of sledge on anvil and the rumbling of avalanche and volcano.) Heracles stood on the edge of the marsh shaking the rattle. The Stymphalian Birds were startled by this shattering clangor and rose in a great flock. There was no way for Heracles to pursue them in the air; he had to tempt them down. He stood there on the marsh bank and bared his chest. One by one these enormous birds swooped at him and tried to drive their armor-piercing beaks through his chest. Their beaks bent on that massive breastbone. One by one, as they swooped down and stabbed at his chest, he seized and strangled them, until there were none of them left alive. The nature of this task wearied even Heracles. His chest was so bruised he had to rest several days before embarking on his seventh labor, which was to capture the Cretan Bull.

Styx (STIK'X): Known chiefly as the great river that bordered Tartarus and across which Charon ferried the dead. Styx was originally the name of the Titaness who became the presiding deity of the river. Zeus had a special fondness for this daughter of Uranus and Gaia. When the Titans attacked him, she deserted her brothers and came to his aid. When asked what favor she wished, she claimed the greatest river of Tartarus as her own, asking that the most sacred oaths be solemnized by the waters of her river. And so,

when any god made an exceptionally important vow, the messenger-goddess, Iris, flew down to Tartarus and returned with a vial of water from the Styx. Whoever made the oath drank of this water and the oath became inviolate. If the oath was broken, he who had sworn falsely was thrust into a deep swoon for nine years. If, after recovering from that swoon, he still failed to abide by the oath, he was expelled from the company of the Olympians forever.

Syrinx (SIHR ingkx): Nymph pursued by Pan. Changed into a river-reed, she inspired him to make the first Panpipes. See [Pan](#).

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Talaria (tuh LAY rih uh): Literally “ankle-wings,” the word came to mean the winged sandals worn by the messenger-gods, Hermes and Iris. Perseus borrowed them from Hermes so that he might fly about the world on his hero-tasks.

Talos (TAY luhs): A nephew of Daedalus who invented the compass and the saw before he was twelve years old. But his precocity cost him his life. Daedalus, who was indisputably the master artificer of ancient times, grew so envious of the inventive genius displayed by the lad that he decided to curtail that career. He led the boy to the edge of a cliff and pushed him off. Some say he pushed him off the roof of Athena’s temple. In any case, Daedalus earned the displeasure of the goddess and had to flee Athens. See [Daedalus](#); [Polycaste](#).

Talus (TAY luhs): A living statue cast in bronze by Hephaestus at the request of Zeus, who wished an indestructible sentry for the island of Crete, where he had left Europa and her three sons. Although Talus was made of bronze, he had to be endowed with life so he might pursue his duties with some intelligence. Hephaestus ran a single vein down his body from throat to ankle where flowed the single stream of blood that gave him the life he needed. The vein was stoppered with a single

bronze pin at the ankle. There was never a sentinel like Talus. Tall as a tree, tireless, invulnerable to weapons, and completely obedient to the orders given by Zeus, he circled the island three times a day. Whenever a ship approached he would hurl huge boulders at it, driving it off. Then the Argonauts came; they wished to land upon Crete to take on food and water. But Talus pelted them with boulders and they could not approach. Then Medea came onto the deck, playing her lyre and singing sweet sorcerous songs. She cast so strong a drowse upon the summer air that even the man of bronze fell under its influence. He went fast asleep, the first time he had ever slept. Thereupon, the Argonauts landed. Medea drew out the bronze pin that stopped Talus' single vein. His blood ran out at the ankle and the bronze sentinel became a heap of scrap metal. The Argonauts took on supplies and departed. Medea, it is said, kept the bronze pin for her hair.

Talthybios (tuhl THY bih uhs): A Mycenaen noble; confidential agent of Agamemnon and thus entrusted with some of the most unsavory errands in mythology. He brought Iphigenia to Aulis to be sacrificed. He was sent by his king to fetch the beautiful slave-girl Briseis, from the tent of Achilles, thus sparking the feud that almost cost the Greeks their victory. After the sack of Troy he was given the task of telling various Trojan widows which Greeks they would have to serve as slaves. It was he who told Andromache that she would become the concubine of Neoptolemus. His most burdensome assignment was to try to persuade Cassandra to stop

her wild ravings and go off peaceably with Agamemnon, who had claimed her. Apparently, however, years of this kind of work did not completely corrupt him — he was still capable of one kindly and courageous deed. On that night of blood in the royal castle of Mycenae when he saw Agamemnon cut down before his eyes, he risked his life to help Electra spirit the young Orestes out of the country before the child could be hunted down and murdered by Aegisthus.

Tantalus (TAN tuh luhs): Disobedient son of Zeus; and founder of the most doom-ridden family in mythology. He made it his business to offend his father in every way he could. Although a mortal, he was admitted to the company of the gods by virtue of being the son of Zeus. He repaid their hospitality by stealing nectar and ambrosia — specifically reserved for divine consumption — and selling it to mortals. Also, it was said, he told secrets he had heard at the banquet table on Olympus, and what he had not heard he made up. Zeus was puzzled and incensed by this behavior but kept his patience until Tantalus displayed the stupendous depths of his wickedness: He invited Zeus for dinner, killed his son, Pelops, roasted him, and served him up to Zeus as a saddle of mutton. Zeus recognized the flesh as human. He resurrected his grandchild and killed Tantalus. But he was not satisfied with just killing so dreadful a criminal — he wished him to suffer throughout eternity. This was the punishment: Tantalus was denied food and drink until he was wild with hunger and parched with thirst. Then he was

made to stand in a stream of crystal water under apple trees whose boughs, laden with delicious fruit, bent invitingly toward him. But when he tried to reach for an apple, the boughs swayed gently away, keeping their fruit just out of reach, and he could never eat. But worst of all was thirst: When he bent to drink from the crystal pool, the waters shrank away from his lips and he could not drink a drop. There he stood, waist-deep, in his crystal pool under the apple trees, eternally reaching for the fruit, eternally stooping to drink, and eternally denied. We derive our word “tantalize” from his name.

Tartarus (TAHR tuh ruhs): Hades’ kingdom; the land of the dead. See [*Hades*](#).

Teiresias (tih REE sih uhs): A Theban prophet whose oracular aptitudes were unequalled and whose counsels were heeded and ignored by several generations of kings, adventurers, and heroes — among them, Heracles, Oedipus, and Odysseus. He was a man of many afflictions. He went blind, or was blinded by an angry god — the legends differ. And, for most of his adult life, he alternated between being a man and a woman — never hermaphroditic, but a complete man at one time, a complete woman at another. These afflictions, however, seemed to sharpen his perceptions. Denied the use of his eyes, he learned the language of birds, who are great gossips and told him many things he would not have learned otherwise. Also, having lived as both wife and husband, he had

dimensions of experience that no one else could rival. In one legend, he was the scapegoat of a quarrel between Zeus and Hera as to who derives the most pleasure from love — male or female. They appealed to Teiresias, who had been both. He asserted without hesitation that the female derived ten times as much pleasure as the male. Hera flew into a rage and blinded him. However, this is only one of the legends that surround this remarkable soothsayer. His powers of foretelling the future and, more significantly perhaps, of divining the complexities of human nature were rivaled only by Cassandra, who also was punished for her gifts.

Telamon (TEHL uh muhn): Brother of Peleus; uncle of Achilles; and father of Ajax, who, next to Achilles, was the most formidable warrior in the Greek forces. In his younger days, Telamon had accompanied his hero-brother, Peleus, on most of his adventures and was accounted a hero himself. He hunted the Calydonian Boar; he journeyed with Jason on the Argos; he helped Heracles defeat Laomedon, false king of Troy. For this last he received Priam's sister, Hesione, as part of the booty. He took her back to Salamis and made her his second wife. She bore him another son, Teucer, half-brother to Ajax, who also fought very bravely at Troy.

Telegonus (tee LEHG oh nuhs): Son of Odysseus and Circe who became the living fulfillment of one of the prophecies of

Teiresias. The blind oracle had predicted that Odysseus would be killed by his own son and that death would come to him from the sea. Now, Telegonus, voyaging on the Inner Sea, was driven off course by a storm and landed on the coast of Ithaca without knowing where he was. His crew was hungry and began to drive off some cattle. Odysseus saw strangers taking his cattle and rode out to stop them. There was a skirmish. Telegonus killed the old hero with a spear whose head was the spine of a sting-ray. Thus, the prophecy of Teiresias came true. Later legends say that Telegonus married his father's widow, Penelope, and that their son was Italus — from whom Italy takes its name.

Telemachus (tee LEHM uh kuhs): Loving and loyal son of Odysseus by Penelope. His search for his lost father is one of the most touching episodes in the legend of Odysseus. And when his father finally returned to Ithaca, the youth served Odysseus in every way possible, preparing an assault against the suitors, risking his life time after time as he and his father drove off the interlopers. There is an odd symmetry to a later legend: After the death of Odysseus, and after Telegonus, son of Circe, had married Penelope, it is said that Telemachus sailed to Circe's island and married her, thus completing the odd posthumous quadrangle. The son of Circe and Telemachus was named Latinus. With his cousin, Italus, he traveled westward to join Aeneas in creating the Roman nation. According to other legends, Telemachus married Nausicaa, the young princess of Phaeacia, who had also loved Odysseus. In all

these tales, however, the sons of Odysseus seem to live in the shadow of the great voyager, able to love and marry only women their father had loved.

Telesphorus (tuh LEHS fuh ruhs): A minor deity appointed to assist Asclepius, the master healer. Telesphorus would drain himself of strength each day and lend his strength to convalescents to carry them through the night, always the most dangerous time for those dangerously ill. Each morning his strength renewed itself and he was ready for that day's task.

Terpsichore (turp SIHK oh ree): Lovely light-footed goddess who is the muse of dancing. She wore a wreath of laurels and carried a lyre. It is said she could run over a meadow without bending a blade of grass and that her sisters had to cry warning before one of her leaps, lest hunters, mistaking her for a bird, launched their arrows at her.

Tethys (TEE thihs): A Titaness; wife of Oceanus; and mother of rivers. She was also the mother of those three thousand lovely sea-nymphs called *the* Oceanids.

Teucer (TOO sur): Son of Telamon and Hesione; half-brother of Ajax; and an archer of uncanny skill. His father, Telamon, banned him from Salamis for life after Ajax had committed suicide in a rage over being deprived of Achilles' armor. Telamon felt that

Teucer could have prevented his brother from taking his own life and he never forgave the young man. See [Telamon](#).

Thalia (thuh LY uh): Lady of Masks; muse of comedy. Her name means “festivity,” and wherever she went laughter and joy went with her.

Thamyris (THAM ih rihs): A great musician; only rival of Orpheus. But he grew arrogant and challenged the Muses to a contest. Such was his pride, it is said, that he was unable to bear defeat. When he lost the competition he cried his eyes out and refused to touch his lyre again.

Thea (THEE uh): A deity out of the eldest legends; called the “goddess of light.” She married her brother, Hyperion, god of light. Their children were Helios, Selene, and Eos — or the sun, the moon, and the dawn.

Themis (THEE mihs): Daughter of Uranus and Gaia, and most powerful of the Titanesses. A consort of Zeus and much esteemed by him, she was known as the “goddess of necessity.” She became the mother of the Fates and the Hours.

Thersander (thur SAN dur): Son of Polyneices; leader of the “Epigoni,” those sons of the champions who had fallen in the campaign called the Seven Against Thebes. A generation after his father’s death, Thersander led these young men in a second

campaign against Thebes. This one was successful. The city fell and Thersander seized the throne that had belonged to his grandfather, Oedipus.

Thersites (thur SY teez): Worst troublemaker among the Greeks who fought at Troy. Bandy-legged, warp-headed, his chief pleasure was to revile his leaders and jeer at heroes. He jeered once too often, however, when he spied Achilles weeping over the corpse of Penthisilea. Achilles smote him so terrible a blow with his fist that he fell lifeless on the spot. See [Penthisilea](#).

Theseus (THEE see uhs; THEE soos): Son of Aegeus and Aethra, but some say that Poseidon was his actual father. He was one of the seven great Greek heroes. Moving from peril to peril all his life, he nevertheless lived to a good old age and his career intersected that of Heracles, Oedipus, Jason, Castor, Pollux, Helen, Atalanta, and Peleus. He hunted the Calydonian Boar, was an Argonaut, and reigned as king of Athens for many years, breaking the sea power of Crete, and making his own kingdom great beyond all others. The story of his life is told in three separate myth cycles. The first series of tales, full of youth and charm and simple adventure, relate his journey from Troezen to Athens. This was the worst stretch of road in that part of the world, infested by a lethal band of robbers. These men chopped off travelers' hands and feet, tore them apart on springing trees, and fed them to giant turtles or, when too much in a hurry for such elaborate homicides, simply

clubbed them to death. Now, Theseus had been warned of these perils and had been advised to take the sea route to Athens. But he was young and rash. Valuing adventure more than safe arrival, he set off on the mountain road. One by one he encountered and defeated these bandits. His specific encounter with each is described under the names of the brigands involved: Sciron, Sinis, Procrustes, etc. Reaching Athens, he was accepted by his father, king Aegeus, as heir to the throne and began his next series of adventures — the Cretan cycle of the Theseus myth. For Theseus insisted on going to Crete as one of the martyred group of Athenian youths whom Aegeus had to send each year to King Minos. Because Athens had been defeated in a war with Crete the city had to pay an annual tribute of six of their most beautiful youths and six of their most beautiful maidens. These youths were doomed. When they reached Gnosso, they were ushered into the labyrinth where the Minotaur was waiting to devour them. See [Minotaur](#). This labyrinth, constructed by Daedalus, was a prison-maze in the castle garden; to escape from it was impossible. Here were penned the Minotaur and his mad mother, Pasiphae. However, Ariadne, daughter of Minos, had fallen in love with Theseus and resolved to help him. She owned a magical ball of thread, also contrived by Daedalus. This thread could unwind itself, turn corners, mark paths, then reel itself up again. With this ball of thread Ariadne was able to guide Theseus to the lair of the Minotaur, where he took the monster by surprise and killed him. Then Ariadne led Theseus out

of the maze and fled with him when he rescued his comrades and embarked for Athens. See [Ariadne](#). There is a third cycle of Theseus tales, not so sequential as the first two, but relating episodes in his long career. In this cycle he eloped with Antiope, queen of the Amazons, who bore him Hippolytus. He later married Phaedre, younger sister of Ariadne. Incensed by her against his son, Hippolytus, he killed the youth. See [Phaedre](#); [Hippolytus](#). Then, with his dear friend, Peirithous, Theseus embarked on a series of daring exploits to fulfill a mutual pledge they had made, each to marry a daughter of Zeus. They kidnapped Helen. When she was reclaimed by her brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, they then invaded Tartarus to abduct Persephone. This raid failed. They were imprisoned in Tartarus and lay shackled there, undergoing fiendish torment, until rescued by Heracles. See [Peirithous](#). Among the lesser legends of Theseus are the help he gave Oedipus, his assault against Thebes to depose Creon, and his expulsion of Medea from the court of Athens. He found time to be a wise king during all these adventures. After his death, he was accorded semi-divine honors by the Athenians. His personality was so powerful that at one point he emerges from myth into history. It was said that at the battle of Marathon when the outnumbered Greeks were losing, a bronze statue of Theseus led them on a charge that broke the Persian ranks and gained a victory that shifted the balance of power from east to west for the next three thousand years.

Thessalus (THEHS uh luhs): Son of Jason and Medea; he was the first king of a province in northern Greece, which, in his honor, was later called Thessaly.

Thetis (THEE tihs): Loveliest of the daughters of Oceanus and Doris. She was pursued incessantly by Poseidon who offered her marriage. Although she did not fancy Poseidon, she was somewhat tempted by the notion of becoming queen of the sea. However, an oracle told Poseidon that any son born of Thetis would be greater than his father. Poseidon withdrew his offer and married Amphitrite. Thetis, thereupon, fell in love with Peleus, greatest warrior of his day. The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was the most lavish fête ever held on Olympus. It was there that Eris came, uninvited, bringing the most mischievous gift in history — the golden apple which bore the seeds of the Trojan War. See [Apple of Discord](#). Thetis had a son and he fulfilled the prophecy. He was Achilles — greater than his father, indeed, the greatest fighting man in all mythology, except for Heracles, who was more than mortal. Thetis was a most tender mother to Achilles throughout his brief and violent career. Failing in her effort to hide him from the war at the court of Sciros, she visited him frequently on the field. She comforted him during his suicidal mood after the death of his friend, Patroclus. She persuaded Hephaestus to make him a new suit of golden armor so that he might venture, gorgeously attired, against the Trojans the next day. And, later that day, she persuaded Hephaestus to hurl red-hot boulders into the river Scamander which

was trying to drown her son. After the death of Achilles, she demanded his soul from Hades. Raising an island from the sea, the White Isle, she placed Achilles on it, providing him with Patroclus and Polyxena for company. Later, it is said, when her husband, Peleus, died — as mortals must — she reclaimed his shade and placed it with that of his son on the White Isle, which she visited daily.

Thoas (THOH uhs): Son of Ariadne and Dionysus. He became king of Lemnos, a very troubled island. During his reign, the women of Lemnos rebelled against their husbands, killed them all — and would have killed the king also had not his daughter, Hypsipyle, spirited him aboard a ship and bade him sail for his life.

Thyestes (THY ehs teez): Brother of Atreus, he involuntarily fed upon his own children whom Atreus had slaughtered, cooked, and served up to him at a banquet. See [Atreus](#). Thyestes had earned his brother's displeasure by seducing his wife, Aerope, but the banquet was supposed to have been one of reconciliation. This horrible meal is a key episode in the tale of the house of Atreus, which had been founded by the arch-criminal Tantalus, grandfather of Thyestes. A curse was fastened upon this family. They went from doom to doom. The descendants of Atreus were all to suffer for his foul crime: Agamemnon, Iphigenia, Orestes, Menelaus. Only in the final years of the hard-earned serenity and wisdom of the matricidal Orestes did the curse burn itself out. See [Orestes](#).

Thyrsus (THUR suhs): Vine-twined staff, tipped with pine cone, brandished by the revelers who followed Dionysus. Later it was believed that the staff had become sacred to Dionysus and imbued with some of his potency; when planted it would take root, bear flowers and fruit.

Titans (TY tuhnz): The first brood of divine creatures produced by the marriage of Uranus and Gaia. Cronus and Rhea were the youngest of the Titans, according to some legends. They became the parents of Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Demeter, Hera, and Hestia. When Zeus deposed Cronus, he was attacked by his uncles, the Titans, and they engaged in a heaven-shaking, earth-quaking struggle until the young Olympian finally prevailed. Attributes of the various Titans are described under their own names: Atlas, Prometheus, Oceanus, Tethys, etc.

Tithonus (tih THOH nuhs): Son of Laomedon; elder brother of Priam. This prince of Troy was radiantly handsome. Eos fell in love with him and bore him away to her eastern palace. She begged Zeus to make him immortal so that he might be her consort forever, but she neglected to ask for eternal youth. After fifty years or so he became old and decrepit while the dawn-goddess was as beautiful as ever. He could not bear this contrast and begged Eos to kill him. But she could not, for he was immortal. Therefore, she changed him into a grasshopper whose dry chirping is often heard when dawn begins to ride the sky.

Tityus (TIHT ih uhs): One of the giant sons of Gaia. He was dispatched to help the Python hunt Leto, whom Hera hated with an unassuageable hatred. Later he was killed by Leto's children, Apollo and Artemis, who persuaded their uncle, Hades, to place the giant in a craggy corner of Tartarus where vultures tore at his liver through eternity, the same punishment that Zeus meted out to Prometheus for a much worse reason.

Triptolemus (trihp TAHL uh muhs): A prince of Eleusis who became a special favorite of Demeter. It is said that he was the first to tell Demeter that it was Hades who had abducted Persephone, thus enabling her to reclaim her daughter with at least partial success. Demeter felt enormously indebted to Triptolemus. She appointed him worldwide envoy of agriculture, equipping him with a chariot drawn by winged dragons upon which he could fly through the air, dropping seed on all the barren places of earth. Where men were too primitive to know the use of the plough, he would descend and teach them. He was also a great protector of animals and warned against needless slaughter. Demeter remembered him after his death. She caused shrines to be erected in his honor and chose his homeland of Eleusis to be the site of her Great Mysteries.

Triton (TRY tuhn): Misshapen prince of the sea; son of Poseidon and Amphitrite. He had a dolphin's tail, green hair, green beard, and scales and gills. He was of kindly disposition and often

flew in the wrack of Poseidon's storms, brandishing his smaller trident, and calming the waters.

Troilus (TROH uh luhs): Youngest of Priam's warrior sons. He fought with exceeding gallantry against the Greeks, but fell fatally in love with the beautiful Chryseis, a captive of the Greeks who had been returned to Troy. Chryseis betrayed Troilus in a very heartless way. She extracted military secrets from him and then took them as a love-offering to Diomedes, the Greek chieftain with whom she had fallen in love during her captivity. Troilus became so despondent over her treachery that he lost his zest for fighting and fell easy victim to Achilles. It was even said that he sought Achilles in single combat as an honorable means of suicide.

Trophonius and Agamedes (troh FOH nih uhs) (ag uh MEE deez): Sons of Apollo; said to be the greatest architects and builders of ancient times. They built Apollo's temple at Delphi, a great temple to Poseidon, and many other splendid temples and edifices. After lifetimes of such fruitful labors, they asked their father, Apollo, what reward they might expect. He told them he would give them the greatest gift within his power and bade them enjoy themselves as much as possible for the next six days; on the seventh day they would receive their reward. For six days they devoted themselves to pleasure; on the seventh day Apollo cast a sleep upon them. As they lay asleep, he painlessly took their lives.

A peaceful death, in Apollo's opinion, was the greatest gift he had to bestow.

Tros (TROHS): Grandson of Dardanus; and father of Ilus, who founded Troy. King Ilus, who loved and honored his father, named the city in his memory. Tros was also the father of Ganymede, who became the cup-bearer to the gods. See [Ganymede](#).

Tyche (TY kee): Sister of Nemesis and capricious assistant to the Fates. See [Nemesis](#).

Tydeus (TY doos; THID ee uhs): Father of the great warrior Diomedes, and a fearsome fighting man himself. He campaigned with Polyneices in the war of the Seven Against Thebes. Sent as a herald to demand the surrender of the city, he was ambushed by fifty Thebans and killed forty-nine of them. He finally fell in this campaign, but his son, Diomedes, who, during the Trojan War defeated Ares in single combat, amply upheld his father's reputation. See [Diomedes](#).

Tyndareus (tihh DAY ree uhs): King of Sparta; husband of Leda; and foster-father of Helen and Polydeuces, who had been sired by Zeus. Leda presented her husband with two children of his own, Castor and Clytemnestra. It was Tyndareus who, following the advice of Odysseus, persuaded the suitors of Helen to pledge themselves by the most solemn vows to abide by his choice of a

husband for her and to go to the aid of that husband if anyone abducted Helen. This pledge, of course, became one of the contributing causes of the Trojan War. See [Helen](#).

Typhon (TY fuhn): Youngest and most powerful of the Giants born to Uranus and Gaia. After Zeus had defeated the Titans and sent them into perpetual exile, the Giants, led by Porphyron, attacked the Olympians. See [Porphyron](#). According to one legend, Typhon almost won the war unaided in its opening skirmish. He had no need to scale the piled up mountains of Pelion and Ossa to reach Olympus; he himself was as tall as a mountain. When he attacked, the gods fled. And, indeed, so terrible a creature as Typhon had never been seen upon earth, under earth, in the skies, or in the yawning gulfs of Chaos. From the great plateau of his shoulders sprouted the scaly stalks of a hundred necks and on each of these necks was a dragon's head each of whose mouths belched flame. When he attacked, the gods fled. Zeus alone held his ground. He seized Zeus and hamstrung him, shackling him hand and foot and penning him in a cave — first, however, cutting off one of his own heads and setting that dragon before the entrance of the cave as a sentinel. There Zeus remained during the opening stages of the battle, until Heracles appeared and routed the Giants. Hermes and Pan raced to the cave where Hermes killed the dragon and Pan unshackled Zeus. Earlier, Typhon had married Echidne, a female monster, and sired a litter of frightful creatures including Cerberus, Ladon, the Chimaera, and the Sphinx. All the whirlpools

that swallow ships were also said to have been his children. From his name we derive our word “typhoon.”

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U

Ulysses (u LIHS eez): Roman name for Odysseus. See [Odysseus](#).

Urania (u RAY nih uh): Muse of astronomy and astrology, and the mother of two great musicians — Linus, the son of Apollo (and tutor of Heracles, who was killed by his impatient pupil), and Hymnaeus, daughter of Dionysus. As Muse of astrology, she was concerned with the future. Sibyls, oracles, soothsayers, and prophets came to her for inspiration. In one hand she carried a globe, in the other a pair of compasses.

Uranus (U ruh nuhs; u RAY nuhs): Son of Gaia; father of Cronus. His name means king of the mountain and he was the ancestor of the gods. He was born of Mother Earth — whom he later wed, siring the Giants, the Cyclopes, the Titans — and was killed by Cronus, youngest of the Titans and father of the gods. He was slain by a stone sickle sharpened for Cronus by Mother Earth who had quarreled with her high-riding husband and preferred her son. Uranus' body was cut into seven pieces and flung into each of the seven seas. His mighty white-bearded head was flung into that branch of the ocean-stream which can be seen from Olympus. But before it sank the head spoke, calling up to Cronus: "You murder me now and steal my throne. But know this. A son of yours shall do

to you as you have done to me.” This prophecy of the butchered god was to come true. His grandson, Zeus, deposed Cronus and became king of the gods.

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V

Venus (VEE nuhs): Roman name for Aphrodite, goddess of love. See [Aphrodite](#).

Vesta (VEHS tuh): Roman name for Hestia, goddess of the hearth, and patroness of marriage. See [Hestia](#).

Vulcan (VUHL kuhn): Roman name for Hephaestus, the smith-god; patron of artisans and inventors. He used a mountain as his smithy; the fires of the mountain tempered his metals. We derive our word “volcano” from the Roman form of his name. See [Hephaestus](#).

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X

Xanthus (ZAN thuhs): TWIN stallion to Balius, one of the magical steeds owned by Achilles. They spoke Greek and, in the heat of battle, would unyoke themselves from their chariot and fight at Achilles' side. It is said they wept great tears when informed of his assassination by Paris, waived their immortality, and insisted on casting themselves on his funeral pyre, so that they might never serve another master. See [Balius](#).

Xuthus (ZOO thus): Brother of Hellen and Dorus, and one of the patriarchs of the Hellenic tribes. His sons were Achaeus and Ion whose descendants formed the two last of those tribal confederations which invaded the Peloponnese and conquered the original inhabitants, colonizing the islands of the Inner Sea and becoming the greatest people of the ancient world. The overall name for these tribes was "Hellenes," but the main branches were the Dorians, the Ionians, and the Achaeans. See [Hellen](#).

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Z

Zephyrus (ZEHF ur uhs): The West Wind. He was the kindest of the four brothers. Like all the winds, he was the son of the Dawn and his father was Astreus. The West Wind came in the springtime. He melted snow. He brought warm rain. And the waters of the melting snow and the warm rain waters sank into the earth and brought up flowers and trees and all the crops that fed mankind. According to one legend, he sired Achilles' marvelous stallions, Balius and Xanthus; their mother was the Harpy, Podarge. In another legend, he married Chloris, a beautiful nymph whom the Romans called "Flora," and was a flower deity. As a wedding gift Zephyrus planted a garden for Chloris, and this garden bloomed all *the* year around, bearing the loveliest of flowers and fruit.

Zetes (ZEE teez): An Argonaut; twin brother of Calais. See [Calais](#).

Zethus (ZEE thuhs): Son of Zeus and Antiope who built the walls of Thebes. This is a legend out of very ancient times when Thebes was still called Cadmea. Zethus, a man of enormous strength, and his brother, Amphion, had a blood feud with Lycus, king of Cadmea, because he had mistreated and abandoned their mother. They killed Lycus with their swords and tied his wife, Dirce, to the tail of a bull, then spurred the bull over rough ground,

causing Dirce to be dragged to her death. It was a cruel death, but she had tormented their mother in a fiendish way. Zethus and Amphion then shared the kingship of Cadmea. But it was an unprotected city. Zethus dragged huge boulders into place, building a wall around the city. Amphion, a master musician, helped in his own way. When the boulders were too large for Zethus, Amphion played his lyre — making the rocks dance into place. Zethus married the nymph Thebe, and changed the name of the city in her honor.

Zeus (ZOOS): Son of Cronus and Rhea. King of the gods. He was all-powerful. Each of the lesser gods held tenure by his consent. But he chose sky and mountaintop as his special realm. His name meant “bright sky.” He married Hera, his elder sister, and honored her beyond all others as queen of the gods. But he had many consorts. He ranged heaven and earth and the depths of the sea for his many women, swiftly changing his shape to escape Hera’s vigilance. He appeared to Europa as a bull, Leda as a swan, Leto as a partridge, Danae as a shower of gold, and to Alcmene as her own husband. His wooing was as irresistible as nature itself, his fertility nature’s bounty. He bred god, demigod, and hero on those favored with his attentions. King of sky and mountaintop, ruler of god and man, he was father Zeus, omnipotent. He sat on his throne on Olympus under a canopy of clouds, grasping the lightning as his sceptre, and held court among the gods. On certain days of the year he dispensed justice. He heard pleas and mediated quarrels. His

opinions were wise and serene, but inflexible; there was no appeal. His will was man's law, his caprice was destiny; the fate of nations hung on his whim. He was sometimes defied — as in the case of Prometheus, who ignored his edict and gave fire to man. He was also sometimes outwitted — by Hera, especially. But his power was great enough to absorb these setbacks and his high dignity was never impaired. In his footfall was thunder. His smile was prosperity, his wrath, catastrophe. Oak and eagle were sacred to him. In Roman mythology, Zeus was known as Jupiter.

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BERNARD EVSLIN

HERCULES



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Hercules

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For GALEAL eldest grandson and youngest reader

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Those in the Book

Humans

HERCULES Prince of Thebes, strongest man in the world

AMPHITRYON His father

ALCMENE His mother

IPHICLES His twin brother

EURYSTHEUS A king and the hero's taskmaster

COPREUS Doer of dirty jobs for King Eurystheus

IOLE A brave girl

DIENERA A princess who smiles sweetly and weeps prettily

AUGEAS A fat and filthy cattle thief

NESSUS A horseman of Calydon

TYRESIAS A blind seer

Half-humans

CHIRON A centaur who tutored Hercules

NEREUS The other half was lobster

Gods

HERA Queen of the Gods, who hates Hercules

ZEUS King of the Gods

HADES Lord of the Dead

POSEIDON God of the Sea

ARES God of War

ATHENE Goddess of Wisdom

ATLAS A Titan, cousin to the gods

Monsters

THE NEMEAN LION An elephant-sized beast with ivory teeth

THE HYDRA A hundred-headed reptile, very poisonous

GERYON A three-bodied ogre

SPEAR-BIRDS Huge winged birds with spear beaks and terrible appetites

RIVER-DEMON Also appearing as giant snapping turtle and horned fish

OCTOPUS OF NER Giant eight-armed sea creature that guards the island of Ner

LADON Enormous serpent, guardian of the golden apples

ANTEUS The earth-giant

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THE TWINS

ONE MORNING, LONG LONG AGO, when the world was new, all the bells in Thebes rang at once. People rushed out of their houses, shouting and laughing, and began to dance in the streets of the marble city. For the bells were announcing that their tall beautiful princess had given birth to a boy. The old king and the prince and all the court paraded to the temple to thank Zeus for their new little prince.

Suddenly, the bells stopped ringing. People stopped dancing. A terrible whisper sped from mouth to ear. The princess was still in labor; another baby was coming.

Why was this such dreadful news? What's wrong with twins? Everything—if they're both heirs to a kingdom. This had happened before in another country close by. Both twins had claimed the crown, starting a bloody civil war.

So Prince Amphitryon stayed in the temple after the others had left. He stretched his arms to the altar and prayed that the second twin would be a girl.

A messenger rushed up the temple steps just as the prince was coming down. The man fell on his knees, stuttering, so frightened he could hardly speak. And the prince knew that his wife had given birth to a second son and that the messenger was afraid of being killed on the spot for bringing bad news.

But Amphitryon, who was very fierce in battle, was a kindly man at heart. He dismissed the messenger and walked slowly back to the castle. Since he was a real leader who did everything possible to drive fear from the hearts of his people, he forced himself to smile as he passed through the crowd. He waved cheerfully, as if he had received the best news in the world. Seeing him this way, the people cast off their gloom and milled about the streets again.

He was still trying his best to look cheerful when he entered the chamber of the princess—where he received another surprise. One baby was three times as big as his brother and different in other ways. He wasn't bald and squinched and squally like most infants, but had a nimbus of red-gold hair and huge gray eyes and lay there smiling to himself. The prince looked at him in wonder. The princess was radiant! She was brimming with joy. Seeing this, the prince stopped pretending; his joy became real. He swept Alcmene into his arms, and, since she was holding the twins, they were all in his arms, his wife and his two sons.

“We need another name!” cried Alcmene. “Hurry, think of one!”

The name they had already chosen was *Iphicles*, after a great-grandfather. And this they gave to the smaller twin, who had been born first.

“Oh, let us think of something splendid for the other one,” said Alcmene. “No ordinary name will do.”

They thought and thought, and finally named the larger twin *Hercules*, which means “earth’s glory.”

When they went out on the balcony that sunset to face the cheering mob, and Amphitryon held first one boy, then the other, into the red light of the falling sun, the people thought the names had been well chosen. And another whisper began to pass from mouth to ear. “That big one—he looks like he’s six months old. That’s no mortal child. His father must be a god.”

They meant to praise their new prince, but, as it happened, this was the worst thing they could have said. These words were to plunge young Hercules into dangers that no one had ever faced before, making him fight for his life against the most fearsome beasts and monsters and demons in that terrible magical world of long ago.

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THE SERPENTS

THE ANCIENT WORLD WAS LIKE OURS in some ways; there were always plenty of busybodies ready to pass on gossip, especially if it might cause trouble. And word soon came to Hera, queen of the gods, about what was being whispered in Thebes. “That son of Princess Alcmena ... he’s too big and beautiful for mortal child. He must be the son of a god.”

And jealous Hera immediately decided that this wonderful child’s father must be her own husband, Zeus. For, as king of the gods, he had always felt free to take as many wives as he liked. When she accused him of being Hercules’ father, he denied it; but she didn’t believe him. And as more and more tales came to her of how big and strong and brave the boy was growing, she decided to kill him.

“My brother Poseidon owes me a favor,” she said to herself. “I’ll get him to lend me a sea serpent or two.”

As it happened, that afternoon, Alcmena had told the boys’ nurse to take them into the castle garden to play. They crawled about the edge of the flower beds awhile and played with pebbles and pine cones, Iphicles always grabbing whatever his brother had. For he was a greedy, aggressive child, while Hercules, although so much bigger, was very gentle. He seemed to know that he had to be careful not to use his strength against his little twin.

The children were sleepy, and the nurse put them into their bull-hide cradles that were slung side by side between two trees. They slept. The cradles swung softly in the wind. Then something crawled into Hercules' sleep. He smiled. He didn't know what a dream was and thought everything he saw was real, sleeping or waking. And this worm was very handsome, not pink and slimy, but seeming to be made of hard smooth leather, blue and green, the colors melting into each other like water when the sun shines on it. What's more, the worm was growing very fast, sprouting out of itself. It was as big as he was and growing longer as he watched.

He opened his eyes. There, curled around the trunk of the tree, and stretching over the cradle to look down into his face, was a huge serpent. It unwrapped itself from the tree and slithered into the bull-hide cradle, rearing up from its own coils and dipping its wedge-shaped head to look at him out of flat black eyes.

Hercules smiled. He thought it was a big worm. He reached up to pat its face. The coils shifted and more snake came out and cast a loop about his waist. Hercules thought the snake was hugging him and gurgled with joy. The loop tightened. The snake was hugging him tightly, too tightly. He could hardly breathe.

Then he heard his brother screaming. Another serpent had come into the other cradle and was wrapping itself around his little twin.

Now, a child always finds it very hard to understand the first cruel thing that happens, and Hercules had been treated with great

love and kindness by his mother, his father, his nurse, and everyone in the castle. So although his breath was being squeezed out of him, and his ribs were about to crack, he didn't understand that evil had come into his life, that someone's jealous hatred had taken the form of a serpent that was trying to kill him. He couldn't realize it; he was much too young. His breath was like fire in his lungs, and the loops were squeezing tighter and tighter.

Then his brother's scream pierced the fog.

That scream was pure fear. It was a cry of terrified pain, and, coming from someone else, it made the fighting blood boil up in little Hercules for the first time; powers that had been sleeping in him began to awaken.

He drew a big breath, deep, deep. At first, the pain grew worse, because deep breathing made the coils tighter. But he tried to ignore the pain and kept drawing more air into his lungs. He felt the coils loosen a bit, enough for him to slip his hand out and grasp the serpent under the head. Then he began to squeeze.

Iphicles was still screaming. And that screaming, that terror, that pain, made Hercules' hand grow tighter and tighter. He felt the coils loosen as the snake began to strangle.

Still not quite knowing what he was doing, he climbed to his feet, balancing himself on the swinging cradle, and leaped into his brother's cradle. Iphicles' head was lolling now; the child had fainted. With his other hand, Hercules seized the serpent that was throttling his brother—caught it under the head in the same terrible

grip—and began to squeeze. And thinking that his brother was badly hurt, a wild grief made his left hand tighten and tighten, squeezing the breath out of this second snake.

The loops fell away from Iphicles, and young Hercules crouched in the cradle holding both serpents. He didn't want to kill them; he had never killed anything. But they couldn't live either. They were too evil. So he braided them about each other and tossed them out of the cradle. They fell to the ground still wound around each other. And the braided serpents, trying to untangle themselves, choked each other to death.

When the nurse ran up, shrieking, followed by the gardeners, followed by other servants of the castle, they saw two huge dead sea serpents still wound about each other. A curious bellowing sound came down out of the tree. They looked up and there in the cradle they saw the young Hercules, holding his brother in his arms, sobbing, trying to wake him up.

Iphicles had three broken ribs. The best healers were called to the castle. And the child came of strong warrior stock. He slowly mended, although forever afterward, he was afraid of snakes. As for young Hercules, his body was blotched with black and purple bruises, but the springy keg of his ribs was unharmed.

However, the child had changed. He seemed to have grown another six inches since his battle with the serpents. He was less a baby now, more a little boy. Nor did he always smile now. Sometimes his face would grow solemn, and a tiny furrow would

come between his gray eyes. And his mother knew the child was trying to understand the evil that had come crawling into his life, and that he couldn't do it. She was very proud of him and loved him more than ever, and so did his father. But they felt grief mixing with their pride. For dimly they knew that this child was truly different in some marvelous dangerous way, and that the difference was making him the target of some unknown wickedness—something more fearsome than a human enemy, something full of mysterious strength and surprise. They also knew that there was nothing much they could do to help their child except try to prepare him for what he would have to face.

Indeed, when Hera learned what had happened to the serpents she had sent, she was more certain than ever that the Theban gossip was true: that Hercules was the son of a god and that that god was Zeus. And her jealous fury grew and grew.

“How could a baby do that?” she said to herself. “Is Zeus shielding him in some magical way? Yes. He must be. But I've outwitted Zeus before, and I'll do it again. I'll get rid of that overgrown brat if it's the last thing I do.”

CHIRON

THE GODS GO BY a different time. Everything is larger for them. Their days are our years. So, while Hera did not forget Hercules, she had other grudges to settle. And when she turned her attention to him again a few weeks later—in her time—he was almost sixteen years old, an enormous youth, bigger and stronger than any man in Thebes and still growing.

He did not live at home with his parents and his brother but in the wild hills of Thessaly where he was being tutored by a very wise creature named Chiron, who was only half man, the other half being horse. That is, he had a horse's body up to the neck, but from that body sprouted the chest, head, and arms of a man. The tribe he belonged to was called the centaurs. They too were hated by Hera, who, indeed, had made them become the way they were.

Long before, Zeus had happened to admire a beautiful maiden of Thessaly and had been unwise enough to let Hera know. "Look at her," he said one day. "Down there in Thessaly—that girl running through the fields. Isn't she lovely? So long-legged and graceful, just like a filly ..."

Whereupon Hera cast a curse, saying, "Miserable girl, you shall become more like a filly than you wish." She said it under her breath so Zeus wouldn't hear. But curses, like prayers, don't have to be said loudly if you mean them, and as soon as Hera had said

this, the girl found herself running through the fields more swiftly than ever because she now had the body of a filly. Later, she became the mother of the tribe called centaurs.

But Zeus, pitying her and angry at what Hera had done, tried to turn the curse into a blessing. He gave the centaurs happy reckless natures, filling them with a love of wild places, and a special wisdom about trees and plants and animals.

And it was Chiron, wisest of all the centaurs, who became tutor to the young Hercules. The boy spent happy years with him in the hills of Thessaly.

Chiron taught him the ways of birds and beasts and of all the creatures who dwell in the mountain lakes and the swift little rivers. Taught him to read the weather in the dance of leaves and the flight of birds, and how to sniff the wind for rain. Taught him how to take honey from the hive without offending the bees, where to find nuts and berries, and which mushrooms were good to eat and which were poison. Wandering the woods and fields with Chiron, young Hercules learned how certain herbs cure fever and how to crush wild oregano leaves to make a paste that will stop bleeding. And how to pack a wound with spider web and moldy bread to make it heal clean. All very useful lore for someone who is going to have to do a great deal of fighting.

For sport, Hercules raced and wrestled the young centaurs. He lost the races, for they could run more swiftly than horses, but he always won the wrestling matches and finally had to give them up

because he had become too strong even for the powerful young centaurs. But he loved to wrestle and roamed the woods looking for bears. He grew very fond of the big furry animals because they enjoyed wrestling as much as he did, and he didn't have to worry about hurting them. But he kept growing and got stronger every day; he realized that the time was coming when he wouldn't even be able to wrestle bears. He had no way of knowing that this magically happy time in the hills of Thessaly was to end so suddenly.

For Hera had been thinking again about Hercules and was planning what to do. But this time, she planned more carefully.

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THE VISION

“I’LL HAVE TO GO SLOWLY,” said Hera to herself. “Zeus has made me promise not to harm any of his sons or daughters. I mean to break that promise, of course, but I don’t want to be caught. So, I can’t simply kill Hercules—who’s very hard to kill, anyway. I’ll have to trick him into arranging his own doom. Yes-s-s ... I’ll make him use his powers against himself. He’s warmhearted, hot-tempered, blazing with energy. And if I can’t use his own heat to burn him out, my name’s not Hera.”

One hot afternoon in May, Hercules lay in a field of flowering clover. The clover smell hung sweet as honey, and bees were among the blossoms; their humming made the world’s drowsiest sound. Hera appeared. She stood looking down at him. She seemed tall as a tree and was clad in purple, a golden crown on her head.

“Are you a goddess?” he murmured.

“I am Hera, queen of the gods.”

“Am I dreaming?”

“It doesn’t matter. I am real.”

He stared at her.

“Hercules, behold—”

She faded, and a picture branded itself on the golden air where she had stood. The people in the picture moved and had voices, and everything they did and said was terribly important. If it was a

dream, it was the kind that seems realer than life. Hercules saw himself standing. He was a man now, with a golden beard. He wore a lion skin and carried a club and was much bigger than the youth lying on the grass. And this man, whom Hercules recognized as himself grown-up, was waiting for someone.

A woman walked toward him; it was his wife, and she held the hands of two children, a boy and a girl. Hercules knew that they were his children because they looked like him. Then the youth on the grass was horrified to see the man lift his club and smash it down on the woman's head. She fell. The children screamed and ran away. The man caught them in two strides, dropped his club, lifted a child in each hand, and knocked their heads together. The heads split like eggs. He dropped the dead children on their dead mother, raised his face to the sky, and howled like a wolf. Then he rushed off among the trees.

The bodies disappeared. Hera stood there looking down at him. There was such a tearing grief in the youth's heart that he couldn't look at the goddess. He knelt on the grass covering his face with his hands.

“Look at me.”

He dropped his hands. Her face was very stern.

“I have come to do you a great service, to show you the man you will be,” said Hera. “You know now what he will do.”

“Why did he kill them?”

“Not *he*, you. That was *you*. You recognized yourself.”

“Yes ...”

“You have seen yourself married, with two lovely innocent children. In a fit of madness, you shall kill them. All, all.”

“Why?”

“In madness there is no ‘why.’”

“I don’t believe it. It’s a false vision. It won’t happen.”

“Hercules, the matter is too important for you to lie to yourself. You know there is truth in that vision. Search your heart, and you will find wrath and evil at the bottom of it.”

“It won’t happen.”

“Oh, yes it will.”

“It won’t! I’ll kill myself now, and it can’t happen.”

“I have come to save you. I am your friend. You don’t have to kill yourself. I shall show you a way you can cleanse your soul of these wicked impulses. You can so purify yourself that it will become impossible for you to commit such a murder.”

“How? How? Tell me!”

“There is only one way, and you must follow my instructions exactly. You must go to the king of Mycenae, King Eurystheus, and put yourself under his orders. Twelve years you must serve him, and whatever he tells you to do, you must do. If you faithfully carry out his wishes, without argument and without hesitation, you shall cleanse yourself of evil, and the foul vision you have seen today shall remain a dream.”

“Must I go to Mycenae now?”

“Now. Don’t wait to say farewell to Chiron. Do not go back to Thebes to bid your mother and father good-by, nor to see your brother. Leave this place immediately and go straight to Mycenae. The king is waiting.”

She vanished.

Hercules arose from the grass and looked about. He couldn’t believe that this was the same sunny slope, that this was the same bed of clover, and these the same bees. Everything was changed. The grass was charred; the bees were tiny demons; and the flowers stank of blood. He couldn’t bear to leave without embracing Chiron once more. But he didn’t dare disobey Hera. Weeping bitterly, he left that place where he had been so happy. He didn’t exactly know where Mycenae was, but he was sure he would find it before he wanted to.

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THE TASKMASTER

HERA HAD SEARCHED ALL the lands of the Middle Sea for a king stupid enough and cowardly enough to carry out her evil wishes and enjoy doing it. She found him in Mycenae. King Eurystheus was a brutal, pig-faced man who took great pleasure in causing pain, especially if he could do it without any risk.

Hera appeared to him and told him that he was to be given the gift of a young slave, who was the world's strongest man and would obey all the king's commands.

"If he's so strong, why should he do what anyone tells him?" said Eurystheus.

"He is under a curse, and this is the way he must work it off. He will try to do any task you set him. If he fails, he dies, and I shall reward you for causing his death."

"Suppose he succeeds?"

"He won't. But if he does, you will get the credit for his deeds, and everyone will say you are a wise and powerful king."

"I am! I am!" cried Eurystheus. "I must be very wise and powerful, because soon I am to have the strongest man in the world to serve me. What's his first task?"

"He is to hunt the Nemean Lion and bring you its hide."

"The Nemean Lion! Nobody can kill that monster. The best hunters in the world have gone against him and been devoured."

“Yes,” said Hera. “I know.”
And vanished.

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THE NEMEAN LION

AS THE KING WAITED for Hercules to come to his castle, he grew more and more frightened. Despite what Hera had said, he couldn't imagine the strongest man in the world taking orders from anyone. He kept thinking what this young giant might do if he got angry, what might happen when Hercules heard him say, "Go hunt the Nemean Lion. Bring me its hide." He pictured how a huge hand would come down at him, grab him by the back of the neck, snatch him off the throne, and hold him dangling like a kitten. *Himself*, Eurystheus, the king! Perhaps the hand would slap him a few times as he dangled there. Maybe do worse. And all the people would know him for what he was: not a stern powerful ruler, but a coward. And the more he thought about Hercules, the more frightened he grew.

Finally, the day came.

The king had posted lookouts beyond the city walls. Now a messenger rushed into the throne room, crying, "He's coming! He's coming! And oh, your majesty, he's a giant!"

Although it was a hot day, the king crouched on his throne, shaking and quaking as though he were sitting in a tub of ice water.

"No," he said to himself. "I'm not going to meet that brute. Why should I? What's the use of being a king if I can't make somebody else do dangerous things for me? I'll send Copreus to

meet him. Let Copreus tell him about the lion. And if Hera is right, the lion will eat him up, and I'll never have to worry again."

Mycenae was a walled city. Its walls were tall and thick, made of heavy stone slabs. The only way in was through an enormous iron gate. But when Hercules reached the city, this gate was closed. He didn't know what to do. Hera had said he must report to the king, and the king would be expecting him. But the gate was bolted.

He felt himself growing angry. He felt his hands opening and closing, and the muscles of his back and shoulders filling with wild strength. The city was locked against him, but chains and bolts wouldn't mean much if he simply tore the iron gate from its hinges and hurled it away. But before he could touch it, he heard voices shouting, "In the name of the king! In the name of the king!" He dropped his arms. Through the gate he saw guards trotting toward the wall. They wore brass armor and brass helmets and carried spears. They reached the gate, unbolted it, and came through. They stood in double file facing him. Hercules started toward the open gate.

"Halt!" said a voice.

A little plump man came through the file of soldiers. He wore a white tunic and bore a white herald's staff.

"Close it!"

Hercules saw six soldiers swing the gate shut. The little man turned to face him. "Are you Hercules?"

“I am. Why do you close the gate against me?”

“King’s orders.”

“But it is him I have come to see.”

“I speak for the king. Your business is with me.”

“What is your name, good herald?”

“I am Copeus.”

Hercules shouted with laughter, for the word means “dung man,” or someone who does dirty jobs. He saw the man flush bright red, and he stopped laughing because he knew it was rude, and Chiron had taught him always to be courteous.

“I am proud of my name,” said the herald stiffly. “It means that I serve the king by doing things he finds unpleasant.”

“Good sir, I apologize. I did not mean to hurt your feelings. But why should the king find it so unpleasant to speak to me?”

“Because he is tenderhearted. It makes him sad to send a young man to his death.”

“Am I being sent to my death?”

“To hunt the Nemean Lion. It comes to the same thing.”

“Will you take a message back to the king?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him that I shall take every care not to sadden him with the news of my death. Tell him that I go to hunt the lion and that I shall return with its hide. And when I do, I hope to be able to thank him personally for giving me the chance to perform so splendid a deed.”

“Brave words, my lad. Do you know anything about this beast whose hide you mean to take?”

“No, sir. It’s a lion like any other, I presume.”

“It’s a lion *unlike* any other. Its parents were Typhon and Ekidne. Typhon, you know, was a monster out of the First Days, so huge and fierce that no one could believe such a creature could exist. But he did, he did ... He was as tall as a cedar; his head was a donkey’s head. His legs were enormous serpents. Instead of hands, a dragon head sprouted from each wrist, belching flame. His strength was the strength of an avalanche, a hurricane, a tidal wave. The gods themselves, they say, were afraid of Typhon; they shuddered on Olympus when he passed below, and hid in a cave until he went away. He, Typhon, was the father of your Nemean Lion. And the lion’s mother was a female monster named Ekidne. She was half woman, half snake, and the halves changed places. That is, sometimes her body was a woman’s and her head was a snake’s, and when she got tired of herself that way, she put on a snake’s body and a woman’s head ... and was equally ugly both ways. In fact, Typhon was the ugliest male in the first days of the world, and Ekidne was the ugliest female. They were so hideous that every other creature fled them, and they were left with each other. So they married, and Ekidne had a litter of monsters. And the youngest of the litter, and some say the worst, was the Nemean Lion. A lion, yes, but bigger than an elephant, its teeth like ivory daggers, its claws like brass hooks, and its hide like armor, which

no weapon can pierce. That is the Nemean Lion, which keeps the whole country between Corinth and Argos in utter terror and has killed and eaten a generation of fighting men.”

“Well, gentle Copeus, I thank you for the information. It’s always good to know the worst about your enemy; then you won’t have any unpleasant surprises.”

“Good hunting,” said Copeus.

“Thank you again. And my best wishes to your royal master.”

Hercules turned and loped off. Everyone stared after him in amazement.

Hercules had learned archery from the centaurs, who did it differently from ordinary men. Bowmen of the time used short bows and drew the string only to their chest. But the centaurs were so long-armed and powerful that they were able to use an enormous bow made of ash strengthened by stag horn; their arrows were as long as spears. When a centaur notched an arrow, he drew the bowstring back past his shoulder, bending the bow almost double, shooting the arrow with terrific force. And the young Hercules was soon outshooting his teachers. He was able to send his bolts through a stone wall three feet thick.

He carried that bow now as he started for Nemea to hunt the lion. But he had no spear. He knew he would have to make his own, for ordinary spears were too small for him. He searched the river shore until he found an old boat, half-covered by reeds. Its hull was smashed in, but its mast was still good. He broke the mast

off; that was his spear shaft. He didn't want to use a leaf-shaped spearhead, which made a large wound. He needed something with a needle point if he was to have any chance of piercing the lion's armor hide. He found an old iron spike and drove it into the end of the mast. Then he sharpened the spike against a rock, flaking the rust away, until it was needle-sharp. As he went along, he practiced throwing the spear at trees and didn't stop until he split an oak with a single cast.

But he wasn't satisfied even then. "With my centaur bow, I can shoot an arrow through a stone wall," he said to himself. "And split an oak tree with my new spear. But it seems I'm to meet some very terrible creatures, beginning with this lion, and, if I'm not lucky, ending with this lion. I'm quite large for a person, it's true, but these monsters make me seem the size of a mouse. So I can't depend on strength alone. No, I'll need cleverness and speed." And thinking about how swift he would have to become, he began to run. He ran as fast as he could, then faster yet. He found himself running so fast, and enjoying the speed so much, that he didn't want to stop even when he saw the wall of a ruined temple looming up before him. He rushed at the wall, planted the butt of his huge spear on the ground, and vaulted. He hurled himself up, up. The mast bent under his weight, then sprang up. He stretched his arms and flattened his body and rode the springing shaft over the wall.

Once he discovered vaulting, he couldn't stop. He kept running. He vaulted rivers and huts. He loved it. It was like flying.

He was enjoying himself so much that he was surprised when he saw a river, and beyond the river, a mountain and knew that it must be Mount Nemea, where the lion hunted.

The sun was sinking. The mountain threw a blue shadow. “This is the right time of day,” he thought. “Lions hunt early and kill before evening. He will be heavy with food now, and perhaps a little slower. Who knows?”

He heard something roar. A savage deafening roar. “I was wrong,” thought Hercules. “He still sounds hungry.” He crouched behind a rock, waiting for the lion.

Then he saw it come. Smoothly, heavily, it came. Its hide was yellow and its mane was black; its teeth were a deadly white grin. He couldn’t believe its size. It was as big as an elephant. It roared again, and the shattering sound was like being hit by a club. It came on and on: pure yellow murder.

Hercules took an arrow from his quiver and put it to his bowstring. The huge bow bent double as he drew the arrow back past his ear, past his shoulder. He held the bow bent, waiting for the lion to come closer, then loosed the arrow. It sang through the air, struck the lion’s shoulder, and glanced off, without leaving a scratch. Fast as he could move, he snatched arrows from his quiver and shot them. One by one he saw them skid off the beast. The lion shook its great head and yawned. Hercules could see its ivory teeth glinting and between them the black hole of its gullet looking like

the mouth of a cave big enough to swallow him, his bow and arrows, and the rock he was hiding behind.

He tossed his bow away, drew back his spear, and hurled it with all his might. It skidded off the lion's head and split a tree. The lion looked after the spear, swiveled its head, and looked toward the man. It prowled closer, so close that Hercules gagged on the rotten-meat stench of its breath.

Hercules was weaponless. He leaped away and ran toward an oak tree, grasped its trunk near the base, and pulled. Up came the tree, roots and all. The lion was coming too. Hercules raised the uprooted tree like a club and smashed it down on the lion's head. The tree broke to splinters.

The lion struck. Hercules sprang away, but not in time. One claw touched his tunic, ripped it to tatters, and ripped the flesh underneath. Unarmed, naked, bleeding, Hercules ran toward his spear. The lion sniffed at the bloody cloth, then raised its head and calmly watched as Hercules ran uphill. The man knew that as fast as he was running, the beast could catch him any time it wanted. But he kept running, for he couldn't do anything else.

Now the lion was following. The spear grew heavier and heavier as Hercules ran, and he wanted to throw it away, but he didn't; it was his only weapon. The lion was gaining ground at every step. Hercules dodged behind a huge rock and drove his spear deep into the earth behind. Then he planted himself and pulled back on the shaft, trying to lever the enormous boulder out

of the ground. The spear bent, but the rock did not budge. And the lion was getting very close. Hercules pulled on the spear; the muscles of back and shoulders writhed like serpents under his bronze flesh. He was breathing red-hot needles; he could hardly see; the rock grew misty. The shaft tried to pull out of his hands as he bent it, but he wouldn't let go. Down, down, he pressed. The spear was bent like a bow now; his hands almost touched the ground. Blackness swarmed in his head; he could do no more. "Zeus help me," he gasped. He made himself draw one more breath, thrusting with his arms, pressing the end of the shaft into the earth, and finally, not quite believing it, felt the rock move.

This tiny movement was joy. The joy became strength. Strength fought with pain, and pain was winning. Now he lay on the spear, flattening it against the earth with his body, using his hands to push the rock. The huge rock leaped out of its hole like a cork out of a bottle and began to roll downhill, flattening bushes, going faster and faster, straight for the lion.

The lion saw it coming. It leaped away but not quite fast enough. The rock hit the beast, bowling it over. Hercules, seeing the lion on the ground, was filled with new energy. He became a blur of motion. He pulled the spear out of the earth and charged downhill. Holding his spear like a vaulting pole and running full speed, he planted the butt of the spear and leaped. The springy wood bent, then sprang up terrifically, flinging him into the air.

This time, he didn't let the pole drop. He held on to it and turned it at the top of his leap, then fell holding it point-first.

The lion crouched on its haunches, forepaws raised, ready to rend the falling man with its talons. Hercules struck as he fell. With all his strength, all his joy, and all his fear, he drove the spear down as he fell toward the lion's face. And drove the spike into the only part of the beast not covered by its armorlike hide—the eye. Deep, deep, the spike pierced into the murky brain.

Writhing in agony, the beast flailed with its paws. And Hercules, dodging, felt his back being raked again by the razor claws. But he didn't care, because he could watch the monster, snarling, frothing, dying.

He climbed to his feet and stood over the lion. He was panting. He had fallen heavily; his whole body felt like one bruise. And now he bled from many wounds. But he felt no pain, just a great singing joy.

His task, however, wasn't quite done. He had been commanded to bring the lion's hide to the king. But the hide was armor; it couldn't be cut by any blade—or, perhaps, only by one. Hercules lifted one of the great paws and studied it. Then he snapped off a claw. It was as big as a hunting knife and sharper than any knife. Using it as a knife, he flayed the lion, rolled the hide into a bloody bundle, hoisted it to his shoulder, and limped downhill toward the river.

He was so tired now that he was dizzy and could hardly make it to the river. But he kept on because he had to cleanse himself before he slept, wash away his own blood and the lion's and treat his wounds with the herbs as Chiron had taught him.

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THE HYDRA

THE KING HAD ORDERED THAT relays of horsemen be posted every twenty miles to the border of Nemea. “Because,” he told Copreus, “I want to know without delay how Hercules fares against the lion ... so if the monster is slain, we can thank the gods for a great victory.”

But Copreus knew the king really wanted to hear that Hercules had been killed, not the lion.

And it was Copreus who got the news first. He was in the courtyard when a horseman galloped through the gate. “Good news!” he cried. “Shepherds in Nemea have found vultures feeding on the flesh of a huge carcass. Its hide is gone, and its head, but it must be the lion, for nothing else could be so big.”

“Yes,” said Copreus. “That’s very good news. You deserve a reward for riding here so fast. Why don’t you dismount and take the news to the king yourself?”

But he hadn’t finished the sentence before the messenger had wheeled his horse about and galloped out the gate again. Copreus was not surprised. Everyone feared the king and tried to keep as far away from him as possible. “I’ll have to go tell him myself,” he thought. “And I’ll be lucky if I come out with my head on my shoulders.”

But Copreus was clever. He was the only one who knew how to handle the king at all. He went into the throne room and said, “Oh, king, the people of Nemea are calling you their savior. And they are preparing rich gifts to thank you for sending someone to rid their land of that monster.”

“What monster?” cried the king. “The Nemean Lion?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“It’s dead?”

“Its flayed body was found on the mountain.”

“So it must have been Hercules who killed it.”

“No one else, your majesty, but the young man you were wise enough to choose for so dangerous a task.”

“He’ll be coming back here!” cried the king, shuddering. “He’ll insist on seeing me this time. I won’t! I won’t! I won’t see him! Copreus, listen to me carefully. I want a big hole dug right into the courtyard, deep as a well, but wider. And I want paving stones so cut that they will fit over this hole and make a lid, hiding it completely. And I want it furnished like a room, you know, very comfortably, and well provided with food and wine. For, if Hercules ever comes through the gate, I shall enter that pit and stay there until he departs. See to it, man! And if everything is not done exactly as I have described, and very quickly, you shall pay with your head.”

“I shall do as you wish, your majesty. But would it not be simpler to lock the gate against him as before and station troops

outside?”

“Of course I want that done too, you idiot! Try to use your head while it’s still on your shoulders. If he can kill that monster and take its hide, what’s to stop him from tearing the gate off its hinges and strolling in as he pleases? Do as I say. Dig my pit, furnish it, then go lock the city gate and post troops outside. And be there yourself to meet him when he comes.”

“That won’t be until the day after tomorrow, at the soonest. It’s a two-day trip from Nemea.”

“Good. That will give Hera time to think of something else for him to do. I hope she can come up with something really fatal in two days ...”

The next morning, the king summoned Copeus and said, “Hera appeared to me last night and brought a new task for Hercules. You are to meet him beyond the gate and transmit these instructions.”

Copeus listened silently as the king told him of the next labor facing Hercules. As he listened, he felt his bones turning to jelly. “I’m done for,” he thought. “When Hercules hears me describe this next monster, he’ll squash me like an ant. And if I refuse to take the message, the king will call his ax man, and my head will roll. Either way I’m a goner. The king will kill me today, or Hercules will do it tomorrow. Well, I might as well give myself one more day.”

So all he said when the king had finished was, “Yes, your majesty.”

But when he returned to his apartment in the castle, he knelt on the floor and wept. For he did not wish to die—either that day or the next.

“Don’t cry,” said a voice.

He scrambled to his feet. It was his niece, Iole. He hadn’t heard her come. She moved very silently, this child, and seemed to appear without approach, like a cat. In fact, she was quite a bit like a cat: slender, graceful, very quick, with black bangs and big green eyes.

“Don’t cry,” she said. “You’ll be all right. I’ll tell Hercules about the Hydra.”

“How do you know about that?” he shouted.

“I know ...”

“You’ve been eavesdropping again!”

“I have to. Nobody tells me anything.”

“You silly little hellcat! Do you know what the king would do to you if he caught you hiding in his throne room listening to secret conversations?”

“He never notices anything; he’s too busy with himself. Anyway, I’m very hard to see if I don’t want to be seen. And that old throne room is full of shadows.”

“But what do you mean, *you’ll* tell Hercules?”

“Just what I said. I’ll do what the king told you to do. I’ll meet him outside the walls and tell him he has to kill that dreadful thing.”

“I can’t let you do that. He’ll be very angry when he hears what he has to do.”

“I’m not afraid of him.”

“You’ve never seen him.”

“Oh, yes I have. I saw him when he first came. I sneaked after you and was hiding behind the gate.”

“Well then, you know how big he is.”

“Yes ... and how kindhearted. He won’t hurt me. He likes children.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I know.”

When Hercules came to Mycenae, he once again found the city locked against him. Once again, he thought about knocking the gate down and forcing his way into the castle. But then he realized that he really had no wish to see the king, who didn’t want to see him. In fact, there was nothing he wanted here but to work off his curse as soon as possible and go back to Thebes or to the centaurs. But he had to wait where he was until someone came to tell him what he had to do next.

He camped outside the city. He stuck his spear in the ground, hung the lion’s skin over it, and had a fine tent. He sat in his tent and watched the gate. He expected to see soldiers coming through,

then Copreus, bearing a message from the king. No one came through. He waited and waited. He dozed off. When he opened his eyes he saw a girl standing near him.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

“Unless I’m dreaming. Who are you?”

“Iole.”

“Hello, Iole.”

“Is that the lion skin you’re using for a tent?”

“It is.”

“I’d like you to tell me all about how you killed it, but I have something to tell you first. Do you remember Copreus?”

“The king’s herald? Of course. I expect him to show up soon.”

“He won’t. I’m here instead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s my uncle. But he’s afraid to tell you what you have to do, so I will.”

“He’s afraid to come himself and sent you? What kind of man is he?”

“A coward. And the king’s worse. But no one sent me exactly. I wanted to come.”

“Well, at least you’re not afraid of me.”

“No sir, I’m not. I have a lot to tell you; shall I start?”

“Please.”

“The thing you have to fight next is called the Hydra. I don’t exactly know what it is, though. The king’s bad at describing

things. But it's very big. And very awful. It has a hundred heads—lizard heads or dragon heads—and each head has a hundred teeth, and every tooth is poison. The way I picture it is a hundred crocodiles joined at the waist.”

“Where is this charming creature to be found?”

“In Argos, in a grove called Lerna, on the bank of a river. I'm coming with you.”

“What?”

“Oh, yes. I watched you when you left to fight the lion, and I wanted to come with you. But we didn't know each other then. Now we do.”

“Do you really think I'd let you anywhere near that dragon with a hundred heads?”

“I want to come with you.”

“Listen to me, Iona dear ...”

“Iole.”

“Iole dear, I like you very much. I've enjoyed our conversation. And I thank you for bringing me this message, unwelcome though it is. But forget all about me and the Hydra.”

She didn't answer. She was gone before he saw her move; she had slipped away like a shadow.

“What a smart brave girl,” he said to himself. “I hope I haven't hurt her feelings. But I can't think about that now. I have to prepare for this monster. Yes, this will take a bit of thinking. I wish my brains were as strong as my muscles. Well, I'll do what I can

with what I have. Now, what did that child tell me? The Hydra is very poisonous, she said. So even one tooth breaking my skin will kill me. And a hundred mouths times a hundred teeth. Let's see: that's ten thousand deaths coming at me all at once. Hmmmm. Lion skin, you shall be a tent no more; I have a better use for you."

He whisked the lion's hide off the spear that was serving as a tent pole, drew one of the lion's claws from his pouch, and, using it as a knife, cut the skin into a long-sleeved tunic and a pair of trousers reaching down to his ankles. He also made gauntlets and boots—for he wanted not one inch of himself exposed to the Hydra's poison teeth. "If this hide turned aside my spear and my arrows," he thought, "it should blunt the Hydra's bite. I need a helmet, too." He took the lion's head and made a helmet of it. It covered his face when he put it on; he could breathe through the mouth and look out the eyeholes.

"It's very hot in here," said Hercules to himself. "The Hydra may not have to kill me; I may just roast to death before I get to him."

All this time, Iole had been watching him from behind a tree. For she hadn't the slightest notion of going home. She had decided to go wherever Hercules went, and if he wouldn't take her, she would simply follow him without letting him see her. She was very good at that.

She watched as Hercules took off his lion-skin clothing, wrapped it into a bundle, and slung it on his back. He grasped his

spear and set off for the grove at Lerna where the Hydra dwelt. He traveled for three days and never noticed the girl gliding from shadow of tree to shelter of bush as she followed him.

The grove called Lerna is tucked inside an elbow of the river. In this river lurked the monstrous reptile. Every day it crawled out to kill. The trees of the grove grow right down to the river, but stop short at one spot; there grass grows from wood to water. Here in this meadow Hercules waited for the Hydra to crawl out of the river.

It was a summer morning, and the sun was hot. Hercules wore his long-sleeved tunic, and trousers, and boots, and gauntlets, and helmet. He felt himself roasting alive in the heavy lion pelt. "If that Hydra doesn't come soon," he thought, "he'll find a cooked meal all laid out for him."

And, as Hercules waited near the river, Iole waited in the grove. She was crouched behind a tree, so well hidden that he couldn't have seen her even if he had turned suddenly. But she had a clear view.

The last monster Hercules had fought was the Nemean Lion, which had roared terribly as it came. And he was expecting the Hydra to announce itself thunderously out of its hundred mouths. So he was taken by surprise when the Hydra came out of the river silently, like a reptile, and had almost reached Hercules before he saw what was coming.

He couldn't believe what he saw. It was a crocodile, but the size of ten crocodiles. "This can't be it," he thought. "It has just one head. But what else can it be? That river can't hold two monsters."

But he was very glad that there was only one head to cope with, even if that one head was as big as a dragon's, full of sharp teeth. He dropped his bow and spear and drew his sword. The Hydra slithered toward him. Weighed down as he was by the heavy lion pelt, Hercules nonetheless leaped into the air and landed on the Hydra's back. He raised his sword high in both hands, slashed down in a terrific scything blow, saw his blade cut through the knobby hide, and felt it slice through flesh and giant bone—right through the entire neck. The Hydra's head seemed to leap off its body. Blood poured out of the neck stump, black blood, smoking as it fell, charring the grass, turning the greenness to black dust.

And Hercules was amazed to see the cut-off head sliding toward him. It sprang off the ground, snapping at him. He struck it down with his clenched fist, whirled about, and saw something that almost made him drop his sword and run. The stump of neck had split into two stumps; from each neck sprouted a new head.

He struck again, cutting off both heads with one blow. They fell to the grass, blood hissing. They did not die, but snapped about his legs like mad dogs. They couldn't bite through his lion-hide trousers, but held on, trying to drag him down. And now, instead of two neck stumps, there were four, and each stump grew a new head. The four heads struck at him with sickening force. Four pairs

of jaws clamped onto his body. The teeth couldn't pierce the pelt, but they closed with crushing power. He felt his bones must break. Jaws held his arms; he couldn't raise his sword. He tore himself away and tried to run clear, but the cut-off heads were fastened to his legs. They dragged him down.

He forced himself up. His sword whirled in a blur about his head. One after the other, he cut the four heads off. Now these heads fell and joined the pack of heads ravening about. Where the four heads had been, there were now eight heads. They came at him from everywhere now, clamping him from all directions. His arms and legs were locked by jaws. Three pair of jaws held his waist, jaws were locking on his head, blinding him. Inside the lion-hide helmet, he felt his skull being squeezed to a pulp. Calling on his last strength, he whirled and kicked and chopped and stabbed. He tore himself free and tried to run. But all the heads were fastened on his legs now; they pulled him down as a pack of hounds pulls down a deer.

Lying on the ground, he saw a pair of jaws striking down toward his face. Before he could stop himself, he slashed with his sword, slicing off that head—and knew it was the worst thing he could have done. For now two heads would grow, and he knew he couldn't handle any more.

The pain was too much now; he felt himself going. And just then he saw Iole flash past him, carrying a torch.

“Stop!” he shouted.

But she ran straight toward the Hydra and slashed at it with her fiery torch, searing the neck stump, then seemed to melt into air, she moved so quickly, dodging away. Hercules smelled the stench of burning flesh. The Hydra flopped gigantically; it was in agony. Its mouths were shrieking. Through his fog, Hercules saw that the burned flesh of the stump was not sprouting any new head.

He saw Iole scoop up the torch and run toward him. She whirled the torch, beating back the pack of cut-off heads. She whipped them with flame, beating them away from his legs. Hercules staggered to his feet.

“Cut off the heads!” cried Iole. “I’ll burn the stumps!”

But Iole was clad only in a thin tunic. Hercules realized that one scratch of a poison tooth would kill her on the spot. He snatched the torch from her, with his left hand seized her by the waist, swung her off the ground, and hurled her into the river. Then he picked up his sword and crouched, waiting for the Hydra to come at him again.

In one hand he held the torch, in his other hand, the sword. And strength had returned. The thought of the child risking her life that way drove out all fear, all weakness. The fire of the torch seemed to be burning cleanly in his veins.

The Hydra was upon him. He moved swiftly, dodging, striking, twisting away from the jaws, slashing again. Each sword blow cut off a head. And, as soon as he struck with his sword, he

struck with his torch, searing the neck stump, burning the flesh so that no new head could grow.

He was very weary now. He could hardly move. But the monster still had two heads left. Hercules did not wait for the Hydra to attack. Forcing his legs to move, he charged. He whirled his sword, cutting off the last two heads, then struck with his torch, searing the last two stumps.

Now the Hydra was blind. The great leather body was twitching. The spiked tail was flailing. The neck stalks were wriggling like charred worms, but life was going out of the monster. The tail flopped weakly, like a grounded fish. The neck stalks went limp. Then all movement stopped. And when the body died, the heads on the grass died also.

Hercules lifted the heavy helmet from his head, drinking the air. He cast off the tunic and slid out of the heavy trousers. No tooth had pierced his armor; he was unscratched. But the air was scorched and he felt poisoned all the same. He didn't take his gauntlets off, or his boots. He had one more thing to do before he could bathe in the river. He emptied his quiver of arrows and, one by one, dipped them in the hissing pools of Hydra blood.

"I'll need special weapons," he thought, "if each monster I fight is worse than the last one. Now these arrows will kill whatever they touch."

He dipped the last arrow, then kicked his way through the dead grinning heads as he tramped toward the river.

When he dived in, Iole climbed out. She stood on the bank and watched him swim. The sun was low now, painting the river with fire. It was still warm, and Iole's tunic was almost dry when Hercules climbed out of the river. He didn't say anything. He sat on a rock and beckoned to her. She came toward him slowly and stopped a few feet away.

He spoke softly. "You saved my life, you know."

"And got thrown into the river for it. My, you threw me far. It was like flying."

"You're a very brave girl. And a very clever one. And very, very naughty. You're going straight back home."

She smiled and came closer, looking up at him with big green eyes. Before he knew what she was doing, she had leaped onto his lap as lightly as a kitten. "But I live with you now," she purred. "I've decided to marry you when I'm older."

"You'd better pick someone else. I don't think I'll last that long."

"I don't want anyone else. And you have to last. I'm going wherever you go. You just saw how useful I can be."

"You're going back home. You live with your uncle, don't you? In the castle?"

"With my Uncle Copreus and that mean old king. Do you really want me to live in a place like that? If you take me back there, I'll run away again. And if I can't find you, I'll live in the woods and get eaten by bears."

“How would you like to live in a cheerful castle with beautiful kind people?”

“With you?”

“With my parents, in Thebes.”

“I want to be with you.”

“Well, I’ll visit you between times.”

“Do you promise?”

“I do.”

“And will you marry me when I grow up.”

“If you still want me then, I’ll be honored.”

And they went off together. But had they stayed a bit longer, they would have seen a wonderful thing. The cut-off Hydra heads sank out of sight, and where each had been, a spring bubbled up. The waters of these springs flowed together and became a river, which swallowed the river Lerna and became a deep swift-running river of crystal waters so pure and beautiful that it gave the name “hydra” to water forever.

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THE AUGEAN STABLES

THE WORLD'S WORST CATTLE thief lived in a place called Elis. The people there hated him, not only because he stole their cattle, but because of what he did with them afterward. Being a thief himself, he thought everybody else was too, and was always afraid someone would steal the cattle he had stolen. So he built a huge barn and holding pen big enough for a thousand cows and fifty bulls, and he never let them out, nor did he ever bother about cleaning the place. Of course, it grew filthier and filthier. Mountains of muck grew. People called it the biggest dung heap in the world. His neighbors sold their farms and moved to the other side of the wide river because the place stank. And he just laughed. His neighbors were so eager to sell that they took any price offered and soon he owned all the land around. He was a huge fat man. His face was always greasy, and his hair crawled with lice. His name was Augeas. When he bought up the last farm in the country, he called himself "Lord of the Manor." Others called him "Lord of the Manure," but not where he could hear them.

To clean out these filthy stables was Hercules' next labor.

He learned about it when he came back to Mycenae after killing the Hydra. He didn't come back immediately. He had gone to Thebes first to leave Iole with his parents. He very much wanted to stay there himself and had to tear himself away. And on the road

back, he had a great longing to visit Thessaly and his old tutor, Chiron, and to run with the centaurs in the hills. But Hera's curse weighed heavily on him, and he knew he had to get back to his labors.

Again the gate was locked. Again he waited outside the walls. Again Copeus came through the gate, but this time he came alone.

"Hail, friend," called Hercules. "Where's the army?"

"I left them home," said Copeus.

"Do you bear a message from the king?"

"I do."

"Another labor?"

"Yes."

"How do you dare to come alone? Last time you were afraid to come at all. You sent your niece."

"Yes," said Copeus, "and I have learned from the child. She said you were kind. I didn't believe her then, but I do now. I hear you've adopted her."

"Not exactly. I think she's adopted me. She's with my parents in Thebes and will live with them. She doesn't like it here."

"No, this is no place for her. I thank you for taking her to Thebes, and I regret very much what I am about to tell you."

"Tell it, man, tell it. Whatever it is, I know you are not to blame."

"Well, I'm going to live up to my name of the dung man now, because I'm going to tell you about the biggest pile of dung in the

world.”

And Copreus told Hercules about the fat cattle thief and his filthy stables.

“If I understand you,” said Hercules, “this Augeas has penned a thousand cattle for a thousand days, and has never let them out. So the place is a filthy reeking midden, and you can smell it all the way to Egypt. Very well, I understand all that. What about it?”

“You are to go there and clean it up in one day.”

“That is my next task?”

“Yes. It should make a change. You won’t have to fight anything big and dreadful, or kill any monsters who are trying to kill you. Just a day’s cleaning, that’s all.”

“Copreus, I know none of this is your fault; you’re only the king’s messenger, and I’m very fond of your niece who saved my life. But you’d better get out of here before I lose my temper.”

Hercules watched him scurry away. “An easy one, this time,” he said to himself. “No monsters to fight, no claws or spiked tails or poison fangs coming at me ... just a day’s work, mucking out stables used by a thousand animals for a thousand days. By the gods, I’d rather take on the lion and the Hydra in one afternoon. My strength and speed won’t help me this time, nor my spear that can split an oak tree, nor my deadly arrows. This requires thinking. And I don’t have the beginnings of an idea. Oh well, I’ll be a week walking to Elis; perhaps something will occur to me on the way, though I doubt it.”

Scowling and muttering to himself, he turned his back on the city and began once again a journey he didn't want to take.

When Hercules reached the river Alpheus, he knew that he had only a few more miles to go. He stopped to look at the broad rippling river, wishing he could just wander along the shore and forget all about the filthy task awaiting him.

"Well," he thought, "the sooner I start, the sooner I'll finish." He began to walk on, but stopped because he heard a little snuffling sound. There, hiding behind a tree, was a maiden in a blue dress, hands over her face, sobbing.

Hercules went to her and said, "Why are you crying?"

"I'm to be the bride of the river, and I'm afraid ... afraid ..."

"What do you mean, 'bride of the river'?"

"Of the River-god—that's what he calls himself. River-demon is more like it. Many rivers run through my country, which is Calydon. I am Dienera, princess of Calydon. And the River-god told my father, the king, he'd flood the whole country, sweeping away farms and villages and cities, unless he could have me as his wife. And to save his kingdom, my father brought me here."

Her violet eyes filled with tears. They overflowed and rolled down her cheeks.

"Don't cry," said Hercules.

"I'm so frightened."

"Well, I don't see any reason for you to marry anyone you don't want to," said Hercules.

A mist arose from the river. It became a column of mist and thickened into the shape of a giant turtle standing upright. It spoke in a low grating voice.

“Leave this place or you die.”

“Who are you?” said Hercules.

“I am the River-god.”

“Is this where you live, here in the river Alpheus?”

“I dwell in all the inland waters, as I choose. Right now I am here, and I wish you elsewhere.”

“Why?”

“That girl is meant to be my wife.”

“Who means her to be?”

“I do.”

“How about you?” said Hercules to the girl. “Do you want him for a husband?”

She shook her head silently. Hercules saw that she was afraid to speak.

“The princess doesn’t like the idea,” said Hercules. “Swim away now like a good fellow.”

He felt something touch him and looked down. Dienera had put her hand on his arm. She reached up and pulled his head down so that she could whisper into his ear. “Take care. He’s very evil. He changes form at will. If he doesn’t snap your head off as that giant turtle, he’ll turn into a dreadful horned fish. If he doesn’t kill you that way, he’ll dive into the river and make it flood until it

drowns you. If you try to flee, he'll overflow his banks and chase you through meadows and fields, sweeping everything away in his flood, until he catches you and drowns you."

"Thank you for the warning," said Hercules, "but I'll have to fight him if I'm to save you. I can't do it today, though. I have another job to do first. I'll be back tomorrow. Will you be safe until then?"

"I don't know. I'm so frightened."

"Tell him you'll be his bride. But you need two days to make your wedding gown."

"But then in two days I'll have to marry him."

"I promise to be back tomorrow and fight him for you. I can't promise to win, but I'll try. Farewell."

He raced away, knowing that if she looked at him again out of her brimming eyes, he'd forget all about his task and stay where he was. As he hurried on, he began to smell something. It was a beautiful summer day, and among the meadow grass was flowering clover, one of the sweetest scents in the world, but he wasn't smelling clover now. It was something foul. It grew worse and worse.

"That must be the stables," he thought. "If I can't stand the smell at this distance, what will I do when I get there?"

He thought a moment, then ran back a way and searched among the grass. "Well for me now that Chiron taught me herbs," he thought. He plucked great handfuls of what he had found, which

was wild garlic. Then he unslung his lion-skin helmet, packed it full of the wild garlic, and stuck it on his head. It was hard to breathe. And what he was breathing was the fumes of wild garlic, but they blocked the foul stench coming from the farm.

In the distance, he saw an enormous barn, so big it covered ten acres. The barnyard was guarded by a high fence. Through the fence, he saw shapes moving. Before he reached the gate, he heard a racketing yell:

“Stop!”

He stopped. Facing him was a grossly fat man, gnawing on a raw beef bone and spitting out bits of gristle. “Who are you, lion-face?” asked the man.

“My name is Hercules. Who are you?”

“I am Augeas. I own this barn and all these cattle. And I own you too now, for a day, because your master has sent you to me to muck out my stables. Right? That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” said Hercules.

“Well, get a shovel and start working. But you’d better take off that lion mask first; you’ll scare my cattle.”

Now, the helmet had slipped a bit, and Hercules couldn’t quite see out the eyeholes. He adjusted the helmet and looked at the man again—and gasped in amazement. For the fat face had huge ballooning cheeks and seven chins, but no nose at all.

“May I ask you two questions, sir?” said Hercules.

“Make ’em short.”

“Why do you keep your place so filthy?”

The man hopped up and down in glee, waving his beef bone and laughing a phlegmy laugh. “Harr, harr, harr. Stink ’em out, Here! Stink ’em out and grab off their farms, pile up the acres, and get rich! Next question.”

“Were you born without a nose, or did someone cut it off?”

“Neither one. Cut it off myself.”

“Why?”

“That makes three questions. But all right. I cut it off so I couldn’t smell what I was doing. Very useful, having no nose. You can do all sorts of dirty profitable things. That’s what I tell any ambitious young person, ‘Cut off your nose!’ Told it to my own son, but he wouldn’t listen, the little fool—just ran away.”

As he spoke, he led Hercules through the gate into the barnyard. The man kept talking, but Hercules wasn’t listening; he was busy looking. And what he saw sickened him. Piles of manure towered higher than the barn roof. The animals packed into the yard were so crusted with filth you couldn’t tell whether they were cows or bulls. And the flies! Great swarms of fat bluebottle flies covering every surface, clustering so thickly you couldn’t pick out a single fly, just one huge hideous glinting blue gob.

“I’ll never be able to clean this place,” said Hercules to himself. “Not in a year, let alone one day. But if I fail in even one task, I can’t work off my curse, and the vision that Hera sent me will come true. Never! I won’t let that happen, no matter what. I’ll

go back right now and fight the River-god and get myself drowned—and cheat my fate that way.”

He pushed Augeas aside, rushed out the gate, and raced away over the field. He heard the man shouting after him, but paid him no heed. He ran as hard as he could because he wanted to get away from the stench as soon as possible; he could feel it now coming through the packing of wild garlic. But as he ran, he found himself thinking about how he would fight the River-god.

“What did she say he changes into? First a giant snapping turtle, then a horned fish, and if his enemy is still alive, he makes the river flood up, drowning everything. Hmmmm. That gives me the beginning of an idea. Yes ... just the beginning, though. Well, I think better when I’m fighting. Maybe before I finish tussling with that watery demon, I’ll have a whole idea.”

He found Dienera hiding behind the same tree. “You’re back early,” she whispered.

“Listen, princess,” he said. “I’ve never kissed any woman except my mother, but I want to kiss you now. Nothing serious—just to make the River-god jealous.”

“Is that the only reason you want to kiss me?”

“It’s to make him come out of the river, you see. So I can get at him.”

She sighed. He bent down and kissed her cheek.

When the River-god had appeared before, he had risen as a column of mist which had thickened into the shape of a giant

snapping turtle. Hercules expected him to do the same thing now but was amazed to see a huge plate spinning out of the water. It landed near him, and he saw that it was the turtle, looking like a double disk of armor plate because it had pulled in arms and legs to leap out of the river. It stuck out a leathery lizard head and scuttled toward him on leather legs. Turtles are supposed to be slow; this one was fast as a tiger. It rushed toward him and snapped at his leg, which he just managed to pull away in time. He danced around, dodging its furious rushes. The great jaws were snapping with enough force to bite through flesh and muscle and thick bone, to shear his leg off at the hip.

The turtle had moved so swiftly that Hercules had no time to draw a weapon, nor to don his lion-skin armor. He ran into the forest hoping the turtle would have trouble following him, but it slithered swiftly over the fallen brush and was after him in a flash. Without breaking stride, he grasped a young oak and pulled it out of the ground with a mighty yank. Whirling, he lifted the uprooted tree as high as he could and smashed it down at the turtle. The tree struck square, shattering the shell. The naked turtle turned and scuttled toward the river. Hercules raced after, hoping to catch it and finish it off before it could enter the water. The turtle was too fast; it slid into the river and disappeared.

And immediately reappeared—not as a turtle, but as a huge fish, twenty feet long, whose head narrowed into a long sharp bony prong. This was the River-god's second change: the horned fish.

The fish was more terrible than the turtle. It flung itself out of the water and came flying through the air, aiming its horn straight at Hercules' throat. He swung his arm, batting it aside, but the horn ripped a bloody furrow in his arm. He ran; the fish followed, slithering on its belly like a snake ... swiftly ... swiftly. Hercules ran as fast as he could to where his things lay scattered. He stooped as he ran, scooping up a lion-hide gauntlet, and whirled just as the fish leaped at him again. But this time he grasped the fish's horn with the hand that wore the gauntlet made of the hide that nothing could pierce. He held the thrashing fish at arm's length by its knife-edge horn and whipped it up and down, faster and faster, finally snapping his wrist and breaking the horn off clean. He stabbed the fish with its own horn. It flopped to the water, leaving a trail of blood.

He heard Dienera's voice: "Run, Hercules, run! He'll flood his banks and drown you!"

"Aha, that's it," shouted Hercules. "Now I know what I was trying to think of. He fights first as a turtle, then as a fish, and now he will flood his banks trying to drown me. He will pursue me over the fields, washing everything away as he goes. Well, chase away, flood! Catch me if you can!"

Laughing, shouting, Hercules swept up Dienera in his arms and fled the river bank just as the water boiled up in a mighty crest, gushed over its banks, and hurled itself over the fields, breaking down trees as it went, sweeping up fallen logs, and tossing them

about like twigs, raging across the country in a foaming avalanche of water.

He raced ahead of the flood, heading straight back the way he had come, toward the stables of Augeas. The brown frothing water, laced with trees, was almost at his heels. But he kept ahead of it, running very swiftly although he bore Dienera in his arms. Now he saw the barn roof looming in the middle distance, and the piles of dung, and the clotted shape of the cattle.

He saw Augeas running to meet him shaking his fist and yelling something he couldn't hear. Then the fat man saw the wall of water, turned again, and ran for the barnyard. But too slowly; he was too fat to run fast. Hercules flashed past him and heard a gurgling scream but did not stop to look back.

He ran through the gates, the river tumbling after. He ran straight through, circling the barn, and around to the other side of the fence, not daring to turn lest he should lose a stride, but hearing the roar of the water behind him. He leaped the fence on the other side and kept running.

Now the noise changed, lost its roar, became a gulping sucking sound, fell to a scraping, then to a wet whisper. He stopped, panting, and put Dienera down. He turned and looked back. The river, sweeping through the Augean stables, had choked itself on the mountains of dung, had silted itself almost solid, and was now crawling back toward its own banks.

Back, back, the river shrank, Hercules and Dienera following it slowly. And he marveled at what the waters had done. Where the barn had been, with its towers of manure and its seething carpet of flies, all was clean, muddy but clean. The stench was gone; the air smelled fresh and wet. Cows and bulls milled about, drenched and shiny, mooing in confusion because they had forgotten what they looked like. The barn was down; it was a wreckage of clean boards.

Hercules looked at Dienera. She smiled up at him; it was the first time he had seen her smile.

“I don’t think the river will bother you again,” he said. “It’ll be busy for a while, digesting its last meal.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“What now? Back to Calydon?”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to Mycenae to find out what I have to do next. Something dreadful, no doubt, but it can’t be worse than this job. You were a great help to me, you know, you and your watery wooer. It took a flood to clean this mess.”

“I didn’t do anything—just stood around being frightened. You’re very brave and very strong.”

“Shall I take you back to Calydon?”

“Am I really the first girl you ever kissed?”

“Except my mother.”

“Do you think you’d like to again sometime?”

“It’s possible. But I won’t have much time for kissing and such until I finish my labors.”

“Will you visit me in Calydon between adventures?”

“I’ll try.”

“No, that means you won’t, and I want you to. Don’t you want to?”

“Yes, but—”

He saw her eyes brimming with tears again.

“Please don’t cry.”

“How can I help it when you’re making me sad?”

“All right, I promise to come see you in Calydon.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

She blinked away her tears and smiled at him so sweetly that he bent down again and kissed her wet face.

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THE BLIND MAN

THERE WAS AN OLD Blind Man who had no home of his own but wandered from place to place and was welcome, at first, wherever he went because he knew what was going to happen before it happened. That kind of person is called an oracle. There were many of them then, but the blind man was the best.

He had never wanted to be an oracle. He didn't like to look into the future, but he couldn't help it.

Now, as it happened, this Blind Man came to Thebes and was wandering about the market place when Iole saw him. She marveled at the way he made his way through the crowd without bumping into anyone. She knew he was blind; she had darted up to look into his face and had seen that his large eyes had pupil and iris all one color, a milky blue, staring stonily straight ahead. He used a cane, not tap-tapping, but holding it in front of him like a pointer. He was shopping. He stopped at an oven and bought a loaf of barley bread, stopped at a woman sitting among baskets and bought a bunch of new onions and a wedge of cheese. He asked for things in a deep rolling voice and made the women take money for what he had bought. And Iole, seeing these women trying to refuse his coins and knowing how they would fight each other in the street for a penny, thought that the Blind Man must be some kind of wizard. She decided to follow him.

She followed him through the market, followed him as he made his way through the teeming square into the quieter avenue. She flitted silently after him through the city, through the gates, beyond the walls, and kept with him as he headed toward the open country. He filled his flask at a stream, sat on a rock, and began to eat his bread and cheese and onions. Iole stood silently, watching him.

“Want something to eat?” he called.

Iole didn’t answer.

“You there, girl, are you hungry?”

“How do you know I’m here?” said Iole.

“You’ve been following me since I came to the market.”

“You’re not blind at all; you’re just pretending.”

“Why would anyone pretend that?”

“Can you see me or not?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know I’m a girl? Well, you know now because you’ve heard my voice. But before?”

“I know more than that. I know how old you are. I know that you look like an Egyptian temple cat with black bangs and jade eyes.”

“How? How?”

“Everyone is surrounded by a band of colored light—red, green, blue, purple, all the colors, and every band is different. I feel the colors on my face; they prickle in different ways. Also, my nose

is as sharp as a hunting dog's, and my ears are as keen as a bat's. The goddess who took my sight sharpened my other senses and gave me some extra ones."

"Which goddess?"

"The Owl Goddess, Pallas Athena, stern and wise."

"Why did she take your sight? Why was she so cruel?"

"She wanted me to serve her. She wanted me not to be misled by appearances but to pay perfect attention to signs and clues by which the gods make their meaning known."

"Will you be my grandfather?"

"What?"

"Be my grandfather."

"I've never had wife or child, certainly no grandchildren."

"But I'm adopting you as my grandfather. Now you must adopt me as your granddaughter, so it'll come out even."

"Do you always go around adopting people?"

"You're only the second. Hercules was the first."

"Hercules!"

"I met him at Mycenae, where I used to live. I helped to kill the Hydra. Then I adopted him as my husband for when I grow up. That's why I'm here. He brought me here to live with his mother and father in the castle. What colors am I?"

"Different shades of green. April green like new grass. Cat's-eye green. Black green of the sharp spring shadows. And a greenish silvery brown of the new moon."

“What do I smell like?”

“April leaves. Pebbles picked from the bottom of a stream.
New grass.”

“You must stay here and tell me things, and not go away.”

“But that’s what I do: go away. I tell things and go away ...
because people don’t like what I say.”

“I’ll like whatever you say. I promise.”

“You don’t understand. The goddess blinded me so I could see
what is to be. It’s a cruel, cruel gift.”

“Why?”

“People ask me to tell their fortunes. And I say no, because
what I see, usually, is misfortune. But they beg. And I tell them.
And when it comes true, they blame me, as if I had *made* it
happen.”

“Suppose it’s something good?”

“Then they think they did it all themselves.”

“Well, I’ll go where you go. It’ll be a few years before I can
marry Hercules, and I’ll come back here then.”

“Do you mean it about marrying Hercules?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you love him?”

“Oh, yes.”

“You mustn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Poor child, poor dear child. My blind eyes pierce the darkness of time to come, and I wish they did not. What I see is this: Hercules cannot be killed by living man or god or monster. Painted in fire upon the blackness before my eyes is she who will be his doom, a girl who wants to marry him.”

“Oh, no!”

She began to sob.

“Come here, child.”

She ran into his arms. He stroked her head. “Don’t cry.”

“I love him so. I don’t want anyone to kill him. Why do you say such terrible things?”

“Forgive me. I don’t mean to.”

“Anyway, how do you know? I don’t believe there is such a thing as the future. If you believe that, you think nothing can ever change. Don’t you see?”

“I am blind.”

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“Perhaps you mean more than I know. Perhaps you can teach me what the goddess didn’t. All the same, I think you’d better be careful about loving Hercules. For my vision of his fate is terrible, and I can tell you only what it is given me to see.”

“Let’s leave this place, Grandfather.”

“Does it matter where we go?”

“No.”

“Come then ...”

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THE TRIPLE TERROR

HERCULES' NEXT TASK CONCERNED a cattle breeder also, but quite unlike the filthy Augeas. For the herd of bulls belonging to Geryon was the finest in all the world. Blood-red they were, huge and sleek, with coral nostrils and jet-black horns.

Geryon himself was a truly monstrous figure, what might be called a Siamese triplet: three giant bodies joined at the waist. Complete bodies. Three heads, six arms, six legs. In a fight he was complete havoc. He had been known to take on a whole company of warriors single-handed and kill every one. With his six legs he could outrun the fastest horse. For sport, he wrestled three bears at once and always won.

And now, Hercules had been ordered to go to Geryon's island and steal his herd of bulls. Hercules stood listening as Copreus told him of this new task. As usual, they stood outside the city walls, because the king was still afraid to let Hercules anywhere near him.

"Well," said Hercules. "I haven't used my poison arrows against anyone yet, but I may have to start now. This three-bodied monster sounds dangerous."

"I should tell you something else," said Copreus. "There is a prophecy concerning Geryon—that he can be killed by no one else—so you may have to steal his cattle without fighting him."

"Is that possible?"

“I don’t think so. He has three enormous bulldogs watching them by day. And at night, he watches them himself. And since he has three heads, one of them always stays awake. Others have tried to steal those handsome red bulls and have been torn to pieces by Geryon before they went three paces into the pasture.”

“Sounds worse and worse,” said Hercules. “But I’ve done things before that no one thought I could do. Maybe I’ll get lucky again.”

He turned, and once again began a journey to where he didn’t want to go.

Geryon’s island lay about ten miles offshore. Hercules stood at the edge of the beach and squinted, trying to make it out in the distance. He saw something, but couldn’t tell whether it was an island or a cloud bank. He walked into the surf, then let the tide take him out. He dived, swam underwater, kicked to the surface, then floated, taking great breaths of salt air. Then he began to stroke toward the island. Ten miles was just a refreshing swim for Hercules, and swimming was the best way to get to the island without anyone seeing him.

It was dark when he reached the island. For all his size, Hercules could move through the woods without making a sound. He had learned this from the centaurs. Nevertheless, when he reached a clearing in the forest which was the bulls’ pasture, he heard a terrific racket of howling and barking. Three enormous bulldogs were racing about, circling the herd, ready to mangle

anyone who came into the pasture. He faded back into the woods, searched for a hollow tree, took out a honeycomb, then searched for a blackberry bush. He ate honey and blackberries, drank water from a stream, and lay down to sleep.

In the morning, he went silently through the woods until he came to the edge of a field where stood a large stone tower which was Geryon's home. He stayed there all day, watching Geryon as he came and went, studying his habits. The monster dined outdoors. His table was a massive slab of wood laid upon four tree stumps. Hercules had never seen a creature eat the way Geryon did. Every two hours, three cooks laid out three meals on the great table, for each of the bodies favored a different food. The right-hand body liked pork, the middle body liked mutton, and the left-hand body ate barbecued goat meat.

"None of him eats beef," thought Hercules. "I suppose that's because of those beautiful bulls; he likes to think of them as alive, not as meat."

Every two hours on the dot the three meals came out on loaded trays, and the three-bodied monster devoured his pork, his mutton, and his barbecued goat. And when he left the tower and went down to the pasture to visit his herds, if two hours had passed, then the cooks would bring his meals down to the pasture and set them out on the grass, which made the bulldogs happy, because he tossed them the marrow bones.

That afternoon, Hercules had a chance to see Geryon in action. As the monster shambled through the forest, he was attacked by a panther which leaped from a tree straight at his throat. It was like a kitten attacking a bear. Geryon's huge powerful hands grasped each of the panther's paws, holding them in a grip of iron, allowing it no chance to use its claws. And the third pair of hands fastened upon the great cat's neck and strangled it to death.

"Impressive," said Hercules to himself, "but I've handled beasts even bigger. Let me really test that prophecy."

Geryon was sprawled at his table taking an afternoon nap. He did not bother to keep one head awake because he was not watching his herd. Now all six eyes were closed, and the monster was snoring hoarsely. Hercules notched an arrow and drew the bowstring back, back, bending the bow almost double, in the long-armed pull that could send the shaft through a stone wall three feet thick. The arrow whistled through the air. Hercules was amazed to see the air thicken around the flying arrow. The bright air jelled, became murky, a quivering semisolid mass, like a beached jellyfish. The arrow slowed, stopped, and was held one inch from the sleeping Geryon's head. Then the air cleared as suddenly as it had thickened. The jellied murk faded into sunlight. The arrow fell to the ground. And not one of Geryon's eyes opened.

"Truly," thought Hercules, "the prophecy was right. Some god or demon is shielding him from harm. He cannot be overcome by

force. And yet, vanquish him I must, for I shall not be able to take his herd while he is alive.”

Hercules went back into the depths of the wood. He had a lot of thinking to do. He thought and thought.

“Prophecies always have a trick in them somewhere,” he said to himself. “Chiron taught me that. What does it say? ‘Geryon can be killed by no one else.’ No one else ... What does *else* mean? It means another creature. He cannot be killed by any other creature, then. But there are three of him. Perhaps there’s an idea there. Yes, I’ll test my idea. And if it doesn’t work, then I’ll have put myself into Geryon’s power, into the reach of those six awful hands. But I’ve got to take the risk.”

Hercules went hunting. He was disappointed in not being able to fight Geryon, and he needed violent action. He chased a wild goat, chased it up into the highest crags, leaping from rock to rock, finally seizing it in mid-leap and bearing it, kicking and butting, halfway down the mountain, where he tied it by the horns to a pine tree. Then he went down off the mountain, into the woods, and hunted a wild boar. At that time, of all the animals that hunters pursued, the wild boar was the most savage. It was built low; it was very heavy and very fast, with razor-sharp tusks. Hercules used no weapon. All he donned were his lion-skin gauntlets that no blade could cut. He chased the boar until it turned, for a boar will run until it is cornered, then it will charge.

He cornered the boar between a rock and a fallen tree, stood off a bit, and waited. The boar charged. Hercules knelt, and as the giant pig came toward him, slashing with its razor tusks, he shot out his hands, covered by the gauntlets. He caught a tusk in each hand, stood up, lifting the boar clear off the ground, then slammed it to earth again, knocking its wind out. He slung the boar over his shoulder and carried it back halfway up the mountain to where he had tied the wild goat. Now he bound the boar to another tree, using a chain this time, because a boar can use its tusks to slash through the strongest rope.

The sheep was easy. Sheep are tame. But they are also heavy. And it was hard work carrying the woolly animal up the mountain road on his third trip. But he did, and tied the sheep to another tree.

Now the goat was tethered to one tree, the boar to another, the sheep to a third.

“That’s the easy part,” said Hercules to himself. “The rest is going to be tricky.”

It was noon now and very hot, and he needed a rest. Besides, he knew that Geryon ate at noon, and he wanted to do what he had to do just before it was time for the monster’s next meal. So he took a brief nap. Then he woke up and went down to the pasture where the red bulls were cropping grass. Without hesitation, he stepped out from behind a tree into the open space. The three bulldogs bowled down at him. He ran to meet them and slapped them to the ground. They couldn’t bite through the lion-hide

gauntlets, but his legs were bleeding by the time he had tied their tails together. But tie them together he did. They ran howling in circles, trying to pull themselves apart. He strolled off, lifted a bull to his shoulders, and trotted out of the pasture.

He trotted all the way to Geryon's tower and came walking to the great table, bearing the bull on his shoulders, just as the three cooks were coming out of the tower with their heaping trays of roast pork, roast mutton, and barbecued goat. Geryon saw a stranger coming toward him bearing one of his precious bulls. With a triple bellow, he leaped up and barged through the line of cooks, upsetting the trays of food, and charged toward Hercules, who immediately turned and fled.

Now, it has been told that Geryon was as speedy as he was powerful, that running on six legs he could outrace the fastest horse. And it was true. Nevertheless, Hercules kept ahead of him. The young man had reached his full size now; he was eight feet tall. His legs were as long as a deer's but cabled with muscle. Even carrying a bull on his shoulders, he kept easily ahead of the scuttling Geryon, keeping always the same distance ahead, never running out of sight because he wanted the monster to keep following him. Sometimes he would lag a little, so that Geryon would think he was tiring and would keep chasing him.

Indeed, there was no chance that Geryon would stop chasing him. The three-bodied giant was running in a red mist of rage, and his rage was growing and growing, not only because his bull was

being stolen, but because he had been running for two hours now. He had missed one meal and was about to miss a second, and hunger was clawing his belly.

Hercules ran him around the island twice more, then decided he'd better start his final lap. For he himself was getting tired. He was sweating. The bull was growing heavier and heavier; it was struggling and was getting very hard to hold. He tried to put on more speed, but he didn't have enough left; the bull was too heavy. He looked behind and saw that Geryon was gaining on him. He almost stumbled, but caught himself. He knew that if he once fell within reach of those terrible hands it would be the end of him.

There was only one thing to do. He lifted the bull and let it fall, doing it carefully so that the animal landed on its legs and was able to gallop off. He knew that Geryon was so enraged that he would keep chasing him anyway. And he was right. Geryon ignored the bull and plowed on after Hercules, who, relieved of the bull's weight, was able to regain the ground he had lost. Nevertheless, he knew he couldn't run much longer.

He headed up the mountain path. Up, up he ran. Far ahead, he heard the bleating of the sheep and the snorting of the angry boar. He put on a burst of speed and reached the trees where the animals were tethered. He broke the chains of the boar and snapped the ropes binding goat and sheep. He slung the boar to the right, the goat to the left, and hurled the sheep straight ahead up the mountain path.

The three bodies of Geryon, coming up the road, saw their favorite food fleeing before them. These bodies were famished; they had never gone more than two hours without eating in their entire triple life, and, by now, they had missed three meals. And each one saw the meal it craved running away from him and was maddened by hunger. The left-hand body tried to swerve to the left after the goat; the right-hand body turned right after the pork; while the middle body tried to forge ahead after the bounding sheep.

Of course, trying to go in three different directions, they went nowhere. They stopped. They tried to run again. The more violently they moved, the less they could go. Enraged, the bodies fell upon each other. The six legs began to kick at each other's bodies. The six hands closed into fists and began to pound at the next face. The three mouths tried to fasten their fangs in each other's necks.

And, as Hercules watched from behind a tree, the three bodies of the single giant, ravaged by hunger, confused by wrath, fought savagely with themselves, and did Geryon the harm that no enemy could do. They battered faces to a pulp, kicked ribs in, and strangled themselves to death.

Geryon fell like a squashed spider and twitched in the dust.

"That was the joker in the prophecy," said Hercules. "He could be killed by no one else, as some god or demon had promised for some reason we'll never know. But split by wrath, each self hating the next self, he could be torn by a terrible inner war, and destroy himself. And I'm very happy to have thought of a way to

make it happen. Now, all I have to do is swim a herd of bulls ten miles across the sea to the mainland and drive them a hundred miles to Mycenae. But that will seem easy after the work I did this afternoon ... and I'm about ready for a swim.”

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THE SPEAR-BIRDS OF THE MARSH

OF ALL THE THINGS with wings in the world of long ago, the Spear-birds of the Marsh were the most dangerous. There were those who said that dragons—which also have wings—were worse, but these people were mistaken, because dragons always hunted alone, while the Spear-birds did their killing in flocks.

They were very big birds, larger than eagles, with stiltlike legs and an enormous wingspread. Their long sharp iron beaks could break rock or pierce the strongest shield. They were always hungry and ate everything that moved. But their favorite food was a nice juicy human being.

To get rid of these deadly creatures was Hercules' next task. What made it even harder was that the Spear-birds lived in a marsh that sucked like quicksand. Its mud swallowed everything that touched it; not even a crocodile could live there. In fact, the only creatures that could dwell in the marsh were water snakes and the Spear-birds themselves, who fed on the water snakes. Their stilt legs held them safely above the sucking mud, and their powerful wings could lift them clear when they wanted to fly away.

When Hercules came near the marsh he knew he was approaching a place of death. The edge of the swamp was littered with bones: shoulder bones and leg bones, spools of spine, rib

cages, and skulls. So many kinds of skulls. Cow skulls, sheep skulls, and many human skulls with their terrible smiles. Skeleton hands held rusty shields.

Hercules studied everything very carefully. The Spear-birds were feeding. He watched them drive their long beaks deep into the mud and come out with long wriggling water snakes, which they killed by snapping them in the air like whips. He watched a bird toss the limp body in the air, catch it as it came down, and swallow it whole. He tossed a stick into the marsh to test the sucking power of the mud, and the mud swallowed the stick just as the bird had swallowed the snake.

“I can’t go in there after them,” he thought. “I’ll have to make them come to me. But how shall I fight them? What weapons shall I use? The best way would be to make them rise in a flock and shoot my poison arrows into their midst. Yes, that’s how I could kill the most of them with least danger to myself. But I would be endangering others. I would be threatening the whole countryside, for the dead birds would fall back into the marsh and their bodies, poisoned by my arrows, would poison the marsh. This huge marsh feeds a whole river system by underground streams, and the rivers would be poisoned. Cattle drinking out of these rivers would sicken and die, and people, too. No, I will not use my poison arrows, even though it would be convenient. I must think of another way. But what? If I fling a lance among them, I might hit one or two, but that’s all. And to use sword or knife I’d have to bring them close

enough for them to use their terrible beaks on me. Nevertheless, I do have to get them close.”

He thought some more. At last he decided that the best way to fight the birds was to put on his lion-skin armor—which even those iron beaks couldn’t pierce—and to stand there on the shore, letting the birds dive down at him. They would blunt their beaks against the lion hide, and he would be able to finish them off with sword or knife.

He put on the lion-skin armor, the lion-head helmet, and the great gauntlets of lion hide. He took up two of the fallen shields and clanged them together, making a hideous clattering noise. The startled birds rose in a great cloud and hovered over the marsh. Hercules danced up and down, shouting at them, beckoning to them, trying to make them attack, then stood there, sword in hand, waiting.

One of them swooped low and came at him. He took a deep breath and waited. Down, down, it came, so close that he could see its snake face and the sun flashing off its iron beak. It came closer, closer, as he crouched, waiting. The bird swerved, swooped upward. He felt the draft of air from its mighty wings, but its beak never touched him, nor did it come within reach of his hands. He watched it as it climbed away.

Another bird dived. He waited. It came closer, very close. Then the same thing happened. When it was close enough for him

to see the light splintering off its beak, it swooped up, sailed away, and joined the flock.

This happened several times. Then Hercules saw the flock coasting down. He watched the birds as they settled in the marsh again and began to feed.

“I know what it is,” he said to himself. “They smell the lion skin and think I’m the lion. They’ve flown over Mount Nemea, these birds; it’s not far from here. And a lot of them probably got killed by the lion before they learned to keep their distance. And now they won’t come near me as long as I’m wearing the lion skin. But do I dare meet them uncovered? Those iron beaks will make a sieve of my body. I don’t know. I have to get them close, and I can’t wear the hide, so I’ll have to risk it.”

He cast away the lion skin, lifted the shields, clanged them again, and stood there bare-chested as the birds rose from the marsh and darkened the sky. Half-naked he stood there, watching them hover. Again he called to them and danced and beckoned. And watched a bird peel off and dive.

Hercules’ breastbone was like a curved piece of brass. His own bronzed skin was tougher than leather. Between bone and skin was a great sheathing of muscle. The Spear-bird came diving so fast that Hercules had no time to swing his sword before the bird was on him, driving its beak into his chest. The beak stuck, couldn’t go through.

Hercules felt a sickening pain, but the pain did not make him lose strength. His hand grasped the Spear-bird's neck and twisted the life out. The bird went limp. But another bird was on its way and drove its beak into his chest. He chopped with the edge of his hand, breaking that bird's neck. Now two iron beaks stuck in his chest, two dead birds dangling from them. He plucked them out of his body and flung them away. Blood poured from his chest.

And the birds were coming.

One by one, they swooped down at him, stabbing with their iron beaks. The beaks bent on his massive chest, but tore the skin until the white bone showed. As they dived and stabbed, they fell into his hands, and he broke their necks. His shoulder muscles stood out in great ridges, his back muscles in great clumps, as he twisted those necks that were tougher than bull whips.

His arms were so tired now that he could hardly lift them. Dead birds were heaped about him, but there still seemed to be as many as ever hovering above. They kept diving. He was covered with blood. He knew that he had lost too much blood. He felt himself tottering. Felt his head swarm with dizziness. He knew he couldn't keep it up.

Now, he had been very careful about choosing the place to take his stand. The marsh was ringed by boulders. Beyond the boulders was a grove of pine trees. He had chosen to meet the birds at a place where one rock lay over two others, making a kind of

shelter, which he had known he might need if he were losing the battle.

He needed it now. He dropped to the ground and crawled into the open cave. Just in time. As he pulled his leg under, a beak drove into the ground; a second later and he would have been nailed there with a beak through his foot. Before the bird could pull away, he smashed its head in with a rock. Then he crouched under his boulder roof as the birds, enraged, dived at the boulder, driving their beaks against it.

To his horror, he heard the huge rock begin to crack. He had been told that the Spear-birds could crack rocks with their beaks, but he hadn't believed they could do anything against that heavy boulder. He heard them diving down at it, chipping away at it. He saw small rocks falling off like hailstones.

"By the gods," he whispered. "Another hour of this and they'll break through that boulder and I'll be like a turtle without its shell."

He saw that the low opening of his rock shelter was filling with red light, and he knew that the sun was sinking. He tried to think how long it would be before darkness fell. It was important, because these birds flew by day and roosted by night and would not keep up the attack after dark. So he crouched there listening to the boulder crumble over his head, watching the rocks slide off to make a heap of rocks, watching the red light fade, trying to think of a way to defend himself if the monster birds did break through. So

busy was he measuring the light and planning what to do that he forgot about his pain and just prayed for darkness.

The red light faded, became a purple light, a blackish-blue light, then blackness. He kept watching the boulder overhead, listening to the beaks drive into the rock. And just as the last light went, a beak did come through. But it disappeared immediately and he heard a beating of wings and felt a trickle of draft through the hole in the boulder roof. He knew that the birds were flying away into the darkness and that he was safe until dawn.

“I can’t sit here,” he said to himself. “I must use this night I have been given. I’ve got to stop this bleeding, get some strength back, and prepare for dawn. They’ll be back at the first light.”

He pulled oregano leaves from his pouch and chewed them into a pulp, which he then spread over his wounded chest. Chiron had taught him that the leaves of the wild mint plant called oregano had great healing power over wounds made by iron. He felt the pain draining out of his chest, felt the blood beginning to clot. But he had bled so much that he was still weak as he crawled out from under the rock and made his way into the grove of trees.

For he had a plan. It was a desperate plan, but it was the best he could do. He went among the pine trees, took vines, and braided them into a rope of vines. Then braided the ropes into a cable of vines. He found a young pine tree and bent it to the ground, then let it go. It whipped out of his hands with terrific force, snapped through its own arc, and touched the ground on the other side. He

broke off a heavy branch from a fallen tree, fitted its forked end against the top of the pine, and bent the young pine again. He bent it to the ground and let it snap up. Like a giant bow it hurled the stick of wood toward the sky. Hercules bent the pine tree again, tied one of his vine cables to it, and tied the other end of the cable to the base of a nearby tree. It was a clear night, luckily, and he could see by moonlight. He found another young pine and did the same thing. He kept bending pines and tying them in a bent position until he had cocked some forty trees.

By now he was very tired. The wounds on his chest had opened again and were bleeding. He chewed more oregano leaves and plastered them to his chest with great scoops of marsh mud. Now half his work was done; but he still had the other half to do, and the sky was growing pale. He had only an hour until dawn.

He raced back to his rock shelter, spread out his lion skin, and shoveled the chipped rocks onto the hide. Then he drew the four corners of the lion skin together into a great sack and swung the sack to his shoulder. It was so heavy it made him walk bowlegged, but he toiled back into the grove of trees again. One by one, he visited his bent pine trees and stuck rocks into the top branches, wedging them carefully—tightly enough so that they would not fall, but loosely enough so that they would fly out of the trees when the time came. The bent trees strained and quivered against their binding of vine as he wedged in the rocks that the Spear-birds had broken for him. But the vine cables held, and Hercules kept

working until the sack was empty and the bent trees were loaded with rocks.

Now the sky was pink. He heard a loud rusty cawing as the birds settled on the marsh and began to hunt water snakes. But feeding kept them too far apart. Each bird had its own territory and drove its beak into its own space, spearing the snakes. He needed the birds in one tightly packed flock.

He picked up the two rusty shields again, stretched his arms wide, and clapped the shields together, making a horrid metallic din. The birds beat their wings, tearing their legs from the mud, rising in a great cloud out of the marsh, blotting out the pink sky.

Hercules turned and bolted toward the grove of trees. The birds hung in the air, waiting for him to show himself. But now he was among his bent pines. He drew his knife and lashed a vine cable. The young pine whipped in an arc, loosing a storm of stones. With all the force of the springing pine behind them, the rocks hurtled more swiftly than an arrow shot from a bow or a stone flung from a sling and swept through the flock in a murderous hail.

Birds dropped. Hercules watched them fall. He yelled for joy and sprang from tree to tree, slashing vines. The trees whipped up, loosing their hail of stones, sending them among the flock. The flock broke. Single birds began to scoot away. None dived.

The pink sky was yellow now, a glorious full dawn. The marsh was free of birds. Dead birds lay among the bones of the

creatures they had killed, and soon their bones would be added to the rubble.

Hercules was very weary. He had lost much blood. But he had scattered the flock and killed most of the Spear-birds. It would be a long time before they could terrorize the countryside again. He picked up his lion skin and his weapons and limped away from the marsh, heading for a river where he could swim and cleanse himself.

“Then,” he thought, “I’ll sleep for the rest of the day and all tonight. And tomorrow I’ll set out, but not for Mycenae. No, I’ve earned a bit of rest. I shall go to Thebes and see my parents and tell Iole the story of my adventures.”

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THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

IN THOSE DAYS, EVERYONE knew that the earth was flat and that the sky was held up by mountains. But at the very northwestern corner of the world, in the uttermost island behind the West Wind, that part of the sky was held up by a Titan named Atlas, who did a mountain's work. He was there because in the beginning of time he had fought against Zeus, and it was his punishment to stand in that orchard forever holding the sky on his shoulders.

The place he stood was called the Garden of the Hesperides, but it was more of an orchard than a garden. Apple trees grew in that orchard, and one tree bore apples of solid gold. This tree had not always been there. It was Mother Earth's wedding gift to Hera and had been planted in the Garden of the Gods on Olympus. Hera had been very selfish about these apples and would never give any to the other gods, who, after a while, began to help themselves. So she dug up her tree, took it as far as she could—to the western edge of the world—and replanted it in the orchard there. And to make sure that the fruit would not be stolen, she set a giant serpent to guard the tree. It wound itself around the trunk and devoured anyone who came near.

To fetch one of these golden apples from the dangerous orchard on the western rim of the world, where the Titan, Atlas,

held the sky on his shoulders, became the next task facing Hercules.

Hercules was given this message as he stood before the iron gates of Mycenae, and again it was Copeus who brought him the king's commands.

"I'll need some directions, my friend," said Hercules. "Everyone has heard of this tree and these apples, but no one seems to know how to get there."

"Only one creature in the world can tell you that," said Copeus. "The Old Man of the Sea alone knows the secret of the orchard."

"And where do I find him?"

"He dwells on the island of Ner, which is his kingdom. His own name is Nereus, but he is known as the Old Man of the Sea. And I must warn you: he's a pretty unpleasant sort of fellow. Not at all easy to deal with."

"I'm getting used to that," said Hercules. "Everything about these missions gets unpleasant sooner or later. Farewell."

Hercules, as usual, felt very much alone in the world as he set out on his mission. But this time he was less alone. For someone else was also thinking very hard about the Old Man of the Sea. It happened this way.

After leaving Thebes, Iole and the Blind Man had wandered here and there for many months and had at last reached a wild and lonely beach, where they decided to stay. They built a little

driftwood shack and lived there. The Blind Man spent hours telling her stories, and the more he told, the more she wanted to hear. She loved his stories. He also taught her to play the lyre, which he played beautifully. Often, in the evening, they would sit on a rock at the very edge of the sea, and he would touch the strings and sing a story-song. The fish would come to the surface and bob in the swell, listening.

Iole made friends with these music-loving fish, especially a dolphin, because the Blind Man had known him a long time and had taught the dolphin to speak. But the man was not easy to live with. Sometimes a mood would come on him, and he would sit on his rock all day from dawn to dusk, gazing out at the sea, refusing to eat, not speaking a word. And would sit there all night, too, without sleeping, his milky eyes looking out into the darkness of the waters. Then, Iole knew, the next dawn he would be choking with visions and gasp out strange words. These words would dance upon the air and form a picture of what was to be.

She stayed close to him on such dawns, although he didn't seem to know whether she was there or not. But she always listened thirstily to his prophecies, for she knew that they were very important to her without knowing why. Upon this dawn, he arose suddenly from his rock, stretched his arms to the rising sun, and cried, "The apples, the golden apples! The eight-armed fish, the lobster-faced liar, beware, beware ... He's a liar, Hercules, beware, beware ..."

Iole saw him sway on his feet. His arms dropped. She leaped to him and flung her arm around his waist, easing him to the sand, where he lay insensible. This had happened before, and she knew what to do. She dragged him up on the beach beyond the high-tide mark, fetched a blanket from the shack to cover him with, and set some lentil soup to boil. For he would awake very hungry, she knew, and could not be questioned about his words until he had eaten. And she had to question him very closely, for this prophecy concerned Hercules.

He woke up after a few hours and ate his soup greedily. Then Iole asked him about the words he had spoken out of his trance.

“What do they mean, Grandfather?”

He sat there silently.

“Tell me. Please ...”

“I’d rather not.”

“It’s about Hercules.”

“That’s why. What I saw in my darkness will grieve you.”

“It won’t. I mean, he’s always fighting monsters. Whatever he’s doing now can’t be worse than what he’s done before. What is the eight-armed fish?”

“An octopus. A giant one. One which has killed and eaten a great white shark.”

“What has it to do with Hercules?”

“This octopus guards an island called Ner, where dwells one named Nereus, known as the Old Man of the Sea. And Hercules is

coming to visit him. Now, one of two things will happen, and I don't know which is worse. Either Hercules will be devoured by the octopus, or he will reach the island and question Nereus, who will give him a fatal answer."

"What will he ask Nereus?"

"Hercules' task is to fetch a golden apple from the Garden of the Hesperides. Only Nereus knows the secret of that orchard—how to find it, and how to pick the apples."

"And he's a liar, isn't he? You called him a lobster-faced liar."

"He is that. He has been bribed by King Eurystheus to tell Hercules exactly the wrong way to go about things, a way that will get him killed in the shortest possible time. Don't cry."

"I'm not crying, I'm thinking. I fear the liar more than the octopus. I've seen Hercules fight the Hydra, and I know what he can do, although he fights better on land than in the water. But he's so honest himself that he doesn't understand about lies and liars. He'll believe Nereus. He must be warned."

"How can he be warned? He sails toward Ner now; I've seen him sailing upon the waters of sleep."

"I shall warn him. Good-by, Grandfather."

Before he could say anything, she hugged him, kissed his blind eyes, and flashed away. She ran to the edge of the beach, shouting and singing. Her voice mixed with the wind and the seething of the waves. A dolphin breached in a glittering arc, slid into the water again, and stuck its head out near her.

“You have called?”

“I have called, and you have come.” She leaped onto his back.

“Do you want a ride?”

“A long ride—to the island of Ner.”

The dolphin stopped swimming. He turned his head back to look at Iole, who was riding him astride, as though he were a horse. “Dearest girl,” he said, “the sea holds many dreadful creatures, and there are few that I fear. I have fought off killer whales, slid through the coils of sea serpents, and will dare them again if I must. But the one creature I fear is the giant octopus that guards the island of Ner.”

“But I’ve adopted you as my best friend and my water steed,” said Iole. “If you won’t take me there, I can’t go. And I must.”

“Why?”

She told him about what the Blind Man had seen, about Hercules and the golden apples, and Nereus, and how she had to warn Hercules about the lies that would be told by the Old Man of the Sea.

“But why should he wish to harm Hercules?”

“He has been bribed by the king of Mycenae, who hates Hercules and is always trying to destroy him.”

“I see. And do you know how the king would have bribed the Old Man of the Sea? What he values most is food for his octopus. And that monster’s favorite food is a child. The king would have promised to send Nereus a shipload of slave children to feed the

octopus. If you go to that island—that is, if I can get you safely past the octopus—why, then Nereus will catch you and toss you right back into the monster’s jaws. Don’t risk it, I beg you.”

“I must go. Will you take me?”

“If you must go, I suppose I must take you.”

The island of Ner was too far, Hercules thought, to reach by swimming. He chopped down a tree, trimmed it of branches, cut it into logs, and lashed them together with vines. Then he stuck his spear into the raft so that it stood upright, making a tall mast, and hung his lion skin as a sail. He attached a heavy flat piece of wood to the stern of his raft as a steering oar and set sail. An east wind bore him westward, which was the way he wanted to go. In two days he came to the island of Ner. It was girded by rocks, and he sailed around the island looking for a way through.

He heard a curious slithering sound. Before his amazed eyes something grew out of the water. He thought it was a snake, then saw it wasn’t. It groped toward the raft; he saw that it had a rubbery tip that could curl like a hand. It slid onto the raft and tried to grasp a log. He raised his foot and stamped on it with his heel. It whisked away. But then another one came, and then another long snaky arm. In the frothing water he saw a great round thing, and many other wavering arms. The raft began to rock violently, and he realized that he was being attacked by a giant octopus. His raft was long and broad; he had lashed many logs together. It was a huge platform of logs and was very hard to overturn. Had it been a skiff

or even a larger ship, the octopus would have tipped it over like a wine cup. But the raft would not capsize; it tilted violently, but held. Hercules kept stamping on the rubbery arms, feeling the logs splinter under his feet as he stamped, but balancing himself on the pitching raft.

He knew he couldn't keep it up. The raft was tilting too steeply. He knew he would have to slide off and fight in the water where he would be at the monster's mercy. He leaped to the spear which was his mast, wrenched it out of the log, and jabbed mightily, punching holes in three of the arms. Now the raft was slippery with blood. Now five arms were sweeping over the logs, and to his horror, he saw the poached eyes and horny beak of the octopus, hoisting itself on board. Swiftly, he donned the lion skin. In that moment of utmost peril, his mind went back, back, to when he had been a baby in a bull-hide cradle and the serpents had come at him. These octopus arms hugging him now were like serpents. They could not crush him in his lion skin, but he knew that the octopus would hug him tight, fall into the water with him, hold him under till he drowned, and eat him at its leisure.

But now his big powerful hands were doing what his baby hands had done so long ago. He seized two of the arms and tied them together in a double knot. He stooped suddenly, caught two other arms, and knotted them together. Working swiftly, swiftly, straining every muscle, wrestling the enormous sea beast, falling backward under the hard blubbery mass, he took its full weight on

his chest and ribs, bracing himself so that he would not be crushed. He felt the terrible beak hammering against the lion hide; nevertheless, his hands kept working, and two by two he tied the arms together so that they could not move.

He rose suddenly. The beast crashed to the logs, splintering them. Hercules cast off his lion skin, stooped, lifted the huge knotted octopus, holding the beaked mouth away from him, and threw the monster into the sea. He watched it sink. With its legs tied it could not swim. It sank to the bottom. Its brutish little brain could not think with its legs tied. When it grasped something, it always ate. Now all its legs were grasping something. It was grasping itself. Its spark of intelligence turned to utter greed, and it began to eat itself. It ate itself all up until only the mouth was left. Then that swallowed itself.

Hercules was in the water now. His raft was a wreckage of logs. He draped his lion skin over two of the logs that were still bound together, sat astride them, and poled himself toward shore with his spear. He threaded his way through the rocks, fending them off with his spear, poling himself in by main strength until he was in shallow water and could wade ashore.

It was dark now; he knew he had better wait until morning before he hunted for Nereus. He lay down and fell fast asleep, and was still sleeping when dawn began to smolder in the sky. He was unaware that Iole had come to the island riding on the dolphin.

Iole slid off the dolphin's back, kissed his nose, and said, "Farewell, my friend."

"You might want to get off this island fast," said the dolphin. "If you need me, just sing out. I'll be somewhere offshore."

"Thank you," said Iole.

She kissed him again, and he whisked out of sight. She didn't exactly know what to do now that she was on the island. She couldn't do anything until Hercules came. Then she had to get to him and warn him to believe nothing the Old Man of the Sea might say.

"But what will I do if that horrid thing finds me first?" she thought. "I'd better hide. Where, though? And I'm so hungry."

She searched for a berry bush, found one, and began to eat. The berries were very sour, but there was nothing else. She ate a handful and was just finishing when she heard something howl.

She climbed a tree. Then saw something coming that almost made her heart stop beating. Nereus was shambling along the beach. She knew it must be he because the Blind Man had said something about a "lobster-face," and there couldn't be two creatures in the world so ugly. Nereus was the only son of the Lobster Queen and a fisherman she had caught, and, unfortunately, he looked more like his mother. His upper body was that of a scaly old man, but he had a lobster face with antennae and stalked eyes. His hands were enormous lobster claws, and he had webbed feet.

As we know, Iole was a very brave girl, but this thing was too gruesome. She opened her eyes and looked at him and quickly closed them again. He was prowling along the beach. Occasionally, he dug in the sand with his claw, plucked out a clam, and crunched it, shell and all. Once in a while, he looked out to sea and howled for his octopus; he liked to see it now and then, just to know it was there.

“Oh my,” thought Iole, “that creepy crawly thing doesn’t even have to try to kill me. If he ever touches me with one of those horrid claws, I’ll curl up and die. But where can I hide? Not here. I’m sure he can climb trees. I’d better find a cave or a cleft in the rocks anyway.”

Suddenly he turned and came toward her. She held her breath. He stopped and listened, his stalked eyes veering and tipping, looking up once, it seemed, into the branches of Iole’s tree. She had to let out her breath but didn’t dare to. He walked away.

She waited for a while after he had disappeared around a bend of the beach, then crept down the tree and went along the shore. It was littered with rocks, large and small, but it was a flat place, and there were no caves as such. She did find a deep cleft in the rocks that looked wide enough for her to get into and deep enough to hide in.

“This will have to do,” she thought. “But I’m liable to wait a long time before Hercules comes; I’d better get some more berries and take them in with me.”

She ran back to the bush, tore a piece off her tunic, and filled the rag with berries. Just as she was tying it into a sack, she heard a howling. She whirled, and saw Nereus scuttling toward her. She flashed away. He came with amazing speed on those webbed feet. He almost caught her. One claw actually did catch a bit of her hair that was whipping behind her as she ran. Her horror became speed. She reached the cleft in the rocks and dived in just as he stretched his arm for her, clacking his claws. She ducked, and the pincers clattered over her head. She shrank deeper into the cleft, as far as she could go. She knew Nereus could see her because she could see him, dancing with rage.

“Come out!” he howled. “Come out immediately! My octopus is very hungry. You’re not fat enough for a real meal but you’ll make a nice snack, so come out.”

“Oh, Hercules,” she said to herself, “how I wish you were here.”

She said it like a prayer, but unlike most prayers, it was answered immediately. She heard a beloved golden voice bawling: “Ho there, old fellow, I need a word with you.” And peering through the rocks, she saw a pair of tall bronzed legs planted on the sand. Through all her grief and fear she hadn’t allowed herself to weep, but now she wept tears of pure joy. She saw Nereus turn away from the cleft, and she crawled up closer to hear what was being said:

“You there,” said Hercules. “Stop that howling. I want to ask you something.”

Nereus turned, snarling. But when he saw a giant youth standing before him, twirling an enormous spear in one hand, he tried to change his snarl into a smile and looked uglier than ever.

“I beg your pardon, young man,” he said, “but I’ve been busy with a very naughty little girl who’s refusing to feed a poor starving octopus.”

“He’s just eaten,” said Hercules. “Tell me, where can I find Nereus, otherwise known as the Old Man of the Sea?”

“You’ve found him. That’s me.”

“Then please tell me how to find the Garden of the Hesperides where grow the golden apples.”

“Gladly shall I tell you how to reach that secret place.”

“And how to pick the apples, and what dangers to avoid?”

“Gladly, gladly.”

“Well, start talking, my fishy friend.”

“You must guide yourself by this verse:

Honey to the snake.

Titan’s burden take ...

To prove the giant’s worth,

Stretch him flat on earth ...”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s a magical verse and full of riddles. You’ll have to solve it for yourself.”

Hercules picked up Nereus by the scruff of the neck and dangled him high over the rock. “Riddle me no riddles, lobster-face, or I’ll break you into bite-sized pieces and feed you to the gulls.”

“Gently, dear sir. I was just about to say that in your case, perhaps, plain words are best.”

“Much the best,” growled Hercules.

“Won’t you put me down?”

“When you tell me plainly what I want to know.”

“I could speak much more comfortably if I were on my feet again.”

“You don’t know what discomfort means yet. But you will if you don’t start talking.”

“Well, this is the meaning of the first line. Wrapped about the trunk of Hera’s apple tree is an enormous serpent named Ladon. He is there to keep off thieves and will certainly make a meal of you unless you buy him off.”

“How?”

“With honey. This Ladon has the sweetest tooth ever known, ninety-six of the sweetest teeth, in fact. If you give him enough honeycombs to munch, he’ll be so happy eating them he’ll let you walk away with all the apples you want. That’s the meaning of the first line, ‘Honey to the snake.’ As for the second line, ‘Titan’s

burden take ...' you must know that Atlas, eldest of the Titans, once was foolish enough to rebel against Zeus, and as punishment he has to bear that part of the sky on his shoulders. Now he's been there for many many centuries and is very weary of his task. He may ask you to take his place for a while. If you agree to help him, he'll let you steal some apples, for part of his duties is to guard them also."

"What do the other lines mean?"

"Please set me down. I'm getting dizzy."

Hercules shook him slightly. "Keep talking. There are worse things than dizziness."

"Yes, yes. Third and fourth lines: 'To prove the giant's worth,/stretch him flat on earth.' Before you return you will have to wrestle the giant, Anteus. Now, he's an awful creature to have to wrestle. Tall as a cedar he is, ten times your own height. And so wide that he looks squat. But he has one weakness, and if you know what it is, you may save yourself. He hates the memory of his own childhood and can't bear any contact with his mother."

Hercules' fingers tightened around the scaly throat. "More riddles?"

"Aaagh. Loosen your fingers, man! I can't tell you anything if you strangle me."

Hercules eased his grip.

"Thank you, thank you," moaned Nereus. "I meant no riddles, believe me. By 'his mother,' I mean Mother Earth. Anteus,

mightiest wrestler in the world, has this one weak spot: if you lay him flat on the ground, he loses all his strength and becomes as helpless as an infant. That's what those lines mean: 'To prove the giant's worth,/stretch him flat on earth.' Lay him flat on the ground, if you can, and he'll lose all his strength. So that's the secret. Three secrets, in fact. I've unlocked the riddle of the verse and given you the information you need to take the apples and get yourself back alive. So now you owe me something."

"Well, I like to pay my debts. What can I do?"

"See that selfish girl hiding in there? Please pry her out of those rocks."

Still holding the Old Man of the Sea, Hercules picked up the huge boulder and tossed it away like a pebble. He lifted the girl and brought her face to face with Nereus.

"Oh, Hercules," she whispered. "I'm so glad you've come ..."

"Iole! Dear dear girl, what are you doing here?"

"I came to warn you against him. He's a liar. He's been paid to lie to you. Whatever he told you, you've got to do the opposite."

"No, she's lying," whimpered Nereus. "She's lying faster than she can talk. Wicked wicked wicked girl! Are you trying to get me killed? Take it back! Please ..."

"Sounds like the truth to me," said Hercules.

"No, Hercules, no!" cried Nereus. "She's just trying to get me in trouble."

"She's succeeding."

“No, no. Please listen ...”

“I listened to you before, didn’t I? And you chose to tell me lies.”

“I didn’t, I didn’t. I’m so honest, it’s unbelievable. Let me go, and I’ll give you a bushel of pearls.”

“Too generous, Nereus.”

Lifting his arm high, he slammed Nereus feet first into a flat rock with such force that the Old Man of the Sea was driven into the rock like a nail into soft wood. But he was immortal for all his ugliness, so he could not die, although driven so deeply into the rock that only his mouth remained unburied. And his lips opened and closed, sucking little creatures from the tide, the first sea anemone.

Hercules was left holding Iole, who was looking up at him, smiling through her tears.

“Your face is dirty,” he said gently.

“Put me down.”

He set her on the ground. She raced down the beach to a tidal pool and washed her tear-stained face. Then Hercules sat on a rock. She snuggled in his lap, and he stroked her hair.

“How did you know about Nereus?” he said. “And how did you get here?”

Sitting there under the morning sun with her head against his shoulder, she told him all about the Blind Man, and how she had left Thebes and wandered with the old prophet, and what he had

seen in the vision, and how she had ridden the dolphin to the island of Ner to warn Hercules. She also told him that she had decided not to marry him after all.

“That may be just as well,” said Hercules. “I think I’ve promised to marry someone else.”

“Who?”

“A princess named Dienera. Her father is king of Calydon.”

“Why did you? What’s she like? Where did you meet her?”

He told her about his fight with the river and cleaning the Augean stables.

“You don’t have to marry her just because you saved her, you know. Do you love her?”

“Well, she asked me that too, and I told her I didn’t know. She says it doesn’t matter because she loves me enough for both of us.”

“That’s nonsense, of course.”

“Perhaps, but she began to cry, and the only way I could make her stop was by promising to marry her.”

“How about your promise to me?”

“You’re not old enough yet.”

“I’m growing fast. Don’t you notice how much taller I am?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve got to break your promise to me or to her. You promised me first.”

“Didn’t you just tell me you’d changed your mind about the whole thing?”

“Well, I might change it again. I have time before I’m old enough.”

“But she’s old enough now, you see. And when I tell her anything she doesn’t want to hear, she starts to cry.”

“I can cry too, you know.”

“But you won’t, will you? You’re my brave girl who saved me from the Hydra and came here to save me from the lies of Nereus. You’re the bravest smartest girl in the world; you’re no cry-baby.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t feel just as sad as that weepy princess. Maybe even sadder.”

“How about my brother, Iphicles. He’ll wait for you if I ask him. He’s a good little chap.”

“I don’t like little chaps. I like them exactly your size.”

“He’ll be king of Thebes one day. Wouldn’t you like to be queen?”

“Not a bit—unless you’re the king.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t be any good as a king. I don’t like to tell people what to do.”

“Let Dienera marry your brother. She sounds like she’d enjoy being queen.”

“Say, that’s not a bad idea. I’ll discuss it with her as soon as I get back with the apples.”

“Don’t tell her it’s *my* idea. Tell her Iphicles has fallen madly in love with her and can’t eat and can’t sleep because he’s thinking

of her all the time. And that he has asked you to find out if she prefers diamonds or rubies or emeralds, or all three combined.”

“That doesn’t sound like Iphicles.”

“What’s the difference? She won’t know that. You just tell her exactly what I told you, word for word.”

“I’ll never remember it all.”

“I’ll write it down for you, and you must memorize it. You don’t really want to marry her and make me very sad, do you?”

“Truth is, I’m not ready to be anybody’s husband yet. I have too much fighting left to do.”

“Absolutely. And in a few years you’ll have wiped out all the monsters in the world and be ready for other things.”

“Unless one of them wipes me out first.”

“I suppose you won’t take me with you to the Garden of the Hesperides?”

“No, Iole dear. I can’t take you there.”

“Good-bye then. Remember, do everything just the opposite of what Nereus said.”

She waded out into the surf, whistling. The dolphin slid in on a wave, and Hercules watched as she mounted the creature and rode away toward the horizon.

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HADES ASKS FOR HELP

HADES, RULER OF THE Dead, was in a bad mood. His demons had just taken a ghost count in the Land beyond Death and had told him what he did not want to hear: his kingdom was not growing as fast as it should. He decided he'd better do something about this and set up a meeting with his brother, Poseidon, god of the sea; his nephew Ares, god of war; and his sister, Hera.

It was to be a secret meeting, because he didn't want Zeus to know anything about his plans. So they couldn't meet on Olympus, and his own kingdom, Tartarus, was too gloomy; no one wanted to go there. But Poseidon invited them to meet in one of his undersea grottoes, where Zeus couldn't see them, and where they would be served a delicious seafood dinner by green-haired water nymphs.

They met in the great grotto, which had glass walls so that they could see the giant turtles, the octopi, the gliding sharks, the blind slugs, and all the curious creatures which dwell at the bottom of the sea. The chamber was full of filtered green light and was very quiet.

"Sister, brother, nephew," said Hades, "I need your help. My kingdom isn't growing fast enough. People are living too long. We just can't depend on natural causes any more. So the favor I must ask divides itself into three favors.

“You, brother Poseidon, please whistle up some dreadful storms, not just the kind that wreck a few ships here and there, but real killers, you know. Enormous tempests, hurricanes, typhoons—the kind that blow whole cities away. Tidal waves that will wash over an entire island, drowning everybody. A month or two of such weather will do wonders for me ...

“You, Ares, you know, of course, what I want you to do. There’s been much too much peace lately. It’s breaking out everywhere. Go down with sword and shield and plant the seeds of hatred. Make people fear each other, make them attack each other. Not just private duels—I want you to hurl whole nations against each other. Tell lies, start rumors, go from one side of a border to the other, any border, killing people on both sides, so each country will blame the other for the murders. Then plant the idea of huge armies in the minds of kings, and since big armies can’t just sit at home eating their heads off, they will be sent to attack each other, and we shall have our wars, bloody ones, with fields full of corpses and shoals of souls to fatten my realm. Between your fire storms and Poseidon’s water storms, hell will prosper again.”

“I’ll be glad to do what I can,” said Ares.

“What you have asked me will mean a lot of bother,” said Poseidon, “but I know you will help me when I need it, so I agree.”

“Why have you called me here?” said Hera. “I am queen of the gods, it is true, but I can do nothing that Zeus would object to. And he would dislike this plan of yours very much, Hades. For

some reason, I don't know why, he likes that pesky race called humankind and seeks to protect them from harm."

"Sister and queen," said Hades, "I know that you do not share your husband's strange affection for humankind. Nevertheless, without meaning to, you have been helping him help them."

"What do you mean?"

"In your hatred of that gigantic young Hercules, you set him to fighting monsters all over the world. I know that your intentions have been good, I know that you have wanted to destroy him, but instead he's been destroying these monsters. And for every monster that he kills, he is saving thousands of people, whom the monsters used to devour. So far, he's wiped out the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, the three-bodied Geryon, and a flock of Spear-birds."

"Not to mention two of my finest sea serpents," grumbled Poseidon.

"He's been very lucky, so far," said Hera. "I have no doubt that Zeus has been giving him secret help. I can't prove it, but it must be so."

"Whatever the reason, dear sister, you simply must kill him before he kills any more monsters and saves any more people."

"He's on a journey now," said Hera. "And this one should really finish him off. He's trying to steal golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides. Now, my tree there is guarded by a giant serpent named Ladon, an enormous thing, dear Poseidon, which makes your two serpents look like earthworms. If, by any chance,

he should escape Ladon, then Atlas will get him. Hercules is big, but he's no match for the mountain-sized Atlas, whose temper is very short, because he's tired of holding up the sky. And if, by some miracle, he should escape Atlas also, there is another fearsome giant awaiting him in Libya. But I don't think he'll get that far."

"Terrible creatures, you describe," said Hades. "But the Nemean Lion and the Hydra and the octopus were supposed to be deadly, too, and you know what he did to them. What I'm asking, dear Hera, is for you, personally, to make sure he dies before the month is out."

"I can't kill him myself," said Hera. "Zeus would find out and would punish me very painfully. I'll have to do it through someone else."

"Well, get someone intelligent, not a stupid monster," said Hades. "Use someone he won't suspect. Do it by treachery. And supervise every step of the murder yourself."

"Brother," said Hera, "one way or other, Hercules shall die before the month is out. Upon my oath as queen of the gods, it shall be done."

"Farewell, I'm off to start some wars," said Ares.

"As soon as you're gone, I'll see about those tempests and tidal waves and things," said Poseidon.

"Brother, sister, nephew," said Hades, "I thank you all. Do your worst, that's all anyone can ask."

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THE GOLDEN APPLES

IT WAS A HILLY ISLAND. Meadows ran right down to the water's edge. Deer and wild horses came down to the sea to swim. Towering above all was Atlas, snow-bearded, with huge misty eyes, holding the sky on his shoulders. If you didn't know about the Titan, you would think he was a mountain.

Fruit trees grew thickly in the orchard, and Hercules searched for a long time before he saw the golden apples flashing among dark green leaves. He came closer, stepping carefully, waiting for the serpent to show itself. Then he saw it and stood there, amazed.

He had heard that Ladon would be wrapped around the tree trunk, but the serpent had unwrapped itself and was coiled in front of the tree. It raised its head as Hercules came near—at least, he thought it must be its head because he saw two eyes. Otherwise, the serpent's body ran right into its head; its jaws were hinged at the tail. In other words, Ladon was a quarter-mile of living mouth lined with teeth.

“Well,” said Hercules to himself, “how in the world am I expected to get past that monster? What did Nereus say? ‘Honey to the snake.’ But everything he said was a lie, wasn't it? And it doesn't really seem that I could buy off this beast with a dab of honey. What shall I do, though? He's too big to strangle. No blade will pierce that leather hide. I can't use my poison arrows and spoil

all the fruit of the orchard and poison the rivers and streams of this beautiful island. ‘Honey to the snake.’ Nereus was a liar, but the best liars always throw in a tiny bit of truth to make their lies sound good. Honeycomb, bees ... Perhaps I’m getting an idea.”

He backed away from the serpent and angled off into the woods searching for a dead tree. He reached in and pulled out a beehive and hung it from his belt. The bees buzzed angrily. They swarmed out in a black cloud and settled on his chest and shoulders, stabbing with their stingers. But his skin was too tough; the stingers broke off. The bees crept back into their hive. He searched for other hollow trees. When he came back to the orchard, his belt was hung with buzzing cones.

He walked slowly toward Hera’s tree. The serpent saw him and opened its jaws. Hercules was looking right down a quarter-mile of pink and black gullet set with ivory knives. The jaws slithered toward him. He took a hive from his belt and, aiming carefully, threw it straight into the jaws, through the hedge of teeth, and saw it travel down the gullet to the jaw hinge at the serpent’s tail.

One by one, he pulled the hives from his belt and hurled them into the yawning gullet. The serpent, drunk on the smell of honey, closed its jaws. But it wasn’t only combs being crunched. The bees were in there too, and bees make a peppery dish. They swarmed out and thrust the wicked little hooks of their tails into the serpent’s

palate, the only place on its body not covered by leather hide. It was like eating fire.

In instant agony, Ladon uncoiled with the force of a thousand steel springs. High, high into the air went the serpent, tail flailing. Hercules held his oak-tree club, waiting. The serpent turned in the air and came plunging down at him. He swung his great club, smashing it into Ladon's body, splitting it open, shattering its fangs. Bits of ivory and honeycomb rained down on the meadow, and the body of the serpent, squashed like an earthworm by a gardener's spade, fell into the sea and sank out of sight.

Hercules walked toward Hera's tree. He reached for an apple. Thunder spoke out of the clear sky.

"Stop, thief!"

He dropped his hand. He knew it must be Atlas speaking, and he remembered that he would have to meet the Titan before he could take the apples. He walked through the orchard and made his way to the other side of the island where Atlas stood. Here he saw the heavy blue bowl of the sky pressing on the shoulders of the Titan. He stood at the giant feet and looked up, up toward the snowy beard and the vast misty eyes. He heard the voice rumble again.

"Off with you, little thief, before I start an avalanche and bury you under a ton of rock."

"I'm no thief," said the young man. "I do not steal. I take. I am Hercules."

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place? I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been standing here for a thousand years, waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For someone strong enough to hold up my part of the sky while I take a little rest. The name they spoke was Hercules.”

“ ‘They’ are mistaken, whoever ‘they’ are,” said Hercules. “I haven’t come here to hold up any sky, but to pick some apples.”

“One little stamp of my foot and a ton of rocks will roll down on you,” said Atlas. “So you won’t get very far with your apples.”

Indeed, just at that moment, a huge boulder came rolling down the slope of the Titan’s thigh. Hercules had to leap away or he would have been crushed beneath it.

“That was just a sample,” said Atlas.

“All right,” called Hercules. “I’ll make a bargain with you. If you let me have an apple or two, I’ll take your place for a little while.”

“I agree. I agree. Take the sky.”

“But only for a very short while. I’m supposed to be strong for a human being, but I’m no Titan, you know. If I take the sky from you, you must take it back quickly.”

“Agreed, agreed,” said Atlas. “Are you going to stand there talking about it for another thousand years? Climb to the top of that hill there, and I’ll pass you the sky.”

Hercules climbed to the top of a nearby hill and called out, “Before I take it, just tell me in plain words how long you’ll be.”

“Not long, not long. I just want to stretch my legs a bit. I’ll run across to that orchard, pick your apples, and come back.”

“Do you promise?”

“Upon my word as a Titan—Titans are older than the gods and much more honest.”

And Atlas, moving swiftly for something so large, lifted the bowl of the sky from his shoulders and set its rim on the shoulders of Hercules. His knees sagged. He felt them sagging. He felt his spine crumbling. But he couldn’t bear to show any weakness. Pride became a steel rod running from his soles to the top of his head, stiffening his backbone. His knees locked. Thighs and legs bunched like rock, welding him to the mountain top. He stood there, hunched, muscles writhing, stood there on the mountain top holding the sky on his shoulders.

Atlas skipped over the island, trampling trees and blowing eagle nests out of the cliffs with the wind of his laughter.

Hercules stood, waiting. His shoulders were on fire. He felt his ribs caving in. He could hardly turn his head. He rolled his eyes, searching for the Titan. The light faded. He felt the sinking sun warm his back, saw his own hunched shadow on the plain below. It was a sight he didn’t want to see.

“Atlas,” he called. “Atlas!”

A thunderous chuckle rolled across the valley.

“Atlas! Where are you? Come back!”

Thunder chuckled again. “Little fool, I’ll never come back.”

“You promised.”

“I lied.”

Hercules, with great effort, moved his head, shifting his gaze upward. The evening star had come out. It is the first star to burn in the western sky. He looked deep into its greenish blue light; it seemed to be laughing at him. He shrugged. And the star fell hissing into the sea, starting a plume of steam and leaving a scar of light in the sky.

“Hold still!” roared Atlas. “If you move, the stars will fall, and we will burn, burn ...”

“I can’t help moving,” said Hercules. “My shoulders are sore.”

“Never mind pain. It’s only for eternity. Bear your burden like a man.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Hercules. “But I’ll need a pad of some kind. My lion pelt will do. If I can fold it on my shoulders under the edge of the sky, then I’ll be able to stand here forever and not twitch or shake the stars.”

“Very well,” said Atlas. “Use your pelt.”

“But you must hold the sky for a bit, while I fold the pelt on my shoulders.”

“Oh, no,” said Atlas. “Out of the question. Never again will I hold that sky.”

Hercules shrugged. The horn of the moon snapped off and the tide, feeling its silver reins loosen, sprang upon the beach. Atlas found himself knee-deep in water. It swirled higher and higher.

“Clumsy little idiot!” he bellowed. “Miserable weakling! You cracked the moon and unbound the tides.”

“My shoulders are getting sorer and sorer,” said Hercules. “And look, there are more stars out now. They’ll be raining down in a minute. Better let me fix that pad.”

He saw Atlas wading toward him.

“All right, all right,” called the Titan. “I’ll hold that accursed sky again, but just for a second. Then you must take it back and bear it forever.”

“I promise,” said Hercules.

Atlas groaned, hunching his back again under the awful weight of the sky. Hercules, feeling light as a feather and full of joy, raced down the slope of the mountain and splashed through the shrinking tide to where the apple tree stood. He filled his pouch with the golden fruit.

“Stop! Stop! What are you doing?” cried Atlas.

“Breaking the same promise you did. Taking a few apples.”

Atlas lifted his gigantic foot, preparing to stamp, and to start an avalanche that would bury Hercules under a ton of rock. But the stars were still wobbling and began to rain spears of fire. And Atlas had to steady himself quickly and quiet the sky. For in the beginning of the world, all the gods had helped adorn the heavens and were very proud of their great chandelier of stars. He did not dare let it break.

“Farewell,” called Hercules. “Don’t think badly of me. I, too, have burdens which I can’t pass on to anyone else.”

Atlas didn’t answer. He was weeping. His tears were snowflakes, the first of that year.

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ZEUS LOOKS DOWN

DEEP DOWN BENEATH THE earth, in the very depths of Tartarus, Hades sat on his ivory and ebony throne watching the hordes of the newly dead passing before him driven by demons. Hades was so happy, he almost smiled, for he was getting the help he asked for, and his kingdom was growing and growing.

Poseidon prowled the waters of the world. He whistled up the four winds and sent them rampaging across the sea, sinking ships and drowning their crews. He whipped the winds into a wild circular dance, which became tempest and hurricane, sweeping away forests, farms, entire cities. He quaked the bottom of the sea, splashing up a huge tidal wave that swept over the islands, drowning everyone.

And on fair days, when the weather wasn't killing them, men were killing each other. Ares had come to earth to kindle hatred in the hearts of men, and the nations of the world hurled armies against each other. With spear and arrow they attacked each other, with fire and sword and flung stone. The beaked ships of their navies rammed great holes in each other; sailors were flung into the water and eaten by sharks.

Finally, the sounds of anger and grief and terror reached even to heaven, and Zeus, sitting on Olympus, heard the clamor. He looked down, and what he saw made him very sad. He couldn't

understand what was happening below. He called his daughter, Athene, goddess of wisdom.

“Why is mankind behaving this way?” he said. “Why are they killing each other?”

“They are following our example and dancing to our tune.”

“What do you mean?”

“When they kill, they copy us. When Poseidon whistles a typhoon out of a clear sky and sweeps away their homes, they know that the god of the sea is a killer; his weapon is storm. And they have been told that whatever gods do is good.”

“You can’t blame their wars on Poseidon.”

“I can blame Ares. He has planted the seeds of hatred in their hearts. He has stuffed the minds of foolish kings with the idea that their safety depends on the number of corpses they can produce and the amount of treasure they can steal from one another. So they raise armies and make war. O Father, if we really want to know why humankind is bloodthirsty, we should look at ourselves.”

“What do you suggest, O wise maiden?”

“We gods are very mighty; our faults are mighty, too. We’re all related and share the same bad habits. We have known absolute power, and that rots our sense of pity. We should enlarge our councils.”

“You mean bring in more gods?”

“I think we need a human up here to teach us humanity.”

“A man?”

“Or a woman. Someone who has lived on earth and known the toil and the danger and the suffering—and the hopes and the joys that people know.”

“But who? Whom shall we call up here to teach us humanity?”

“I cannot tell you. If I were you, I should call upon the wisest of humankind and heed that opinion.”

“Who is the wisest of humankind?”

“An old old man who has been blind for many years and in his blindness has seen more than anyone else. His name is Tyresias, but he is known simply as the Blind Man.”

“You have given me much to think of, daughter. When the time comes, I shall consult with you again ... and with your blind friend.”

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THE EARTH GIANT

ONCE AGAIN, HERCULES had done what he set out to do and was sailing home with three golden apples. Once again, he was sailing on a raft he had made himself with his spear as a mast and his lion skin as a sail. The raft was slow and clumsy, but ever since his fight with the octopus, he considered a raft to be the best platform for fighting sea monsters, and that was more important than speed.

However, he was not allowed to sail peacefully home. Hera whispered to Poseidon, who called a half-gale out of the north, driving the raft southward toward the hot hump of land called Libya, where the giant Anteus ruled. Hercules stood on his raft, studying the coast. He didn't like what he saw. It was a bare scorched-looking stretch of shore. But then he saw something he liked even less. An enormous figure was wading toward him, waist-deep in the sea.

"Can this be that giant Nereus spoke of?" wondered Hercules. "The one I have to fight? I hope not. He's almost as big as Atlas."

He watched, horrified, as the giant reached into the water with a hand as big as a skiff and pulled out a swordfish. This was a terrible creature, as big as a shark; its sword was three feet long, and needle-pointed. But the giant cupped it out of the water like a boy catching a minnow and stood there, waves swirling around his

waist, picking his teeth with the swordfish. He cast it back into the water, laughing a great rumbling laugh.

“Ho there,” he called. “You, little one, standing on those twigs, who are you?”

“I am Hercules.”

“I’m glad to see you, Hercules. You’re bringing me three golden apples, aren’t you?”

“I have three golden apples,” said Hercules. “But not for you. One of them I must bring back to the king of Mycenae, for that is my task. Another one is a gift for a girl I know, named Iole. And the third is a gift for a young lady named Dienera.”

“Very generous. But I’m afraid you don’t understand. I am Anteus. This is my land and my harbor. And I am charging you a docking fee: three golden apples. You must pay or you cannot leave.”

“I won’t give you these apples. You’ll have to take them.”

“Do you really want me to use force? You’re either very brave or very foolish or perhaps both. Don’t you know that I can squash you like an ant?”

“Very well, I challenge you to a wrestling match. But let me come ashore and eat something and sleep a bit. I have sailed a long way.”

“I like you, little Hercules,” boomed Anteus. “You’ve not only brought me three beautiful golden apples, but you’re going to give

me some sport as well. Come ashore, come ashore. We'll dine together. It'll be your last meal, of course, for tomorrow we fight."

When you're not used to the desert, it looks flat and ugly by day. But it can be beautiful at night. If you sleep outdoors, you see stars flaring like torches in a black sky, and they sink toward you, spinning like fire-wheels. You can weave their threads of light among your thoughts and make pictures that flicker against the velvet sky.

That's what Hercules was doing the night before the fight. He lay out on the sand looking up at the sky. He couldn't sleep. He was trying to puzzle out the verse spoken by Nereus. "To prove the giant's worth, stretch him flat on earth." Earth was Mother Earth, Nereus had said. And contact with earth robbed Anteus of his strength. But was this the truth or a lie? Should he believe it or do the opposite? Had the verse helped him before or not? A memory picture flared. He was standing in the orchard throwing beehives into Ladon's gullet. Had Nereus told him the truth about that? "Honey to the snake," he had said, but hadn't mentioned bees. Yet bees and honey were connected, very much so. So was that line a lie or not? And the next line, "Titan's burden take." Another picture flared, his own hunched shadow being crushed by the heavy rim of the sky. He had shouldered the Titan's burden and had almost been stuck with it forever. Yet, and this was true too, if he hadn't taken the sky from Atlas and frightened him by shaking the stars, he

would never have been able to get the golden apples away from the orchard. So, were those lines true or not?

Now another picture flickered. Himself fighting the giant, Anteus, who was ten times his own size, strong enough to crush stones in his hands and to pick his teeth with swordfish. “To prove the giant’s worth, stretch him flat on earth.” A truth or a lie or something between? Important to know, because when fighting an Anteus, one mistake is all you’re allowed.

“Well, maybe it’ll get clearer during the fight,” he said to himself. “Best thing I can do now is get some sleep.” So he chased the pictures and the puzzling verse out of his head, shut his eyes, and went fast asleep.

The next morning, they fought, and everyone in the land came to watch. They wrestled in a natural arena, a level place cupped by worn-down hills. The only rule in this match was that you had to come in without weapons. After the bout started, you could do anything you wanted, use anything you could get. Punching, kicking, gouging, choking—these were what the people wanted to see. But they were also used to being disappointed. No one had ever lasted more than a minute against Anteus.

The wrestlers stripped and oiled themselves. Slaves had to lean ladders against Anteus and climb with sponges and buckets of oil to the great plateau of his shoulders and the huge keg of his chest. The slaves departed. The wrestlers crouched.

“I barely reach to his kneecap,” thought Hercules. “What can I possibly do? Well, when in doubt, charge!”

And the audience was amazed to see the man hurtle straight toward the giant. Anteus stood, waiting. Then he swung his leg in a terrific kick. His foot, traveling at enormous speed, hit the top of Hercules’ head, which was hard as a rock. The small bones of instep and ankle shattered like glass. Anteus hopped in agony. Hercules thrust his shoulder against that leg, pushing it out from under the giant, who went crashing to the ground. People sitting on the slopes felt the hills tremble as Anteus fell full length on the ground, cracking his head on a tree stump.

Hercules heard the ugly dry sound of that head splitting open. He saw the giant’s blood soaking into the ground, heard the rattling gasp of his breath. He stood over his enemy, watching him die, and was amazed to see the ashy face flush with life. He saw the giant’s eyes snap open, blazing with hatred, and the great chest swell. Before he could dodge away, Anteus shot his arm out, and the huge fingers caught Hercules by the throat and began to strangle him.

The air darkened. The earth tilted. Hercules struggled, trying to tear those baling-hook fingers from his throat. In all his battles he had never felt a force equal to that of Anteus who, lying at ease on the ground, was calmly throttling Hercules to death with one hand. And, as his sight faded, he heard again the thin sneering voice of Nereus: “To prove the giant’s worth, stretch him flat on earth,” and he knew suddenly the power of that lie. He knew that

he should have done the opposite, for Anteus was the favorite son of Mother Earth and drew new strength from her touch. Felled to earth, the giant must rise again, stronger than before, and destroy the one who had laid him in his mother's lap.

This truth glimmered in the young man's darkening mind; it flared brightly, as truth does even when things are worst. And the strangling Hercules felt his tortured breathing ease a bit as the new idea cast a light that became strength beyond the strength of muscles.

He swung his arm in a desperate arc, knocking away the hand that was choking him. Taking a huge breath, he stooped swiftly, grasped the giant about the waist, and tried to pull him off the ground. But Anteus kicked and flailed and clung to the earth. And his mother, knowing he was in danger, pulled with all her strength—called gravity—trying to hug her son to her and keep him safe. Hercules couldn't pull him up, and he knew that if he couldn't, he was lost. He pulled and tugged. Anteus clung to the earth, which hugged him close.

"Father Zeus, help me now," whispered Hercules. And with those words, he felt the lightning energy that belonged to the Lord of the Sky fill his veins with a voltage of strength that allowed him to tear the struggling giant from the clutch of earth and lift him slowly toward the sky. His split head began to bleed again, and his life drained out as Hercules held him to the brassy sun.

Hercules kept holding the giant even after he was dead. He didn't dare let him touch earth again. He carried the enormous body to the beach and cast it into the sea and watched as the triangular fins of sharks began to cut the water.

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THE SHIRT OF NESSUS

FRIGHTENING NEWS CAME TO the king: Hercules had killed the Serpent of the Orchard and the giant Anteus; he had escaped Atlas and was coming to Mycenae with golden apples. The king was so terrified that he immediately climbed down into the pit that had been dug in his courtyard and hid there, shivering.

This time, Hercules refused to wait outside the walls. He knocked open the locked gate with one blow of his fist, marched into the courtyard, and tossed a golden apple into the pit. Leaving the city, he tore the gates from their hinges, twisted them into a tall spiral grille, and planted it outside the walls, where it became a roost for birds.

Then he went to see Dienera. But someone had gone before him into Calydon. His old enemy, Hera, realizing now that he could not be killed by force, had decided on treachery.

“He’s never used the arrows he dipped into the Hydra’s blood,” she said to herself. “Even when he desperately needed to kill some monster, he didn’t take that easy way because he was afraid the poison might spread. Well, I’ll see to it that he does use one, and I’ll make sure the poison spreads—right through his own accursed body.”

Now, there was a young warrior of Calydon, named Nessus, who was a marvelous horseman. He rode so well that his body

seemed to grow out of the horse's body, and people called him "the centaur," for centaurs, remember, were half man, half horse. And Nessus loved Dienera and was very jealous of anyone who came near her. Hera walked into his sleep, and said, "Oh, Nessus, I am the goddess Hera. I have come to give you what you most want."

"Thank you, goddess. Dienera is what I most want. But she doesn't want me."

"If you do exactly as I say, she shall be your wife."

"But she says she's going to marry this Hercules. How I hate him!"

"Yes, he's hateful. You shall kill him and marry her."

"I'm a good fighter, goddess. And certainly no coward. But Hercules is supposed to be the strongest man in the world."

"He is still only a man, and I am a goddess. I intend to destroy him, and you shall be my helper. Your reward shall be Dienera."

"Tell me what to do."

"Hercules will visit her tomorrow. During his visit, they will quarrel, and she will run away from him, hoping that he will follow. But you will be hiding nearby. You will snatch her up into the saddle and gallop away."

"She'll never forgive me."

"Yes she will. She likes to be kidnapped. She'll be hoping that Hercules will rescue her. But when he doesn't show up, she'll be very angry at him and forgive you."

"Why won't he show up?"

“I’ll see to it that he gets himself killed chasing you.”

“Suppose he catches me first?”

“How can he? He’ll be on foot, and you’ll be on horseback. Besides, you’re not afraid of a little risk, are you?”

“I’ll be there tomorrow, goddess, on my fastest horse.”

The next day, Hercules came to the castle and gave Dienera one of his golden apples. She was delighted. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. Shall we get married today?”

“Not today, princess. I have to go somewhere.”

“You just got here.”

“I have a long way to go and must start.”

“Where?”

“To find the girl who gets my third golden apple.”

“You have another girl? Another apple? I want you to forget her and give it to me.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

“Who is this girl? Do you love her?”

“I guess so.”

“More than you love me?”

“Well, it’s different. She’s still a child, I guess, but she’s very brave and very clever. She saved my life twice. You’d like her if you knew her.”

“I hate her! And I hate you too.”

Blinded by tears, she ran away from him. She ran out of the garden and into a field. Then ran more slowly and peeked over her

shoulder to see if he was following. She felt a hand clutching her arm, felt herself being whisked into the air. Nessus had galloped out of a grove of trees where he had been hiding and snatched her into the saddle.

“Help!” she screamed. “Hercules! Help!”

Nessus galloped away. Hercules heard her scream and saw a horseman speeding away with her. He ran after the horse. Now, Nessus was riding a great raw-boned stallion that was the fastest horse in Calydon. Its flying hooves ate up the miles. Hercules ran with all his might. He saw that he was gaining, but too slowly. If the horseman meant to harm Dienera, he would have time before Hercules could catch him.

Hercules thought quickly. “The only way I can get him is with an arrow,” he said to himself. “But it’s a long way, and he’s moving fast. I might hit her instead. I could kill the horse, but then they’d go flying off, and she might get hurt. I can’t use an ordinary arrow; it will have to be a poison one. Then I can aim at his foot, and a scratch will stop him.”

He knelt on the grass, searching in his quiver for a poison bolt. He notched the arrow. He pulled on the bowstring, drew it back, back, until the bow bent almost double and let fly. The arrow cut through the air and grazed the rider’s arm. Arm and shoulder immediately went blue. Poison ran through the man’s veins. He stiffened and fell out of the saddle. The horse planted its feet, and stood there, trembling. Dienera slid off, bewildered. She looked

down at her kidnapper. His face was blue. There was a bloody froth on his lips. His breath rattled in his throat.

“Dienera,” he whispered, “I’m dying.”

She dropped to her knees and looked into his face. Hera, who had planned all this, hovered invisibly over them. She whispered to the dying Nessus, “I’m sorry this happened. But I’ll show you a way to avenge yourself on Hercules even after you’re dead. If your poisoned blood can touch him, he will die too.”

She kept whispering, telling Nessus exactly what to do. The dying man listened greedily. Dienera held him in her arms. She was sorry for him. She tried to cry, but couldn’t quite. She did squeeze out a tear or two, which proved to her that she was really tenderhearted. And she shed a few more tears. They splashed on his face.

“Princess dear,” whispered Nessus, “I’m sorry I kidnapped you. I know you’ll marry Hercules, and I want to give you a wedding gift. Take my tunic and cut away the part that is stained with my blood. Weave that bloody cloth into a shirt you will make for Hercules. The heart blood of one who has loved you so well will be a magic potion. If Hercules wears that shirt, he can never love anyone but you.”

“Thank you,” said Dienera. “That’s just what I need.”

“Farewell, dear princess.”

Nessus died. Dienera quickly tore away the bloody part of the garment and hid it in her tunic just before Hercules reached her.

Hercules gazed down at the fallen horseman. He couldn't bear the look of him, lying there so blue-faced and rigid. He couldn't bear the thought that he had poisoned him.

“Go back to the castle,” he said to Dienera. “I'll gather wood and make a fire and burn his body, so that his blood won't soak into the ground and poison the grass. I'll come to you when I'm finished.”

Dienera returned to the castle. She went to a loom and wove a shirt for Hercules. She had never woven anything before; she had left that to her slaves. But now Hera hovered invisibly, guiding her hands. And the shirt she wove was a gorgeous thing, decorated with pictures of the battles fought by Hercules ... the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, Anteus ... pictures of all his adventures woven into the shirt with colored threads. In the very middle of its back, she inserted the patch that was taken from the shirt of Nessus and steeped in poison blood. Hera kept helping her, and her fingers flew with magical speed. She was finished by the time Hercules returned to the castle. She went to him and said:

“Hercules, dear, I'm sorry I was so mean before. But I won't be jealous, I swear. Go have a nice visit with Iole. And to show that you love me too, take this shirt that I have woven and promise me that you'll wear it when you see her—so that I'll know you're thinking of me.”

“Thank you,” said Hercules. “I'll wear it with pleasure.”

Hercules ran along the shore toward the driftwood shack where Iole lived with the Blind Man. Iole, with her keen eyes, spotted him while he was still a long way off. She ran to meet him. It was a sunny day, too hot for a heavy embroidered shirt, but Hercules had promised Dienera that he would be wearing it when he met Iole, so he had put it on.

He was so eager to see Iole that he was running fast and was hotter than ever, so hot that the clot of Hydra blood began to melt, and the wet shirt clung to his back. The girl came running to him and leaped into his arms. He set her on his shoulders, and gave her a golden apple. She rode his shoulders, laughing with joy, and tossing the apple into the air.

“Why are you wearing this tapestry?” she said. “Some girl made it for you—that weepy princess, I’ll bet.”

She heard a curious gasping sound and thought he was laughing. She felt him stagger and just managed to slide off his shoulders before he fell. She thought he had stumbled. He climbed to his feet and stood there swaying.

The Blind Man came limping up. “Greetings, Hercules,” he said.

Hercules didn’t answer. He couldn’t answer. He tried to speak, but no words came. Iole screamed as she saw his face turning blue. The Hydra venom melted the inside of the shirt, turning each of its fibers into a thorn, which pierced his back and shoulders. The thorns wove themselves into the fibers of his flesh, fusing them

into one mat of nettles. He felt himself scorching. The pain was worse than anything he had ever known. It burned through his flesh, into his marrow. For the first time in his life, he screamed.

Iole saw his face twist in agony, saw his hands lift and claw his face. She saw those hands grasping the shirt at the shoulders, trying to tear it off. The shirt stuck. It was part of his skin now. Hercules pulled at the shirt. He pulled with all his might, and tore the shirt off his back, tearing his own flesh away, peeling himself to the bone.

Pain killed him before the poison could reach his heart. His legs folded. He fell in a puddle of hissing blood. Iole's face was white as bone. With him gone, she didn't want to stay in the world for one second. She knelt to him and kissed his lips, drinking the poison froth, and fell dead with her head on his chest.

Tyresias raised his blind face to the sky and howled like a wolf. "O Zeus," he cried. "Father Zeus, hear me now, I pray. Hear me as I bear witness to this man, the best of his kind. He killed a monster once, and that monster was the Hydra. He cut off a hundred dragon heads and buried them under rocks, for they kept snapping after death. And each of those poison heads became a stream. The streams mingled and became a river, the river Hydra, clear and pure, and very beautiful in the tumbling of its waters. For in your wisdom, O Zeus, you have made the earth use everything it is given, even monstrous matter. So now I call upon you, O mighty and mysterious one, whose shadow is justice, and ask that the same

Hydra blood which this man's courage made into a river of singing waters, that this same poison running in his body now, shall run pure again, restoring him to the wholeness of his flesh."

Zeus stood with Athena on Olympus. She had heard the Blind Man howling and had made her father listen. The words of the prophet drifted up to Zeus and made him frown.

"Hera has done this deed," he said. "I forbade her to kill him herself, but she has done it through trickery."

"Behold the man," said Athena. "He, lying there, was the best and strongest, the bravest and most gentle of humankind. Let him join us here on Olympus and teach us to be human, too, before man, learning cruelty from us, destroys himself."

"So be it," said Zeus.

Far below, on the shore of the flashing sea, Hercules arose. He was clothed in flesh again, all new, milky and lustrous. His face was like the evening star, streaming light. He stood taller than before, changed, joyous, godlike.

He called. A chariot coasted down the steeps of air, drawn by twelve golden eagles, and the chariot was golden too. He lifted Iole into the chariot. And the gold of the eagles and the gold of the chariot flying straight toward the sun made so hot a stream of golden light that it pierced the old man's blindness. His sight was restored, and the first thing he saw after forty years of darkness was the golden chariot streaking away, and Hercules holding Iole in his arms.

So Hercules was taken among the gods and lived among them, teaching them humanity. And Hera pretended it was all her idea.

There are different stories about what happened to Iole. Some say she became a goddess, that her name was shortened to Eos, and that she rode in the sun chariot, painting the dawn. Some say that Hercules drove that sun chariot, and that his name was changed to Helios. Others say, though, that Athena simply changed the girl into a gull, who flies forever over the sea, crying “Hercules, Hercules ...”

We do know, though, what happened to the shirt. It fell into the hands of Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth, who washed its poison away and cut out its embroidered pictures. From time to time, she takes a handful of these pictures and visits her hearths, scattering them among the flames, so that boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, see pictures in the heart of the flame and pin their own face on Hercules as he fights the Nemean Lion and the Hydra and the three-bodied giant ... as he wrestles the river in all its changes and ties the octopus into knots and throws Anteus and does all those other brave and wonderful things. And these boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, promise themselves that they will be brave when they grow up and always fight those shapes of evil called monsters and always dare to be gentle, too.

HEROES, GODS
AND MONSTERS
— OF THE —
GREEK MYTHS



BERNARD EVSLIN

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Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths

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For my wife, Dorothy

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INTRODUCTION

THESE WERE THE FIRST STORIES I ever heard. I was four years old, and my young uncle was practicing his Greek on me. He read me the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, translating as he went. The unknown words poured over me like dark music, and when he turned to English it was always a letdown. I was very glad to hear what was happening, and wanted to know what happened next—but still there seemed something missing, the golden hero voices, sea whispers, spear shock. I had been bitten by poetry in the dark, and didn't know it.

Later, modeling myself after my uncle, I studied Greek and Latin and read the stories the way Hesiod told them; and Herodotus, Homer, Vergil, Ovid...and knew the old enchantment. Then I went to them in most of their English versions, and again felt this terrible loss.

So I began to tell them myself.

What are they then, these stories so often retold?

In Greek mythology heroes and monsters alike are spawned by the gods. The Gorgons, those snake-haired horrors, are granddaughters of Rhea, mother of Zeus, which makes them cousins of their arch-enemy, Perseus. In other words, both good and evil come from the gods. Good is the divine enemy expressing itself through

men of high deeds. Evil is the same energy, twisted. When hero confronts monster in these myths it is apt to be a family quarrel.

This pagan idea has influenced all the religions that came after.

The birth of the monster is attended by rage, and that is what makes him monstrous, the wrath of a god—or, more often, a goddess—carving a dangerous, ugly form for itself out of living flesh.

These Greek myths are drenched in sunlight, and this sunlight is more than weather; it is a moral quality. Heroes love to cavort in the open air, to fly, to cleave the burning sea, race on the hills, hunt over the fields. But monsters belong to darkness. Where the Gorgons live it is always winter. Cerberus, the three-headed dog, guards the gate of dark Tartarus, the land of the dead. Scylla and Echidne, the dreaded serpent-women, lurk in a sea-cave waiting to swallow the tides, make shipwrecks, catch sailors and crack their bones. The Minotaur howls in a maze of shadows. The monsters wait in darkness, and when heroes hunt them, they must come in out of the sun, and the ordeal starts right there.

So we see a great religious theme—the eternal struggle between the powers of Light and the powers of Darkness embodied in these simple stories in a way that has branded itself on man's consciousness forever.

Bernard Evslin

THE GODS

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Zeus

CRONOS, FATHER OF THE GODS, who gave his name to time, married his sister Rhea, goddess of earth. Now, Cronos had become king of the gods by killing his father, Uranus, the First One. The dying Uranus had prophesied, saying, “You murder me now and steal my throne—but one of your own sons will dethrone you, for crime begets crime.”

So Cronos was very careful. One by one, he swallowed his children as they were born. First three daughters—Hestia, Demeter, and Hera; then two sons—Hades and Poseidon. One by one, he swallowed them all.

Rhea was furious. She was determined that he should not eat her next child who she felt sure would be a son. When her time came, she crept down the slope of Olympus to a dark place to have her baby. It was a son, and she named him Zeus. She hung a golden cradle from the branches of an olive tree and put him to sleep there. Then she went back to the top of the mountain. She took a rock and wrapped it in swaddling clothes and held it to her breast, humming a lullaby. Cronos came snorting and bellowing out of his great bed, snatched the bundle from her and swallowed it, clothes and all.

Rhea stole down the mountainside to the swinging golden cradle and took her son down into the fields. She gave him to a

shepherd family to raise, promising that their sheep would never be eaten by wolves.

Here Zeus grew to be a beautiful young boy, and Cronos, his father, knew nothing about him. Finally, however, Rhea became lonely for him and brought him back to the court of the gods, introducing him to Cronos as the new cupbearer. Cronos was pleased because the boy was beautiful.

One night Rhea and Zeus prepared a special drink. They mixed mustard and salt with the nectar. Next morning, after a mighty swallow, Cronos vomited up first a stone, and then Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon—who, being gods, were still undigested, still alive. They thanked Zeus and immediately chose him to be their leader.

Then a mighty battle raged. Cronos was joined by the Titans, his half-brothers, huge, twisted, dark creatures taller than trees, whom he kept pent up in the mountains until there was fighting to be done. They attacked the young gods furiously. But Zeus had allies too. He had gone to darker caverns—caves under caves under caves, deep in the mountainside—formed by the first bubbles of the cooling earth. Here Cronos thousands of centuries before (a short time in the life of a god) had pent up other monsters, the one-eye Cyclopes and the Hundred-handed Ones. Zeus unshackled these ugly cousins and led them against the Titans.

There was a great rushing and tumult in the skies. The people on earth heard mighty thunder and saw mountains shatter. The

earth quaked and tidal waves rolled as the gods fought. The Titans were tall as trees, and old Cronos was a crafty leader. He attacked fiercely, driving the young gods before him. But Zeus had laid a trap. Halfway up the slope of Olympus, he whistled for his cousins, the Hundred-handed Ones, who had been lying in ambush. They took up huge boulders, a hundred each, and hurled them downhill at the Titans. The Titans thought the mountain itself was falling on them. They broke ranks and fled.

The young goat-god Pan was shouting with joy. Later he said that it was his shout that made the Titans flee. That is where we get the word “panic.”

Now the young gods climbed to Olympus, took over the castle, and Zeus became their king. No one knows what happened to Cronos and his titans. But sometimes mountains still explode in fire and the earth still quakes, and no one knows exactly why.

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Hera

NOW, THESE GODS REIGNED for some three thousand years. There were many of them, but twelve chief ones. Zeus married his sister Hera—a family habit. They were always quarreling. He angered her by his infidelities; she enraged him with her suspicions. She was the queen of intriguers and always found it easy to outwit Zeus, who was busy with many things.

Once she persuaded the other gods into a plot against him. She drugged his drink; they surrounded him as he slept and bound him with rawhide thongs. He raged and roared and swore to destroy them, but they had stolen his thunderbolt, and he could not break the thongs.

But his faithful cousin, the Hundred-handed Briareus, who had helped him against the Titans, was working as his gardener. He heard the quarreling under the palace window, looked in, and saw his master bound to the couch. He reached through with his hundred long arms and unbound the hundred knots.

Zeus jumped from the couch and seized his thunderbolt. The terrified plotters fell to their knees, weeping and pleading. He seized Hera and hung her in the sky, binding her with golden chains. And the others did not dare to rescue her, although her voice was like the wind sobbing. But her weeping kept Zeus awake. In the morning he said he would free her if she swore never

to rebel again. She promised, and Zeus promised to mend his ways too. But they kept watching each other.

Zeus was king of the gods, lord of the sky. His sister Demeter was the earth-goddess, lady of growing things. His sister Hera, queen of the gods, was also his wife. His brother Poseidon was god of the sea. His other brother, Hades, ruled a dark domain, the underworld, the land beyond death.

The other gods in the Pantheon were Zeus's children; three of them were also Hera's. These were Ares, the god of war; Hephaestus, the smith-god, forger of weapons; and Eris, goddess of discord, who shrieks beside Ares in his battle chariot. The rest of Zeus's children were born out of wedlock. Three of them entered the Pantheon.

The first was Athene, and the story of how she was born is told in the next chapter.

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Athene

ZEUS WAS STROLLING ON Olympus one morning and noticed a new maiden walking in his garden. She was Metis, a Titaness, daughter of one of his old enemies. But the war was long ago, and she was beautiful. He charged down the slope after her.

She turned into a hawk and flew away. He turned into a hawk and flew after her. She flew over the lake and dived in and became a fish. He became a fish and swam after her. She climbed on the bank and became a serpent and wriggled away. He changed himself into a serpent and wriggled after her and caught her. And the two serpents plaited themselves into beautiful loops.

After he left her, he heard a bird cry and a fish leap, and those wild sounds combined to become a prophecy, which the rattling leaves echoed: “Oh, Zeus, Metis will bear a child, a girl child. But if she bears again, it will be a son who will depose you as you deposed Cronos.”

The next day Zeus walked in his garden again and found Metis there. This time she did not flee. He spoke softly to her and smiled. She came to him. Suddenly he opened his mouth and swallowed her.

That afternoon he suffered a headache—the worst headache that anyone, god or mortal, had suffered since the beginning of time. It was exactly as if someone were inside him with a spear,

thrusting at all the soft places in his head. He shouted for Hephaestus, who came rushing up with hammer and wedge. Zeus put his head on the anvil, and Hephaestus split the mighty skull. Then Hephaestus leaped back, frightened, because out of the head sprang a tall maiden in armor, holding a long spear.

This was Athene, the gray-eyed, the wide-browed. The manner of her birth gave her domain over intellectual activities. It was she who taught man how to use tools. She taught him to invent the ax, the plough, the ox-yoke, the wheel, and the sail. She taught his wife to spin and weave. She concocted the science of numbers and taught it to man—but never to woman. She hated Ares and took great pleasure in thwarting him on the field of battle. For all his mighty strength, she often beat him, because she was a mistress of strategy. Before battle, captains prayed to her for tactics. Before trial, judges prayed to her for wisdom. It was she who stated that compassion was the best part of wisdom. The other gods didn't know what she meant by this. But some men understood and were grateful. All in all, she was perhaps the best-loved god in the Pantheon. The people of Athens named their beautiful city after her.

There are many stories about Athene—about her skill in battle, her wisdom, and her kindness. But, like the other gods, she was also very jealous. One of the best stories is that of Arachne.

Arachne was a young girl who lived in Lydia, famous for its purple dye. Her joy was weaving, and she wove the most beautiful things anyone had ever seen: cloaks so light you could not feel

them about your shoulders, but warmer than fur; tapestries wrought with pictures so marvelous that birds would fly through the window and try to eat the cherries off the woven bough. She was a very young girl, and everyone praised her—and soon she began to praise herself. She said:

“I, I am the greatest weaver in all the world. The greatest since the world began, no doubt. In fact, I can weave better than Athene herself.”

Athene heard this, of course. The gods are very quick to hear criticism and very swift to act. So she came to earth, to the little village where Arachne lived.

The girl was inside, spinning. She heard a knock at the door and opened it. There stood a lady so tall, so sternly beautiful that Arachne knew she must be a goddess, and she was afraid she knew which one. She fell on her knees. Far above her head she heard a voice speaking softly, saying terrible things.

“Yes, miserable girl, I am Athene. I am the goddess you have mocked. Is there any reason I should not kill you?”

Arachne shook her head, weeping. She could not answer.

“Very well,” said Athene. “Prepare yourself for death. You have defied the gods and must die.”

Then Arachne stood up and said, “Before I die, great Athene, let me give you a present.” She went in and took a lovely cloak she had woven and gave it to her. And said: “Take this cloak. It must

often get cold up high on Olympus. This will shield you from the wind. Please take it. I am sure you have nothing so fine.”

Athene shook her head and said, “Poor child. You are being destroyed by your own worth. Your talent has poisoned you with pride like the sting of a scorpion. So that which makes beauty brings death. But it is a handsome cloak, and I appreciate the gift. I will give you one chance. You have boasted that you can spin and weave better than I—than I, who invented the loom, the distaff and the spindle, and out of the fleece of the clouds wove the first counterpane for my father, Zeus, who likes to sleep warm, and dyed it with the colors of the sunset. But you say you can weave better than I. Very well, you shall have a chance to prove it. And your own villagers shall judge. Seven days from today, we shall meet. You will set your spindle in that meadow, and I shall be in my place, and we shall have a contest. You will weave what you will, and I shall do so too. Then we will show what we have done, and the people will judge. If you win, I shall withdraw the punishment. If you lose, it is your life. Do you agree?”

“Oh, yes,” said Arachne. “Thank you, dear goddess, for sparing my life.”

“It is not yet spared,” said Athene.

The word flashed from village to village. When the time came, not only Arachne’s neighbors but all the people in the land had gathered in the great meadow to watch the contest. Arachne’s house was the last in the village and faced the great meadow. She had set

up her loom outside the door. Athene sat on a low flat hill overlooking the field. Her loom was as large as Arachne's cottage.

The girl went first. At the sight of her sitting spinning there in the sunlight, the crowd pushed in so close she hardly had room to work. Her white hands danced among the flax, and she worked so quickly, so deftly, that she seemed to have forgotten the loom and to be weaving in the air. Swiftly and more swiftly she tapped on the wool with her fingers, making it billow and curl, then rolling it quickly into a ball, then shaking it out again, straining the wool into long shining threads with quick little pokes of her thumb at her spindle. It was said that her working was as beautiful as her work, and when she was told that, she always smiled and said, "It is the same thing." So she wove, and the people watched. Then the finished cloth began to come from the loom, and everybody laughed to see. For they were joyous scenes. Morning scenes: a little boy and a little girl running in a green field among yellow flowers, chased by a black dog; a maiden at a window dreamily combing her hair; a young man watching the sea, counting the waves. And, later, in a purple dusk, that same young man and girl standing under a tree looking at each other. Swiftly and more swiftly the white hands danced between loom and spindle. She wove bouquets of flowers for the wedding, and a wedding gown for the bride, and a gorgeous cloak for the young husband. And, remembering what Athene had said before, she spun a counterpane for their bed. Each square not a block of color, but a little picture—

one from the childhood of the man, one from the childhood of the bride, all together, mixing, as their memories would mix now.

The counterpane was last. When she arose and snapped it out, the people gasped and laughed and wept with joy. And Arachne curtsied toward the low hill, and Athene began to spin.

The goddess had conjured up a flock of plump white woolly clouds about her hilltop. So she did not have to comb fleece or draw thread; she used cloudwool, the finest stuff in all the world. And she dyed it with the colors of the dawn and the colors of the sunset and the colors of sleep and the colors of storm. Now the whole western part of the sky was her loom. She flung great tapestries across the horizon. Scenes from Olympus—things that mortal man had never hoped to see. Almost too terrible to see... Cronos cutting up Oranos with a scythe... Zeus charging across the firmament with his Hundred-handed Ones, shattering the Titans... the binding of Zeus... the punishment of Hera. Zeus chasing Metis as hawk and fish and snake. Then the birth of Athene herself, springing from Zeus' broken head. Then more quiet scenes: Athene teaching the arts to man; teaching him to plough, to sail, to ride in chariots; teaching the women to spin. Then, finally—muddling it all up, poking her long spindle among the woven clouds, and mixing them and stirring up a dark strange picture—the future of man. Man growing huge and monstrous, his trees turning to spikes, his fields to stone. Swollen and dropsical with pride, building

something so loathsome he had to look away while he was making it.

This was too much for the multitude. The vast crowd fell on its knees and wept. Arachne was watching. She had never moved from the time Athene had started to work, but stood there straight with pale face and glittering eyes, watching. And when the people fell on their knees, she turned and went away. She walked quietly to a grove of trees and there took a rope and hanged herself.

Athene came down from the hill and spoke no word to the people, who dispersed. Then she went to the grove and saw Arachne hanging there. The girl's face was black, her eyes were bulging, her hair was streaming. Athene reached her long arm and touched the girl on the shoulder. The face grew blacker, and the eyes bulged more. The body shrank; the arms and legs dwindled and multiplied. Then Athene touched the rope. It shriveled, growing thinner and thinner, until it was a frail shining strand. And there at the end of this shining silken hair swung a small hairy creature with many legs.

It looked at Athene, then turned and scuttled up its thread, drawing it up as it climbed. It floated away over the grass until it came to a low bush, cast another loop, and sat there practicing, for it knew that now it was meant to spin without rivalry until the end of time.

That is why spiders are called Arachnids by those who know them best.

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Poseidon

AFTER CRONOS WAS DEPOSED, the three sons threw dice for his empire. Zeus, the youngest, won and chose the sky. Poseidon smiled to himself because the sky was empty, and he knew that the impulsive Zeus had chosen it because it looked so high. And now, he, Poseidon, could choose as he would have done if he had won. He chose the sea. He had always wanted it; it is the best place for adventures and secrets and makes claim on land and sky. Hades, who was always unlucky, had to take the underworld. The earth was held as a commonwealth and left to the goddesses to manage.

Poseidon left Olympus and came to his kingdom. He immediately set about building a huge underwater palace with a great pearl and coral throne. He needed a queen and chose Thetis, a beautiful Nereid, or water nymph. But it was prophesied that any son born to Thetis would be greater than his father, so Poseidon decided to try elsewhere. The prophecy came true. The son of Thetis was Achilles.

Poseidon chose another Nereid named Amphitrite. But like his brother Zeus, he was a great traveler and had hundreds of children in different places. He was a very difficult god, changeful and quarrelsome. He did bear grudges; but he could be pleased, and then his smile was radiant. He liked jokes and thought up very curious forms for his creatures. He liked to startle nymphs with

monsters, and concocted the octopus, the squid, the sea-polyp or jellyfish, the swordfish, blow-fish, sea cow, and many others. Once, trying to appease Amphitrite's jealous rage, he thought up the dolphin and gave it to her as a gift.

He was greedy and aggressive, always trying to add to his kingdom. Once he claimed Attica as his own and stabbed his trident into the hillside where the Acropolis still stands, and a spring of salt water spouted. Now, the people of Athens did not want to belong to the kingdom of the sea. They were afraid of Poseidon, who had a habit of seizing all the youth of a town when he was in the mood. So they prayed to be put under the protection of another god. Athene heard their prayers. She came down and planted an olive tree by the side of the spring. Poseidon was enraged. His face darkened, and he roared with fury, raising a storm. A fishing fleet was blown off the sea and never came to port. He challenged Athene to single combat and threatened to stir up a tidal wave to break over the city if she refused. She accepted. But Zeus heard the sound of this quarreling and came down and decreed a truce. Then all the gods sat in council to hear the rival claims. After hearing both Athene and Poseidon, they voted to award the city to Athene because her olive tree was the better gift. After that, Athenians had to be very careful when they went to sea, and were often unfortunate in their naval battles.

Poseidon was very fond of Demeter and pursued her hotly whenever he thought about it. He cornered her finally one hot

afternoon in a mountain pass, and demanded that she love him. She didn't know what to do—he was so huge, so implacable, so persistent.

Finally Demeter said, “Give me a gift. You have made creatures for the sea; now make me a land animal. But a beautiful one, the most beautiful ever seen.”

She thought she was safe, because she believed he could make only monsters. She was amazed when he made her a horse, and gasped with delight when she saw it. And Poseidon was so struck by his handiwork that he swiftly made a herd of horses that began to gallop about the meadow, tossing their heads, flirting their tails, kicking up their back legs, and neighing joyously. And he was so fascinated by the horses that he forgot all about Demeter and leaped on one and rode off. Later he made another herd of green ones for his undersea stables. But Demeter kept the first herd; from that all the horses in the world have descended.

Another story says it took Poseidon a full week to make the horse. During that time he made and cast aside many other creatures that didn't come out right. But he simply threw them away without killing them, and they made their way into the world. From them have come the camel, the hippopotamus, the giraffe, the donkey, and the zebra.

In another story, Demeter turned herself into a mare to escape Poseidon. But he immediately changed himself into a stallion,

galloped after her, and caught her. From this courtship came a wild horse, Arion, and the nymph named Despoena.

Demeter was also a moon goddess. And all through mythology there is a connection between horse and moon and sea. The she-horse is given a sea-name, “mare”; the moon swings the tides, the waves have white manes, the dripping horses stamp on the beach, and their hooves leave moon-shaped marks. An old, old thing that has not entirely disappeared.

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Hades

WHEN THE GREEKS BURIED THEIR dead, they put a coin under the corpse's tongue so that his soul could pay the fare on the ferry that crossed the river Styx. It was Charon who rowed the boat; he was a miser. Souls who couldn't pay for the ride had to wait on this side of the river. Sometimes they came back to haunt those who hadn't given them the fare.

On the other side of the river was a great wall. Its gate was guarded by Cerberus, a three-headed dog who had an appetite for live meat and attacked everyone but spirits. Beyond the gate, in Tartarus, was a great wide field shaded by black poplars. Here lived the dead—heroes and cowards, soldiers, shepherds, priests, minstrels, slaves. They wandered back and forth aimlessly. When they spoke, they twittered like bats. Here they awaited trial by three judges—Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus.

Those who had particularly displeased the gods were given special punishment. Sisyphus must always push a huge rock uphill. Each time he gets it halfway up, it breaks loose and rolls down to the bottom, and he must begin again. And this he will do for all time. Tantalus has been given a burning thirst and set chin-deep in a cool, clear stream of water. But every time he bends to put his lips to the water, it shrinks away, and he can never drink. Here he will stand as long as Sisyphus rolls his stone.

But these are special cases. Most of the souls were judged to be not too good and not too bad, but simply dead. They went back to the field, which is called the Field of Asphodel, to wait—for nothing.

Those judged to be of unusual virtue went to the Elysian Fields close by. Here it was always holiday. The air was full of music. The shades danced and played all day long—all night long too—for the dead need no sleep. Also, these happy spirits had the option of being reborn on earth. Only the bravest accepted. There was a special part of Elysium called the Isles of the Blest. Here lived those who had been three times born and three times gained Elysium.

Hades and his queen lived in a great palace made of black rock. He was very jealous of his brothers and scarcely ever left his domain. He was fiercely possessive, gloated over every new arrival, and demanded a headcount from Charon at the close of each day. Never did he allow any of his subjects to escape. Nor did he allow a mortal to visit Tartarus and return. There were only two exceptions to this rule, and those are other stories.

The palace grounds and the surrounding fields were called Erebus; this was the deepest part of the underworld. No birds flew here, but the sound of wings was heard; for here lived the Erinyes, or Furies, who were older than the gods. Their names were Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera. They were hags, with snaky hair, red-hot eyes, and yellow teeth. They slashed the air with metal-

studded whips, and when they found a victim, they whipped the flesh from his bones. Their task was to visit earth and punish evildoers, especially those who had escaped other punishment. They were greatly feared; no one dared say their name. But they were referred to as the “Eumenides,” or Kindly Ones. Hades valued them. They enriched his kingdom, for their attentions persuaded people to suicide. He enjoyed their conversation. When they returned to Erebus after their work was done, they circled low over the palace grounds, screaming their tale, and the latest gossip.

Hades was well-cast to rule the dead. He was violent, loathed change, and was given to slow black rage. His most dramatic hour was when he kidnapped Persephone and made her his queen. But that belongs to the next story.

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Demeter

DEMETER MEANS “BARLEY-MOTHER.” Another name for her is Ceres, from which we get the word “cereal.” She was the goddess of the cornfield, mistress of planting and harvesting, lady of growing things. Zeus was very fond of her. He always obliged her with rain when her fields were thirsty. He gave her two children, a boy and a girl. The girl was named Persephone, and Demeter loved her very much.

Persephone was raised among flowers and looked like a flower herself. Her body was as pliant as a stem, her skin soft as petals, and she had pansy eyes. She took charge of flowers for her mother. She was adept at making up new kinds and naming them.

One day she went farther than usual—across a stream, through a grove of trees, to a little glade. She carried her paintpot, for she had seen a stand of tall waxy lilies she had decided to stripe. As she was painting their faces she saw a bush she hadn’t noticed before. She went to look at it. It was a very strange bush, with thick, green, glossy leaves and hung with large red berries that trembled on their stems like drops of blood. She stared at the bush. She didn’t know whether she liked it or not. She decided she did not and seized it by its branches and pulled. But it was toughly rooted and hard to pull. She was used to getting her own way. She set herself and gave a mighty tug. Up came the bush; its long roots dragged out of the

ground, leaving a big hole. She tossed the bush aside and turned to go back to her lilies, but she heard a rumbling sound and turned back. The noise that grew louder and louder was coming from the hole. To her horror, the hole seemed to be spreading, opening like a mouth, and the rumbling grew to a jangling, crashing din.

Out of the hole leaped six black horses, dragging behind them a golden chariot. In the chariot stood a tall figure in a flowing black cape. On his head was a black crown. She had no time to scream. He reached out his long arm, snatched her into the chariot, and lashed his horses. They curvetted in the air and plunged into the hole again. When they had gone, the hole closed.

Demeter was frantic when the girl didn't come home, and rushed out to search for her. The tall green-clad goddess rode in a light wicker chariot behind a swift white horse, a gift from Poseidon. She sped here and there, calling, "Persephone... Persephone..." But no one answered. All night long she searched, and as dawn broke, she came to the glade. There she saw the uprooted bush and the trampled grass. She leaped from her chariot. Then she saw something that stabbed her through—Persephone's little paintpot, overturned. She lifted her head to the sky and howled like a she-wolf. Then she fell still and listened. The sun was rising; the birds had begun to gossip. They told each other of the heedless girl and the strange bush and the hole and the chariot and the black rider and how surprised the girl was when he caught her.

Then Demeter spoke softly, questioning the birds. They told her enough for her to know who had taken her daughter. She put her face in her hands and wept. Just then a little boy came running into the meadow to pick some flowers. When he saw Demeter, he laughed. He had never seen a grownup crying before. But when she looked up, he stopped laughing. She pointed at him, whispering, and he was immediately changed into a lizard. But he hadn't learned to scuttle yet and just sat there looking at Demeter a moment too long, for a hawk swooped and caught him. He was a lizard for only a short while.

Demeter climbed back into her chariot and sped to Olympus. She charged into the throne room where Zeus sat.

"Justice!" she cried. "Justice! Your brother Hades has stolen my daughter—*our* daughter."

"Peace, good sister," said Zeus. "Compose yourself. Hades' wooing has been a trifle abrupt, perhaps, but after all he is my brother—*our* brother—and is accounted a good match. Think, sweet Demeter. It is difficult for our daughter to look beyond the family without marrying far beneath her."

"Never!" cried Demeter. "It must not be! Anyone but Hades! Don't you realize this is a spring child, a flower child, a delicate unopened bud. No ray of sunlight ever pierces that dank hole he calls his kingdom. She'll wither and die."

"She is our daughter," said Zeus. "I fancy she has a talent for survival. Pray, think it over."

Then Demeter noticed that Zeus was holding a new thunderbolt, a marvelously wrought zigzag lance of lightning, volt-blue, radiant with energy. And she realized that Hades, who in his deep realms held all stores of silver and gold, had sent Zeus a special gift. It would be difficult to obtain justice.

“Once again,” she said, “will you restore my daughter to me?”

“My dear,” said Zeus, “when your rage cools, you will realize that this is a fine match, the very best thing for the child. Please, go back to earth and give yourself a chance to be intelligent about this.”

“I will go back to earth,” said Demeter, “and I will not return until you send for me.”

Weeks passed. Then Zeus found his sleep being disturbed by sounds of lamentation. He looked down upon the earth and saw a grievous sight. Nothing grew. The fields were blasted and parched. Trees were stripped of leaves, standing blighted, with the blazing sun beating down. The soil was hard and cracked, covered with the shriveled brown husks of wheat and corn and barley killed in the bud. And there was no green place anywhere. The people were starving; the cattle had nothing to eat; the game could find nothing and had fled. And a great wailing and lamentation arose as the people lifted their faces to Olympus and prayed for Zeus to help them.

“Well,” he thought to himself, fingering his new thunderbolt, “I suppose we shall have to compromise.”

He sent for Demeter. When she came, he said, "I have been thinking. Perhaps I have not been quite fair to you."

"No," said Demeter.

"Do you still wish your daughter's return?"

"Yes," said Demeter. "While she is gone, no crops will grow. No tree will bear, no grass will spring. While she is gone and while I mourn, the earth will grow as dry and shriveled as my heart and will put forth no green thing."

"Very well," said Zeus. "In light of all the facts, this is my judgment. Your daughter shall be restored to you and shall remain with you. However, if any food has passed her lips during her sojourn in Tartarus, then she must remain there. This is the Law of Abode, older than our decrees, and even I am powerless to revoke it."

"She will have been too sad to eat," cried Demeter. "No food will have passed her lips. She shall return to me and remain with me. You have spoken, and I hold you to your word."

Zeus whistled, and Hermes, the messenger god, appeared. Zeus sent him with a message to Hades demanding Persephone's release.

"Will you ride with me to the gates of Tartarus?" cried Demeter. "I have the swiftest horse in the world, given me by Poseidon."

"Thank you, good aunt," said Hermes. "But I believe my winged shoes are even faster."

And he flew out of the window.

In the meantime, Persephone was in Erebus with the dark king. After the first few days of haste and brutality and strangeness, he began to treat her very gently, and with great kindness. He gave her rubies and diamonds to play jacks with, had dresses spun for her of gold and silver thread, ordered her a throne of the finest ebony, and gave her a crown of black pearls. But she made herself very difficult to please. She tossed her head, stamped her foot, and turned from him. She would not speak to him and said she would never forgive him. She said she wanted to go home to her mother, and that she had to attend to her flowers, and that she hated him and always would. As she launched these tirades at him, he would stand and listen and frown and keep listening until she flounced away. Then he would go and get her another gift.

Secretly, though, so secretly that she didn't even tell it to herself, she was rather enjoying the change. She did miss the sunshine and the flowers, but there was much to amuse her. Secretly she gloated upon her power over this most fearsome monarch. Secretly she enjoyed his gifts and his efforts to please her...and marveled at the way he was obeyed. Although she never forgot how he had frightened her when he came charging out of that hole in his chariot, she admired the lofty set of his black-robed figure, the majestic shoulders, the great impatient hands, and his gloomy black eyes. But she knew that part of her power over him was disdain, and so kept flouting and abusing him, and, which

made him gloomier than ever, refused to let a crumb of food pass her lips.

He tried every way he knew to tempt her into eating. His cook prepared the most delicious meals, and his servants bore them to her chamber. But she would pretend not to notice a thing and sit there holding her head high, not even allowing her nostrils to twitch, although the rich smells were making her wild with hunger. She swore she would not eat a mouthful until he had returned her to her mother.

He was desperate to please her. He set aside a corner of the palace grounds for a dark garden and gave her rare seeds to plant—magical blooms that did not need the sunlight. She grew a species of black orchid and mushrooms and nightshade, henbane, and hellebore. He gave her a little boy to help her garden, a very clever little gardener, a new spirit. He was very deft and good company too, although she noticed that his eyes were a bit lidless. She had no way of knowing that he was the same little boy her mother had turned into a lizard and fed to a hawk. But he knew who she was.

She had other amusements too. She liked to wander in the Elysian Fields and dance with the happy shades. She was fascinated by the torments, particularly the funny man trying to roll the stone uphill and always having to start over again. She pitied Tantalus, and when no one was looking, cupped some water in her hands and gave it to him to drink. And he thanked her in a deep sad voice. But after she left, it was worse than ever; he knew she would

not remember him again, and this one flash of hope made the ordeal worse.

Still, she liked her garden best, and that was where she spent most of her time—more time than ever, because she was so hungry she didn't know what to do, and she didn't want Hades to see how she felt. She knew he would think up more delicious things to tempt her if he thought she was weakening.

Standing in the garden one afternoon, half-hidden in a clump of nightshade, she saw the little boy eating something. It was a red fruit, and he was eating it juicily. He saw her watching and came toward her smiling, his mouth stained with red juice. He held out his hand. It was a pomegranate, her favorite fruit.

“We're alone,” he whispered. “No one will see you. No one will know. Quickly now—eat!”

She looked about. It was true. No one could see them. She felt her hands acting by themselves, as though she had nothing to do with them. She watched as the fingers curled savagely and ripped the fruit across. They dug in, plucked out seeds, and offered them to her lips. One...two...three...she thought she had never tasted anything so delicious as these tiny tart juicy seeds. Just as she swallowed her sixth seed, a high glad yelling cry split the air, and the pomegranate dropped to the ground. It was a cry that any god recognized—Hermes' keen herald shout, meaning that he was coming with news, good or bad, but worthy of high attention.

She raced to the palace. The little gardener scooped up the pomegranate and raced after her. Sure enough, it was cousin Hermes, his hair tumbled from the wind, the wings on his feet still fluttering from the speed of his going.

“Good day, cousin,” he said.

Hades loomed next to him, scowling blackly.

“I bring you a message from your mother. She wants you home. And your host has kindly agreed to an early departure. How are you? Haven’t eaten anything here, I hope. No? Good! Let’s be on our way.”

He put his arm around her waist, and they rose in the air. And Persephone, looking back, saw the little gardener rush to Hades with the pomegranate in his hand.

By the time Persephone had come home to her mother, Hades had already been to Olympus and had presented his case to Zeus. Zeus pronounced his judgment. Because the girl had eaten six seeds of the pomegranate, she would have to spend six months with Hades each year.

“Never mind, Mother,” said Persephone. “Don’t cry. We must be happy for the time that I am here.”

“I suffer!” cried Demeter. “I suffer! Here—” She struck herself on the chest. “Here—in my mother’s heart. And if I suffer then everyone else shall suffer too. For the months that you spend with that scoundrel, no grass will grow, no flowers blow, no trees

will bear. So long as you are below, there will be desolation everywhere.”

That is why summer and winter are the way they are. That is why there is a time for planting and a time when the earth must sleep under frost.

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Birth of the Twins

ZEUS PURSUED A NYMPH named Leto. But Hera was watching, so he changed Leto into a quail, and then himself into a quail, and they met in a glade. Here the sun sifted through the trees and striped the grass with shadows, and it was difficult to see two quail whose feathers were brown and lighter brown. But the eyes of jealousy are very sharp, and Hera saw them. She flung a curse, saying, “Leto, you will grow heavy with child, but you shall not bear anywhere the sun shines.”

She sent the great serpent Python to enforce her curse, to hunt Leto out of any sunny place she might try to rest. Zeus sent the south wind to help the girl, and she was carried on the wings of the warm strong wind to an island called Delos. Python swam after. Before he could reach the island, however, Zeus unmoored it and sent it floating swiftly away, pushed by the south wind, more swiftly than Python could swim. Here, on this lovely island, Leto gave birth to twins—Artemis and Apollo.

Artemis

FATHER ZEUS WAS BY NO MEANS an attentive parent. He had so many children in so many different circumstances he could scarcely keep them all in mind. However, he was not permitted to forget Leto's children. They were too beautiful. And beauty was the quality he found most attractive. As he looked down from Olympus, their faces seemed to blaze from among all the children on earth. It seemed to him that they cast their own light, these twins, each one different—Apollo a ruddy light, Artemis a silver light. And he knew that they were true godlings and must be brought to Olympus.

He sent for them on their third birthday. He had Hephaestus make Apollo a golden bow and a quiver of golden arrows that could never be emptied and a golden chariot drawn by golden ponies. But he withheld Artemis' gifts; he preferred her and he wanted her to ask him for things. He took her on his lap and said, "And what gifts would you fancy, little maid?"

She said, "I wish to be your maiden always, never a woman. And I want many names in case I get bored with one. I want a bow and arrow too—but silver, not gold. I want an embroidered deerskin tunic short enough to run in. I need fifty ocean nymphs to sing for me, and twenty wood nymphs to hunt with me. And I want a pack of hounds, please—fierce, swift ones. I want the mountains

for my special places, and one city. One will be enough; I don't like cities." She reached up and played with his beard and smiled at him. "Yes? May I have all these things? May I?"

Zeus answered, "For a child like you, it is worthwhile braving Hera's wrath once in a while. You shall have more than you ask for. You shall have the gift of eternal chastity, and also the gift of changing your mind about it at any time, which will help you not to want to. And, finally, the greatest gift of all: You shall go out and choose your own gifts so that they will have a special value."

She kissed him and whispered her thanks into his ear and then went running off to choose her gifts. She went to the woods and to the river and to the ocean stream and selected the most beautiful nymphs for her court. She visited Hephaestus in his smoking smithy inside the mountain and said, "I've come for my bow. A silver one, please."

He said, "Silver is more difficult to work than gold. It needs cool light; it should be made underwater. You must go deep beneath the sea, off the island of Lipara, where my Cyclopes are making a horse trough for Poseidon, who thinks of nothing but horses these days."

So Artemis and her nymphs swam underwater to where the Cyclopes were hammering at a great trough. The nymphs were frightened at the sight of the huge one-eyed scowling brutes, and they hated the noise of the hammering. But Artemis jumped up on the forge and said, "I come with a message from Hephaestus. He

bids you put aside this horse trough and make me a silver bow and a quiver of silver arrows which will fill again as soon as it is empty. If you do this, I shall give you the first game I shoot." The Cyclopes, who were very greedy and tired of working on the horse trough, agreed.

When they had finished her bow, she thanked them very prettily. But when their leader, Brontes, tried to take her on his knee, she tore a great handful of hair from his chest. He put her down quickly and went away cursing.

Holding her silver bow high, screaming with joy, she raced across field and valley and hill, followed by her nymphs who streamed after her with flashing knees and floating hair laughing and singing. She came to Arcadia where Pan was feeding his hounds.

"Oh, Pan," she cried. "Oh, little king of the wood, my favorite cousin, please give me some of your dogs—the best ones, please."

"And what will you give me in return?" he said, looking at the nymphs.

"Choose," she said, "But I should warn you, cousin, that like me they have taken an unbreakable vow of chastity."

"Never mind," said Pan. "Keep them. What dogs do you fancy?"

"That one and that one and that one," she cried, "and this one. And I must have him...and him."

He gave her his ten best dogs. Three of them were huge black and white hounds able to catch a live lion and drag it back to the hunter. The others were lean white deerhounds; any one of them could outrun a stag.

Artemis was wild to try out her new gifts. She sent her white hounds racing after two deer, bidding them bring back the animals unharmed. She harnessed the deer to her silver chariot and drove away. She saw a tree which had been struck by lightning; it was still smoldering. She had her nymphs break pine branches and thrust them into the cinders, for night was coming and she wanted light to shoot by. She was too impatient to wait for dawn.

Four times she shot her silver bow. First she split a pine tree, then an olive tree. Then she shot a wild boar. Lastly, she shot an arrow into a city of unjust men, and the arrow pierced all of them, never ceasing its flight till they were all dead.

And the people, seeing her ride over the mountains, wielding her silver bow, followed by the maidens and their torches, called her the Goddess of the Moon. Some called her the Maiden of the Silver Bow. Others called her Lady of the Wild Things. Some called her the Huntress. Others, simply, the Maiden. And so she had her last gift—many names.

She let no man approach her. Once a young man named Actaeon glimpsed her bathing in a stream. She was so beautiful he could not bear to go away, but hid there, watching. She saw him

and immediately changed him into a stag. Then she whistled up her hounds, who tore him to pieces.

She tried to impose the same rule upon her nymphs, which was difficult. Zeus himself seduced one of the most beautiful, named Callisto. When Artemis learned of this, she changed Callisto into a she-bear and whistled to her dogs. They came leaping and howling and would have torn the bear to pieces too, but Zeus happened to notice what was going on. He caught Callisto up and set her among the stars, still in her bear shape so that Hera would not be suspicious.

Once Artemis found her vow difficult to keep. But that is another story, the story of Orion, which comes later.

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Apollo

APOLLO WAS THE MOST beautiful of the gods. His hair was dark gold, his eyes stormy blue. He wore a tunic of golden panther skin, carried his golden bow, and wore a quiver of golden arrows. His chariot was beaten gold; its horses were white with golden manes and flame-colored eyes. He was god of the sun always. Later he became patron of music, poetry, mathematics, and medicine. And, later, when he was a mature god, he preached moderation. He bade his worshippers to look first into their own hearts and find there the beginnings of wisdom and to conduct themselves prudently in all things. But in his youth he did many cruel and wanton deeds. Several times he was almost expelled from the company of the gods by Zeus whom he had angered with his wild folly.

As soon as he was given his bow and arrows, he raced down from Olympus to hunt the Python who had hunted his mother. Dryads, who are tattletales, told him he could find his enemy at Mount Parnassus. There he sped. As he stood on a hill, he saw the great serpent weaving its dusty coils far below. He notched an arrow, drew his bow, and let fly. It darted like light; he saw it strike, saw the huge coils flail in agony. Shouting with savage glee, he raced down the slope, but when he got there he found the serpent gone. It had left a trail of blood which he followed to the oracle of Mother Earth at Delphi. Python was hiding in a cave, where he

could not be followed. Apollo breathed on his arrowheads and shot them into the cave as fast as he could. They broke into flames when they hit. Smoke filled the cave, and the serpent had to crawl out. Apollo, standing on a rock, shot him so full of arrows he looked like a porcupine. He skinned the great snake and saved the hide for a gift.

Now, it was a sacred place where he had done his killing; here lived the oracles of Mother Earth, whom the gods themselves consulted. They were priestesses, trained from infancy. They chewed laurel, built fire of magic herbs, and sat in the smoke, which threw them into a trance wherein they saw—and told in riddles—what was to come. Knowing that he had already violated a shrine, Apollo thought he might as well make his deed as large as possible, and claimed the oracles for his own—bidding them to prophesy in his name.

When Mother Earth complained to Zeus about the killing of her Python, Apollo smoothly promised to make amends. He instituted annual games at Delphi in celebration of his victory, and these he graciously named after his enemy, calling them the Pythian games. And he named the oracles Pythonesses.

Less excusable was Apollo's treatment of a satyr named Marsyas. This happy fellow had the misfortune to be an excellent musician—a realm Apollo considered his own—and where he would brook no rivalry. Hearing the satyr praised too often, Apollo invited him to a contest. The winner was to choose a penalty to

which the loser would have to submit, and the Muses were to judge. So Marsyas played his flute, and Apollo played his lyre. They played exquisitely; the Muses could not choose between them. Then Apollo shouted, "Now you must turn your instrument upside down, and play and sing at the same time. That is the rule. I go first." Thereupon the god turned his lyre upside down, and played and sang a hymn praising the gods, and especially their beautiful daughters, the Muses. But you cannot play a flute upside down, and certainly cannot sing while playing it, so Marsyas was declared the loser. Apollo collected his price. He flayed Marsyas alive and nailed his skin to a tree. A stream gushed from the tree's roots and became a river. On the banks of that river grew reeds which sang softly when the wind blew. People called the river Marsyas, and that is still its name.

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Sons of Apollo

DURING THE CONTEST WITH the satyr Marsyas, Apollo won the favor of the most playful Muse, Thalia, queen of festivities. Upon her he fathered the Corybantes, or crested dancers, lithe young men who shaved their hair to a forelock and danced at great rituals.

Then, roaming the hillsides, he came across a young girl who reminded him of his sister. She was a huntress. She chased deer on foot, hunted bears and wolves. When he saw her wrestling a full-grown lion and throwing it to earth, he decided he must have her. Her name was Cyrene. The son he gave her was named Aristeus, who taught man beekeeping, olive culture, cheese-making, and many other useful arts.

His next adventure was with the nymph Dryope. He found her tending sheep on a mountainside. He hid behind a tree and watched her. To his dismay, she was joined by a gaggle of hamadryads, mischievous girls who love to tell tales. So he had to stay hidden. He waited for the hamadryads to leave, but they lingered. Gods are impatient; they hate to be kept waiting. He changed himself into a tortoise and crawled out. The nymphs were delighted to see him and turned him this way and that and tickled him with a straw. He was a splendid glossy tortoise with a beautiful black and green shell. Dryope wanted him for her own and put him in her tunic. When her friends protested, he turned himself into a snake, poked

his head out of the tunic, and hissed at them. The hamadryads fled, screaming. Dryope fainted. When she came to, she was in the arms of a god. Their son was Amphissus, founder of cities and builder of temples.

But his most famous son was Asclepius. This was the manner of his birth.

Apollo fell in love with Coronis, a princess of Thessaly, and insisted on having his way, which was unwise of him because she loved an Arcadian prince named Ischys. When she was with child, Apollo went on a journey, but set a white crow to spy on her. All crows were white then and were excellent chaperons; they had sharp eyes and jeering voices.

It was to Delphi that Apollo had gone. An oracle there told him that at that very moment Coronis was entertaining young Ischys. Just then the crow flew in, wildly excited, full of scandal, telling the same tale. “Your fault! You did not watch her closely enough!” cried Apollo. And he cursed the crow with a curse so furious that her feathers were scorched—and all crows have been black ever since.

Apollo could not bring himself to kill Coronis. So he asked his sister Artemis to oblige him. She was happy to; she was never fond of his amours. She sped to Thessaly and finished Coronis with one arrow.

Apollo, very dejected, put the corpse on the funeral pyre and lighted the fire. Then he remembered that she was with child by

him. Hermes was now standing by, waiting to conduct her soul to Tartarus, for that was one of his duties. Understanding the situation in a flash, he delivered the dead girl of a living child, a boy. Apollo wished to have nothing to do with the child and asked Hermes to take care of him. Hermes had been struck by the way the baby had observed the details of his own birth—watching everything with a wide stare, so interested he forgot to cry—and recognized that this was an unusual child. So he gave him into the care of Chiron, the centaur, the fabulous tutor. Chiron taught him diagnostics, surgery, herbology, and hunting.

The boy could not wait to grow up. He doctored everyone he could get his hands on, and was soon known throughout the land for his skill at curing the sick. His fame reached Apollo, who decided to test him. He appeared at Asclepius' door in the guise of a feeble old man afflicted with every loathsome disease known to medicine—and a pauper besides. Asclepius tended him with his own hands, and was so gentle and skillful that Apollo was amazed. The god resumed his own form and embraced the lad and told him he was pleased with his progress. He sent him to see his aunt Athene, who, he said, knew certain secrets of mortality. She too approved of the young man and gave him two vials of Gorgon blood. One vial could raise the dead, the other was the deadliest poison ever known. "No, Aunt," he said. "I need only the first vial. You keep the other."

Some say that it was by his own skill that he restored life to the dead, and that Athene was simply trying to take some of the credit for herself. Be that as it may, he did snatch several patients from the very gates of Tartarus, and Hades was enraged. He complained to his brother Zeus that Asclepius was robbing him. Zeus stood on Olympus, hurled a thunderbolt, and killed the young physician together with the patient he was tending.

When Apollo heard about this, he went into one of his wild heedless rages, stormed to Olympus, battered in the doors of Hephaestus' smithy, and there slew all the Cyclopes, who had forged the thunderbolt which had killed his son. When Zeus heard this, he banished Apollo to Tartarus forever. But Mother Leto came and pleaded with him, reminding him of their old love. She spoke so beautifully that Zeus relented, withdrew the edict of Apollo's banishment, and even agreed to bring Asclepius back to life. But he suggested that Asclepius be more tactful about his cures and avoid offending the gods.

When Aphrodite heard this story, she was bitten by envy. She considered herself a favorite of Zeus, but he had never done so much for her. Her heart was bitter against Apollo, and she wanted to do him a mischief. She called her son Eros, the infant archer, whose sweetly poisoned arrows infect man and woman with a most dangerous fever. She told him what she wanted.

Eros had two kinds of arrows: one tipped with gold and tailed with white dove feathers—these were for love. The others, made of

lead, with brown owl feathers, were the arrows of indifference. He took up his bow and stalked his game.

Apollo, he knew, was hunting; so he made Apollo's path cross that of Daphne, a mountain nymph, daughter of the river god, Peneus. Then, fluttering above them, invisible, he shot Apollo with the dart of love and Daphne with the arrow of indifference. When the golden god came running down the slope toward the nymph, he saw her start up and run away. He could not understand it. She fled; the god pursued. She was a very swift runner, but great footsteps pounded behind her, and she felt the heat of his breath on her shoulders.

She ran toward the river and cried, "Oh, Father, save me! Save me!" Her father heard. Apollo, reaching for her, found himself hugging a tree; the rough bark scratched his face. He said, "But why?—why do you hate me so?"

The wind blew through the leaves, and they whispered, "I don't know...I don't know..."

But then the tree took pity on the grieving god and gave him a gift—a wreath of her leaves, laurel leaves that would never wither—to crown heroes and poets and young men who win games.

And still today, when questioned by losers, laurel trees whisper, "I don't know...I don't know..."

Hermes

YOUNG GODS WERE OFTEN precocious, but no one so much as Hermes who, five minutes after his birth, sneaked out of his crib and went searching for adventure. He toddled swiftly down the slope of Mount Cyllene until he came to a meadow where he saw a herd of beautiful white cows grazing. He saw no cowherd and decided to steal them. A treeful of crows began to seethe and whistle, “They belong to Apollo...to Apollo...’pollo...” but he paid them no heed. He plaited grass into shoes for the cows and fitted them over their hooves and drove them away.

When Apollo returned, he was furious to see his cows gone, and even more furious when he searched for tracks and found none—only odd sweeping marks on the ground. The crows chattered, “A baby stole them...your brother, your brother...” But this made no sense to Apollo; besides he did not trust crows. He did not know where to begin looking; he searched far and wide, but could find no clue.

Then one morning he passed a cave he had passed a hundred times before. But this time he heard strange beautiful sounds coming out of it—sounds unlike anything he had ever heard before—and he looked inside. There, drowsing by the fire, was a tall lovely Titaness named Maia, whom he had seen before in the garden on Olympus. Sitting in her lap was a little baby boy doing

something to a large tortoise shell from which the strange sounds seemed to be coming.

“Good day, cousin,” said Apollo. “Are you to be congratulated on a new son?”

“Hail, bright Phoebus,” said Maia. “May I have the honor of presenting your half-brother, young Hermes?”

“Half-brother, eh? Well, that’s an honor without being a distinction. What’s that he’s playing with?”

“He makes his own toys,” said Maia proudly. “He’s so clever, you can’t imagine. He made this out of an old shell that he strung with cowgut, and from it he draws the most ravishing sounds. Listen—”

“Cowgut? May I ask what cow he persuaded to contribute her vital cords for his pastime?”

“I do not understand your question, cousin.”

“Understand this, cousin. I have had a herd of cows stolen recently. The crows told me they had been taken by some baby, my brother, but I didn’t believe them. I seem to owe them an apology.”

“What?” cried Maia. “Are you accusing the innocent babe of being a cattle thief? For shame!”

“Mother, if you don’t mind,” said a clear little voice, “perhaps you’d better let me handle this.” The baby stood on his mother’s knee and bowed to Apollo. “I did take your cows, brother. But I didn’t know they were yours. How could I have? And they are

quite safe, except for one. Wishing to begin my life with an act of piety, I sacrificed her to the twelve gods.”

“Twelve gods?” said Apollo haughtily. “I am acquainted with but eleven.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hermes. “But I have the honor to be the twelfth. Above all things, I wish your good will, fair brother. So, in return for this cow, allow me to make you a present—this instrument. I call it a lyre. I’ll be glad to teach you to play.”

Apollo was enchanted with the trade. He stayed in the cave all that afternoon practicing his scales. As he was strumming his new toy, he noticed Hermes cutting reeds, which the child swiftly tied together, notched in a certain way, then put to his lips, and began to make other sounds, even more beautiful than the lyre could produce.

“What’s that?” cried Apollo. “What do you call that? I want that too.”

“I don’t need any more cows,” said Hermes.

“I must have it. What else of mine do you wish?”

“Your golden staff.”

“But this is my herdsman’s staff. Do you not know that I am the god of herdsmen, and that this is the rod of authority?”

“A minor office,” said Hermes. “Unworthy of the lord of the sun. Perhaps you would allow me to take over the chore. Give me your golden staff, and I will give you these pipes.”

“Agreed! Agreed!”

“But since pipes and lyre together will make you god of music, I must have something to boot. Teach me augury.”

“You drive a hard bargain for a nursling,” said Apollo. “I think you belong on Olympus, brother. This cave will not long offer scope for your talents.”

“Oh, yes, take me there!” cried Hermes. “I am eager to meet Father Zeus.”

So Apollo took Hermes to Olympus and introduced him to his father. Zeus was intrigued by the wit and impudence of the child. He hid him away from Hera and spent hours conversing with him.

“You say you wish to enter the Pantheon,” said Zeus. “But really—all the realms and powers seem to have been parceled out.”

“Father, I am of modest nature,” said Hermes. “I require no vast dignities. Only a chance to be useful, to serve you, and to dwell in your benign and potent presence. Let me be your herald. Let me carry your tidings. You will find me quick and resourceful, and what I can’t remember I will make up. And, I guarantee, your subjects will get the message.”

“Very well,” said Zeus. “I will give you a trial.”

So Hermes became the messenger god and accomplished his duties with such swiftness, ingenuity, and cheerfulness that he became a favorite of his father, who soon rewarded him with other posts. Hermes became patron of liars and thieves and gamblers, god of commerce, framer of treaties, and guardian of travelers.

Hades became his client too and called upon him to usher the newly dead from earth to Tartarus.

He kept a workshop on Olympus and there invented the alphabet, astronomy, and the scales; also, playing cards and card games. He carried Apollo's golden staff decorated with white ribbons, wore a pot-shaped hat, and winged sandals which carried him through the air more swiftly than any bird could fly.

It was he who gave Zeus the idea of disguising himself and mingling with mortals when bored with Olympus. He joined his father in this, and they had many adventures together...which will be told in their place.

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Hephaestus

NO ONE CELEBRATED THE birth of Hephaestus. His mother, Hera, had awaited him with great eagerness, hoping for a child so beautiful, so gifted, that it would make Zeus forget his heroic swarm of children from lesser consorts. But when the baby was born, she was appalled to see that he was shriveled and ugly, with an irritating bleating wail. She did not wait for Zeus to see him, but snatched the infant up and hurled him off Olympus.

For a night and a day he fell, and hit the ground at the edge of the sea with such force that both of his legs were broken. He lay there on the beach mewling piteously, unable to crawl, wracked with pain, but unable to die because he was immortal. Finally the tide came up. A huge wave curled him under its arm and carried him off to sea. And there he sank like a stone, and was caught by the playful Thetis, a naiad, who thought he was a tadpole.

When Thetis understood it was a baby she had caught, she made a pet of him and kept him in her grotto. She was amazed at the way the crippled child worked shells and bright pebbles into jewelry. One day she appeared at a great festival of the gods, wearing a necklace he had made. Hera noticed the ornament and praised it and asked her how she had come by it. Thetis told her of the strange twisted child whom someone had dropped into the

ocean, and who lived now in her cave making wonderful jewels. Hera divined that it was her own son and demanded him back.

Hephaestus returned to Olympus. There Hera presented him with a broken mountain nearby, where he could set up forges and bellows. She gave him the brawny Cyclopes to be his helpers, and promised him Aphrodite as a bride if he would labor in the mountain and make her fine things. Hephaestus agreed because he loved her and excused her cruelty to him.

“I know that I am ugly, Mother,” he said, “but the fates would have it so. And I will make you gems so beautiful for your tapering arms and white throat and black hair that you will forget my ugliness sometimes, and rejoice that you have taken me back from the sea.”

He became the smith-god, the great artificer, lord of mechanics. And the mountain always smoked and rumbled with his toil, and he has always been very ugly and very useful.

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Aphrodite

APHRODITE WAS THE GODDESS of love and beauty; so there are more stories told about her than anyone else, god or mortal. Being what she is, she enters other stories; and such is the power of her magic girdle that he who even speaks her name falls under her spell, and seems to glimpse her white shoulders and catch the perfume of her golden hair. And he loses his wits and begins to babble and tells the same story in many ways.

But all the tales agree that she is the goddess of desire, and, unlike other Olympians, is never distracted from her duties. Her work is her pleasure; her profession, her hobby. She thinks of nothing but love, and nobody expects more of her.

She was born out of the primal murder. When Cronos butchered his father, Oranos, with the scythe his mother had given him, he flung the dismembered body off Olympus into the sea, where it floated, spouting blood and seed which drifted, whitening in the sun. From the foam rose a tall beautiful maiden, naked and dripping. Waves attended her. Poseidon's white horses brought her to the island of Cythera. Wherever she stepped, the sand turned to grass and flowers bloomed. Then she went to Cyprus. Hillsides burst into flowers, and the air was full of birds.

Zeus brought her to Olympus. She was still dripping from the sea. She wore nothing but the bright tunic of her hair, which fell to

mid-thigh and was yellow as daffodils. She looked about the great throne room where the gods were assembled to meet her, arched her throat, and laughed with joy.

Hera was watching Zeus narrowly. “You must marry her off,” she whispered. “At once—without delay!”

“Yes,” said Zeus. “Some sort of marriage would seem to be indicated.”

And he said, “Brothers, sons, cousins, Aphrodite is to be married. She will choose her own husband. So make your suit.”

The gods closed around her, shouting promises, pressing their claims. Earth-shaking Poseidon swung his mighty trident to clear a space about himself. “I claim you for the sea,” he said. “You are sea-born, foam-born, and belong to me. I offer you grottoes, riddles, gems, fair surfaces, dark surroundings. I offer you variety. Drowned sailors, typhoons, sunsets. I offer you secrets. I offer you riches that the earth does not know—power more subtle, more fluid than the dull fixed land. Come with me—be queen of the sea.”

He slammed his trident on the floor, and a huge green tidal wave swelled out of the sea—high, high as Olympus, curling its mighty green tongue as if to lick up the mountain—and poised there, quivering, not breaking, as the gods gaped. Then Poseidon raised his trident, and the mighty wave subsided like a ripple. He bowed to Aphrodite. She smiled at him, but said nothing.

Then the gods spoke in turn, offering her great gifts. Apollo offered her a throne and a crown made of hottest sun-gold, a golden

chariot drawn by white swans, and the Muses for her handmaids. Hermes offered to make her queen of the crossways where all must come—where she would hear every story, see every traveler, know each deed—a rich pageant of adventure and gossip so that she would never grow bored.

She smiled at Apollo and Hermes and made no answer.

Then Hera, scowling, reached her long white arm and dragged Hephaestus, the lame smith-god, from where he had been hiding behind the others, ashamed to be seen. And she hissed into his ear, “Speak, fool. Say exactly what I told you to say.”

He limped forward with great embarrassment and stood before the radiant goddess, eyes cast down, not daring to look at her. He said, “I would make a good husband for a girl like you. I work late.”

Aphrodite smiled. She said nothing, but put her finger under the chin of the grimy little smith, raised his face, leaned down, and kissed him on the lips.

That night they were married. And at the wedding party she finally spoke—whispering to each of her suitors—telling each one when he might come with his gift.

NATURE MYTHS

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Prometheus

PROMETHEUS WAS A YOUNG Titan, no great admirer of Zeus. Although he knew the great lord of the sky hated explicit questions, he did not hesitate to beard him when there was something he wanted to know.

One morning he came to Zeus, and said, “O Thunderer, I do not understand your design. You have caused the race of man to appear on earth, but you keep him in ignorance and darkness.”

“Perhaps you had better leave the race of man to me,” said Zeus. “What you call ignorance is innocence. What you call darkness is the shadow of my decree. Man is happy now. And he is so framed that he will remain happy unless someone persuades him that he is unhappy. Let us not speak of this again.”

But Prometheus said, “Look at him. Look below. He crouches in caves. He is at the mercy of beast and weather. He eats his meat raw. If you mean something by this, enlighten me with your wisdom. Tell me why you refuse to give man the gift of fire.”

Zeus answered, “Do you not know, Prometheus, that every gift brings a penalty? This is the way the Fates weave destiny—by which gods also must abide. Man does not have fire, true, nor the crafts which fire teaches. On the other hand, he does not know disease, warfare, old age, or that inward pest called worry. He is happy, I say, happy without fire. And so he shall remain.”

“Happy as beasts are happy,” said Prometheus. “Of what use to make a separate race called man and endow him with little fur, some wit, and a curious charm of unpredictability? If he must live like this, why separate him from the beasts at all?”

“He has another quality,” said Zeus, “the capacity for worship. An aptitude for admiring our power, being puzzled by our riddles and amazed by our caprice. That is why he was made.”

“Would not fire, and the graces he can put on with fire, make him more interesting?”

“More interesting, perhaps, but infinitely more dangerous. For there is this in man too: a vaunting pride that needs little sustenance to make it swell to giant size. Improve his lot, and he will forget that which makes him pleasing—his sense of worship, his humility. He will grow big and poisoned with pride and fancy himself a god, and before we know it, we shall see him storming Olympus. Enough, Prometheus! I have been patient with you, but do not try me too far. Go now and trouble me no more with your speculations.”

Prometheus was not satisfied. All that night he lay awake making plans. Then he left his couch at dawn, and standing tiptoe on Olympus, stretched his arm to the eastern horizon where the first faint flames of the sun were flickering. In his hand he held a reed filled with a dry fiber; he thrust it into the sunrise until a spark smoldered. Then he put the reed in his tunic and came down from the mountain.

At first men were frightened by the gift. It was so hot, so quick; it bit sharply when you touched it, and for pure spite, made the shadows dance. They thanked Prometheus and asked him to take it away. But he took the haunch of a newly killed deer and held it over the fire. And when the meat began to sear and sputter, filling the cave with its rich smells, the people felt themselves melting with hunger and flung themselves on the meat and devoured it greedily, burning their tongues.

“This that I have brought you is called ‘fire,’ ” Prometheus said. “It is an ill-natured spirit, a little brother of the sun, but if you handle it carefully, it can change your whole life. It is very greedy; you must feed it twigs, but only until it becomes a proper size. Then you must stop, or it will eat everything in sight—and you too. If it escapes, use this magic: water. It fears the water spirit, and if you touch it with water, it will fly away until you need it again.”

He left the fire burning in the first cave, with children staring at it wide-eyed, and then went to every cave in the land.

Then one day Zeus looked down from the mountain and was amazed. Everything had changed. Man had come out of his cave. Zeus saw woodmen’s huts, farm houses, villages, walled towns, even a castle or two. He saw men cooking their food, carrying torches to light their way at night. He saw forges blazing, men beating out ploughs, keels, swords, spears. They were making ships and raising white wings of sails and daring to use the fury of the

winds for their journeys. They were wearing helmets, riding out in chariots to do battle, like the gods themselves.

Zeus was full of rage. He seized his largest thunderbolt. “So they want fire,” he said to himself. “I’ll give them fire—more than they can use. I’ll turn their miserable little ball of earth into a cinder.” But then another thought came to him, and he lowered his arm. “No,” he said to himself, “I shall have vengeance—and entertainment too. Let them destroy themselves with their new skills. This will make a long twisted game, interesting to watch. I’ll attend to them later. My first business is with Prometheus.”

He called his giant guards and had them seize Prometheus, drag him off to the Caucasus, and there bind him to a mountain peak with great chains specially forged by Hephaestus—chains which even a Titan in agony could not break. And when the friend of man was bound to the mountain, Zeus sent two vultures to hover about him forever, tearing at his belly and eating his liver.

Men knew a terrible thing was happening on the mountain, but they did not know what. But the wind shrieked like a giant in torment and sometimes like fierce birds.

Many centuries he lay there—until another hero was born brave enough to defy the gods. He climbed to the peak in the Caucasus and struck the shackles from Prometheus and killed the vultures. His name was Heracles.

Pandora

AFTER ZEUS HAD CONDEMNED Prometheus for giving fire to man, he began to plan how to punish man for accepting it. Finally he hit upon a scheme. He ordered Hephaestus to mold a girl out of clay and to have Aphrodite pose for it to make sure it was beautiful. He breathed life into the clay figure; the clay turned to flesh, and she lay sleeping, all new. Then he summoned the gods and asked them each to give her a gift.

Apollo taught her to sing and play the lyre. Athene taught her to spin, Demeter to tend a garden. Aphrodite taught her how to look at a man without moving her eyes and how to dance without moving her legs. Poseidon gave her a pearl necklace and promised she would never drown. And finally Hermes gave her a beautiful golden box, which, he told her, she must never, never open. And then Hera gave her curiosity.

Hermes took her by the hand and led her down the slope of Olympus. He led her to Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus, and said, "Father Zeus grieves at the disgrace which has fallen upon your family. And to show you that he holds you blameless in your brother's offense, he makes you this gift—this girl, fairest in all the world. She is to be your wife. Her name is Pandora, the all-gifted."

So Epimetheus and Pandora were married. Pandora spun and baked and tended her garden, and played the lyre and danced for

her husband, and thought herself the happiest young bride in all the world. Only one thing bothered her—the golden box. First she kept it on the table and polished it every day so that all might admire it. But the sunlight lanced through the window, and the box sparkled and seemed to be winking at her.

She found herself thinking, “Hermes must have been teasing. He’s always making jokes; everyone knows that. Yes, he was teasing, telling me never to open his gift. For if it is so beautiful outside, what must it be inside? Why, he has hidden a surprise for me there. Gems more lovely than have ever been seen, no doubt. If the box is so rich, the gift inside must be even more splendid—for that is the way of gifts. Perhaps Hermes is *waiting* for me to open the box and see what is inside and be delighted and thank him. Perhaps he thinks me ungrateful...”

But even as she was telling herself this, she knew it was not so—that the box must not be opened, that she must keep her promise.

Finally she took the box from the table and hid it in a dusty little storeroom. But it seemed to be burning there in the shadows. Its heat seemed to scorch her thoughts wherever she went. She kept passing that room and stepping into it, making excuses to dawdle there. Sometimes she took the box from its hiding place and stroked it, then quickly shoved it out of sight, and rushed out of the room.

She took it then, locked it in a heavy oaken chest, put great shackles on the chest, and dug a hole in her garden. She put the

chest in, covered it over, and rolled a boulder on top of it. When Epimetheus came home that night, her hair was wild and her hands were bloody, her tunic torn and stained. But all she would tell him was that she had been working in the garden.

That night the moonlight blazed into the room. She could not sleep. The light pressed her eyes open. She sat up in bed and looked around. All the room was swimming in moonlight. Everything was different. There were deep shadows and swaths of silver, all mixed, all moving. She arose quietly and tiptoed from the room.

She went out into the garden. The flowers were blowing, the trees were swaying. The whole world was a dance in the magic white fire of that moonlight. She walked to the rock and pushed it. It rolled away as lightly as a pebble. And she felt herself full of wild strength.

She took a shovel and dug down to the chest. She unshackled it and drew out the golden box. It was cold, cold; coldness burned her hand to the bone. She trembled. What was inside that box seemed to her now the very secret of life, which she must look upon or die.

She took the little golden key from her tunic, fitted it into the keyhole, and gently opened the lid. There was a swarming, a hot throbbing, a wild meaty rustling, and a foul smell. Out of the box, as she held it up in the moonlight, swarmed small scaly lizardlike creatures with bat wings and burning red eyes.

They flew out of the box, circled her head once, clapping their wings and screaming thin little jeering screams—and then flew off into the night, hissing and cackling.

Then, half-fainting, sinking to her knees, Pandora, with her last bit of strength, clutched the box and slammed down the lid—catching the last little monster just as it was wriggling free. It shrieked and spat and clawed her hand, but she thrust it back into the box and locked it in. Then she dropped the box and fainted away.

What were those deathly creatures that flew out of the golden box? They were the ills that beset mankind: the spites, disease in its thousand shapes, old age, famine, insanity, and all their foul kin. After they flew out of the box, they scattered—flew into every home and swung from the rafters—waiting. And when their time comes, they fly and sting—and bring pain and sorrow and death.

At that, things could have been much worse. For the creature that Pandora shut into the box was the most dangerous of all. It was Foreboding, the final spite. If it had flown free, everyone in the world would have been told exactly what misfortune was to happen every day of his life. No hope would have been possible. And so there would have been an end to man. For though he can bear endless trouble, he cannot live with no hope at all.

Phaethon

LONG AGO, WHEN THE world was very new, two boys were racing along the edge of a cliff that hung over a deep blue sea. They were the same size; one boy had black hair, the other had yellow hair. The race was very close. Then the yellow-haired one spurred ahead and won the race. The loser was very angry.

“You think you’re pretty good,” he said. “But you’re not so much. My father is Zeus.”

“My father is Apollo,” said the yellow-haired boy, whose name was Phaethon.

“My father is the chief god, king of the mountain, lord of the sky.”

“My father is lord of the sun.”

“My father is called the thunderer. When he is angry, the sky grows black and the sun hides. His spear is a lightning bolt, and that’s what he kills people with. He hurls it a thousand miles and it never misses.”

“Without my father there would be no day. It would always be night. Each morning he hitches up his horses and drives the golden chariot of the sun across the sky. And that is day time. Then he dives into the ocean stream and boards a golden ferryboat and sails back to his eastern palace. That time is called night.”

“Sometimes I visit my father,” said Epaphus, the other boy. “I sit on Olympus with him, and he teaches me things and gives me presents. Know what he gave me last time? A little thunderbolt just like his—and he taught me how to throw it. I killed three vultures, scared a fishing boat, started a forest fire. Next time I go, I’ll throw it at more things. Do you visit your father?”

Phaethon never had. But he could not bear to tell Epaphus. “Certainly,” he said, “very often. I go to the eastern palace, and he teaches me things too.”

“What kind of things? Has he taught you to drive the horses of the sun?”

“Oh, yes. He taught me to handle their reins and how to make them go and how to make them stop. And they’re huge horses. Tall as this mountain. They breathe fire.”

“I think you’re making it all up,” said Epaphus. “I can tell. I don’t even believe there is a sun chariot. There’s the sun, look at it. It’s not a chariot.”

“Oh, what you see is just one of the wheels,” said Phaethon. “There’s another wheel on the other side. The body of the chariot is slung between them. That is where the driver stands and whips his horses. You cannot see it because your eyes are too small, and the glare is too bright.”

“Well,” said Epaphus. “Maybe it is a chariot, but I still don’t believe your father lets you drive it. In fact, I don’t believe you’ve been to the palace of the sun. I doubt that Apollo would know you

if he saw you. Maybe he isn't even your father. People like to say they're descended from the gods, of course. But how many of us are there, really?"

"I'll prove it to you," cried Phaethon, stamping his foot. "I'll go to the palace of the sun right now and hold my father to his promise. I'll show you."

"What promise?"

"He said I was getting to be so good a charioteer that next time he would let me drive the sun chariot *alone*. All by myself. From dawn to night. Right across the sky. And this time is next time."

"Poof—words are cheap," said Epaphus. "How will I know it's you driving the sun? I won't be able to see you from down here."

"You'll know me," said Phaethon. "When I pass the village I will come down close and drive in circles around your roof. You'll see me all right. Farewell."

"Are you starting now?"

"Now. At once. Just watch the sky tomorrow, son of Zeus."

And he went off. He was so stung by the words of his friend, and the boasting and lying he had been forced to do, that he traveled night and day, not stopping for food or rest, guiding himself by the morning star and the evening star, heading always east. Nor did he know the way. For, indeed, he had never once seen his father Apollo. He knew him only through his mother's stories.

But he did know that the palace must lie in the east, because that is where he saw the sun start each morning. He walked on and on until finally he lost his way completely, and weakened by hunger and exhaustion, fell swooning in a great meadow by the edge of a wood.

Now, while Phaethon was making his journey, Apollo sat in his great throne room on a huge throne made of gold and rubies. This was the quiet hour before dawn when night left its last coolness upon the earth. And it was then, at this hour, that Apollo sat on his throne, wearing a purple cloak embroidered with the golden signs of the zodiac. On his head was a crown given him by the dawn goddess, made of silver and pearls. A bird flew in the window and perched on his shoulder and spoke to him. This bird had sky-blue feathers, golden beak, golden claws, and golden eyes. It was one of Apollo's sun hawks. It was this bird's job to fly here and there gathering gossip. Sometimes she was called the spy bird.

Now she said, "Apollo, I have seen your son!"

"Which son?"

"Phaethon. He's coming to see you. But he has lost his way and lies exhausted at the edge of the wood. The wolves will surely eat him. Do you care?"

"I will have to see him before I know whether I care. You had better get back to him before the wolves do. Bring him here in comfort. Round up some of your companions and bring him here as befits the son of a god."

The sun hawk seized the softly glowing rug at the foot of the throne and flew away with it. She summoned three of her companions, and they each took a corner of the rug. They flew over a desert and a mountain and a wood and came to the field where Phaethon lay. They flew down among the howling of wolves, among burning eyes set in a circle about the unconscious boy. They pushed him onto the rug, and each took a corner in her beak, and flew away.

Phaethon felt himself being lifted into the air. The cold wind of his going revived him, and he sat up. People below saw a boy sitting with folded arms on a carpet rushing through the cold, bright moonlight far above their heads. It was too dark, though, to see the birds, and that is why we hear tales of flying carpets even to this day.

Phaethon was not particularly surprised to find himself in the air. The last thing he remembered was lying down on the grass. Now, he knew, he was dreaming. A good dream—floating and flying—his favorite kind. And when he saw the great cloud castle on top of the mountain, all made of snow, rose in the early light, he was more sure than ever that he was dreaming. He saw sentries in flashing golden armor, carrying golden spears. In the courtyard he saw enormous woolly dogs with fleece like clouddrift guarding the gate. These were Apollo's great sun hounds.

Over the wall flew the carpet, over the courtyard, through the tall portals. And it wasn't until the sun hawks gently let down the

carpet in front of the throne that he began to think that this dream might be very real. He raised his eyes shyly and saw a tall figure sitting on the throne. Taller than any man, and appallingly beautiful to the boy—with his golden hair and stormy blue eyes and strong laughing face. Phaethon fell on his knees.

“Father,” he cried. “I am Phaethon, your son!”

“Rise, Phaethon. Let me look at you.”

He stood up, his legs trembling.

“Yes, you may well be my son. I seem to see a resemblance. Which one did you say?”

“Phaethon.”

“Oh, Clymene’s boy. I remember your mother well. How is she?”

“In health, sire.”

“And did I not leave some daughters with her as well? Yellow-haired girls—quite pretty?”

“My sisters, sire. The Heliads.”

“Yes, of course. Must get over that way and visit them all one of these seasons. And you, lad—what brings you to me? Do you not know that it is courteous to await an invitation before visiting a god—even if he is in the family?”

“I know, Father. But I had no choice. I was taunted by a son of Zeus, Epaphus. And I would have flung him over the cliff and myself after him if I had not resolved to make my lies come true.”

“Well, you’re my son, all right. Proud, rash, accepting no affront, refusing no adventure. I know the breed. Speak up, then. What is it you wish? I will do anything in my power to help you.”

“Anything, Father?”

“Anything I can. I swear by the river Styx, an oath sacred to the gods.”

“I wish to drive the sun across the sky. All by myself. From dawn till night.”

Apollo’s roar of anger shattered every crystal goblet in the great castle.

“Impossible!” he cried. “No one drives those horses but me. They are tall as mountains. Their breath is fire. They are stronger than the tides, stronger than the wind. It is all that *I* can do to hold them in check. How can your puny grip restrain them? They will race away with the chariot, scorching the poor earth to a cinder.”

“You promised, Father.”

“Yes, I promised, foolish lad. And that promise is a death warrant. A poor charred cinder floating in space—well, that is what the oracle predicted for the earth—but I did not know it would be so soon...so soon.”

“It is almost dawn, Father. Should we not saddle the horses?”

“Will you not withdraw your request—allow me to preserve my honor without destroying the earth? Ask me anything else and I will grant it. Do not ask me this.”

“I have asked, sire, and you have promised. And the hour for dawn comes, and the horses are unharnessed. The sun will rise late today, confusing the wise.”

“They will be more than confused when this day is done,” said Apollo. “Come.”

Apollo took Phaethon to the stable of the sun, and there the boy saw the giant fire-white horses being harnessed to the golden chariot. Huge they were. Fire-white with golden manes and golden hooves and hot yellow eyes. When they neighed, the trumpet call of it rolled across the sky—and their breath was flame. They were being harnessed by a Titan, a cousin of the gods, tall as a tree, dressed in asbestos armor with helmet of tinted crystal against the glare. The sun chariot was an open shell of gold. Each wheel was the flat round disk of the sun as it is seen in the sky. And Phaethon looked very tiny as he stood in the chariot. The reins were thick as bridge cables, much too large for him to hold, so Apollo tied them around his waist. Then Apollo stood at the head of the team gentling the horses, speaking softly to them, calling them by name—Pyroeis, Eous, Aethon, Phlegon.

“Good lads, good horses, go easy today, my swift ones. Go at a slow trot and do not leave the path. You have a new driver today.”

The great horses dropped their heads to his shoulder and whinnied softly, for they loved him. Phaethon saw the flame of their breath play about his head, saw Apollo’s face shining out of

the flame. But he was not harmed, for he was a god and could not be hurt by physical things.

He came to Phaethon and said, “Listen to me, son. You are about to start a terrible journey. Now, by the obedience you owe me as a son, by the faith you owe a god, by my oath that cannot be broken, and your pride that will not bend, I put this rule upon you: Keep the middle way. Too high and the earth will freeze, too low and it will burn. Keep the middle way. Give the horses their heads; they know the path, the blue middle course of day. Drive them not too high nor too low, but above all, do not stop. Or you will fire the air about you where you stand, charring the earth and blistering the sky. Do you heed me?”

“I do, I do!” cried Phaethon. “Stand away, sire! The dawn grows old and day must begin! Go, horses, go!”

And Apollo stood watching as the horses of the sun went into a swinging trot, pulling behind them the golden chariot, climbing the first eastern steep of the sky.

At first things went well. The great steeds trotted easily along their path across the high blue meadow of the sky. And Phaethon thought to himself, “I can’t understand why my father was making such a fuss. This is easy. For me, anyway. Perhaps I’m a natural-born coachman though...”

He looked over the edge of the chariot. He saw tiny houses down below and specks of trees. And the dark blue puddle of the sea. The coach was trundling across the sky. The great sun wheels

were turning, casting light, warming and brightening the earth, chasing all the shadows of night.

“Just imagine,” Phaethon thought, “how many people now are looking up at the sky, praising the sun, hoping the weather stays fair. How many people are watching me, me, me...?” Then he thought, “But I’m too small to see. They can’t even see the coach or the horses—only the great wheel. We are too far and the light is too bright. For all they know, it is Apollo making his usual run. How can they know it’s me, me, me? How will my mother know, and my sisters? They would be so proud. And Epaphus—above all, Epaphus—how will *he* know? I’ll come home tomorrow after this glorious journey and tell him what I did and he will laugh at me and tell me I’m lying, as he did before. And how shall I prove it to him? No, this must not be. I must show him that it is I driving the chariot of the sun—I alone. Apollo said not to come too close to earth, but how will he know? And I won’t stay too long—just dip down toward our own village and circle his roof three times—which is the signal we agreed upon. After he recognizes me, I’ll whip up the horses and resume the path of the day.”

He jerked on the reins, pulled the horses’ heads down. They whinnied angrily and tossed their heads. He jerked the reins again.

“Down,” he cried. “Down! Down!”

The horses plunged through the bright air, golden hooves twinkling, golden manes flying, dragging the great glittering chariot after them in a long flaming swoop. When they reached his

village, he was horrified to see the roofs bursting into fire. The trees burned. People rushed about screaming. Their loose clothing caught fire, and they burned like torches as they ran.

Was it his village? He could not tell because of the smoke. Had he destroyed his own home? Burned his mother and his sisters?

He threw himself backward in the chariot, pulling at the reins with all his might, shouting, "Up! Up!"

And the horses, made furious by the smoke, reared on their hind legs in the air. Then leaped upward, galloping through the smoke, pulling the chariot up, up.

Swiftly the earth fell away beneath them. The village was just a smudge of smoke. Again he saw the pencilstroke of mountains, the inkblot of seas. "Whoa!" he cried. "Turn now! Forward on your path!" But he could no longer handle them. They were galloping, not trotting. They had taken the bit in their teeth. They did not turn toward the path of the day across the meadow of the sky, but galloped up, up. And the people on earth saw the sun shooting away until it was no larger than a star.

Darkness came. And cold. The earth froze hard. Rivers froze, and oceans. Boats were caught fast in the ice in every sea. It snowed in the jungle. Marble buildings cracked. It was impossible for anyone to speak; breath froze on the speakers' lips. And in village and city, in the field and in the wood, people died of the cold. And the bodies piled up where they fell, like firewood.

Still Phaethon could not hold his horses, and still they galloped upward dragging light and warmth away from the earth. Finally they went so high that the air was too thin to breathe. Phaethon saw the flame of their breath, which had been red and yellow, burn blue in the thin air. He himself was gasping for breath; he felt the marrow of his bones freezing.

Now the horses, wild with change, maddened by the feeble hand on the reins, swung around and dived toward earth again. Now all the ice melted, making great floods. Villages were swept away by a solid wall of water. Trees were uprooted and whole forests were torn away. The fields were covered by water. Lower swooped the horses, and lower yet. Now the water began to steam—great billowing clouds of steam as the water boiled. Dead fish floated on the surface. Naiads moaned in dry riverbeds.

Phaethon could not see; the steam was too thick. He had unbound the reins from his waist, or they would have cut him in two. He had no control over the horses at all. They galloped upward again—out of the steam—taking at last the middle road, but racing wildly, using all their tremendous speed. Circling the earth in a matter of minutes, smashing across the sky from horizon to horizon, making the day flash on and off like a child playing with a lamp. And the people who were left alive were bewildered by the light and darkness following each other so swiftly.

Up high on Olympus, the gods in their cool garden heard a clamor of grief from below. Zeus looked upon earth. He saw the

runaway horses of the sun and the hurtling chariot. He saw the dead and the dying, the burning forests, the floods, the weird frost. Then he looked again at the chariot and saw that it was not Apollo driving but someone he did not know. He stood up, drew back his arm, and hurled a thunderbolt.

It stabbed through the air, striking Phaethon, killing him instantly, knocking him out of the chariot. His body, flaming, fell like a star. And the horses of the sun, knowing themselves driverless, galloped homeward toward their stables at the eastern edge of the sky.

Phaethon's yellow-haired sisters grieved for the beautiful boy. They could not stop weeping. They stood on the bank of the river where he had fallen until Apollo, unable to comfort them, changed them into poplar trees. Here they still stand on the shore of the river, weeping tears of amber sap.

And since that day no one has been allowed to drive the chariot of the sun except the sun god himself. But there are still traces of Phaethon's ride. The ends of the earth are still covered with icecaps. Mountains still rumble, trying to spit out the fire started in their bellies by the diving sun.

Orpheus

HIS FATHER WAS A Thracian king; his mother, the Muse, Calliope. For awhile he lived on Parnassus with his mother and his eight beautiful aunts and there met Apollo, who was courting the laughing Muse, Thalia. Apollo was taken with Orpheus and gave him a little golden lyre and taught him to play. And his mother taught him to make verses for singing.

So he grew up to be a poet and musician such as the world had never known. Fishermen used to coax him to go sailing with them early in the morning and had him play his lyre on the deck. They knew that the fish would come up from the depths of the sea to hear him and sit on their tails and listen as he played, making it easy to catch them. But they were not caught, for as soon as Orpheus began to play, the fishermen forgot all about their nets and sat on deck and listened with their mouths open—just like the fish. And when he had finished, the fish dived, the fishermen awoke, and all was as before.

When he played in the fields, animals followed him, sheep and cows and goats. And not only the tame animals but the wild ones too—the shy deer, and wolves, and bears. They all followed him, streaming across the fields, following him, listening. When he sat down, they would gather in a circle about him, listening. Nor did the bears and wolves think of eating the sheep until the music

had stopped, and it was too late. And they went off growling to themselves about the chance they had missed.

And as he grew and practiced, he played more and more beautifully, so that now not only animals but trees followed him as he walked, wrenching themselves out of the earth and hobbling after him on their twisted roots. In Thrace now there are circles of trees that still stand, listening.

People followed him too, of course, as he strolled about, playing and singing. Men and women, boys and girls—particularly girls. But as time passed and the faces changed he noticed that one face was always there. She was always there—in front, listening—when he played. She became especially noticeable because she began to appear among his other listeners, among the animals and the trees who listened as he played. So that finally he knew, that wherever he might be, wherever he might strike up his lyre and raise his voice in song, whether people were listening, or animals or trees and rocks—she would be there, very slender and still, with huge dark eyes and long black hair, her face like a rose.

Then one day he took her aside and spoke to her. Her name was Eurydice. She said she wanted to do nothing but be where he was, always; and that she knew she could not hope for him to love her, but that would not stop her from following him and serving him in any way she could. She would be happy to be his slave if he wanted her to.

Now, this is the kind of thing any man likes to hear in any age, particularly a poet. And although Orpheus was admired by many women and could have had his choice, he decided that he must have this one, so much like a child still, with her broken murmurs and great slavish eyes. And so he married her.

They lived happily, very happily, for a year and a day. They lived in a little house near the river in a grove of trees that pressed close, and they were so happy that they rarely left home. People began to wonder why Orpheus was never seen about, why his wonderful lyre was never heard. They began to gossip, as people do. Some said Orpheus was dead, killed by the jealous Apollo for playing so well. Others said he had fallen in love with a river nymph, had gone into the water after her, and now lived at the bottom of the river, coming up only at dawn to blow tunes upon the reeds that grew thickly near the shore. And others said that he had married dangerously, that he lived with a sorceress, who with her enchantments made herself so beautiful that he was chained to her side and would not leave her even for a moment.

It was the last rumor that people chose to believe. Among them was a visitor—Aristeus, a young king of Athens, Apollo's son by the nymph Cyrene, and a mighty hunter. Aristeus decided that he must see this beautiful enchantress, and stationed himself in the grove of trees and watched the house. For two nights and two days he watched. Then finally he saw a girl come out. She made her way through the grove and went down the path toward the river. He

followed. When he reached the river, he saw her there, taking off her tunic.

Without a word he charged toward her, crashing like a wild boar through the reeds. Eurydice looked up and saw a stranger hurtling toward her. She fled. Swiftly she ran—over the grass toward the trees. She heard him panting after her. She doubled back toward the river and ran, heedless of where she was going, wild to escape. And she stepped full on a nest of coiled and sleeping snakes, who awoke immediately and bit her leg in so many places that she was dead before she fell. And Aristeus, rushing up, found her lying in the reeds.

He left her body where he found it. There it lay until Orpheus, looking for her, came at dusk and saw her glimmering whitely like a fallen birch. By this time Hermes had come and gone, taking her soul with him to Tartarus. Orpheus stood looking down at her. He did not weep. He touched a string of his lyre once, absently, and it sobbed. But only once—he did not touch it again. He kept looking at her. She was pale and thin, her hair was disheveled, her legs streaked with mud. She seemed more childish than even He looked down at her, dissatisfied with the way she looked, as he felt when he set a wrong word in a verse. She was wrong this way. She did not belong dead. He would have to correct it. He turned abruptly and set off across the field.

He entered Tartarus at the nearest place, a passage in the mountains called Avernus, and walked through a cold mist until he

came to the river Styx. He saw shades waiting there to be ferried across, but not Eurydice. She must have crossed before. The ferry came back and put out its plank, and the shades went on board, each one reaching under his tongue for the penny to pay the fare. But the ferryman, Charon, huge and swart and scowling, stopped Orpheus when he tried to embark.

“Stand off!” he cried. “Only the dead go here.”

Orpheus touched his lyre and began to sing—a river song, a boat song, about streams running in the sunlight, and boys making twig boats, and then growing up to be young men who go in boats, and how they row down the river thrusting with powerful young arms, and what the water smells like in the morning when you are young, and the sound of oars dipping.

And Charon, listening, felt himself carried back to his own youth—to the time before he had been taken by Hades and put to work on the black river. And he was so lost in memory that the great sweep oar fell from his hand, and he stood there, dazed, tears streaming down his face—and Orpheus took up the oar and rowed across.

The shades filed off the ferry and through the gates of Tartarus. Orpheus followed them. Then he heard a hideous growling. An enormous dog with three heads, each one uglier than the next, slavered and snarled. It was the three-headed dog, Cerberus, who guarded the gates of Tartarus.

Orpheus unslung his lyre and played. He played a dog song, a hound song, a hunting song. In it was the faint far yapping of happy young hounds finding a fresh trail—dogs with one graceful head in the middle where it should be, dogs that run through the light and shade of the forest chasing stags and wolves, as dogs should do and are not forced to stand forever before dark gates, barking at ghosts.

Cerberus lay down and closed his six eyes, lolled his three tongues, and went to sleep to dream of the days when he had been a real dog, before he had been captured and changed and trained as a sentinel for the dead. Orpheus stepped over him and went through the gates.

Through the Field of Asphodel he walked, playing. The shades twittered thin glee, like bats giggling. Sisyphus stopped pushing his stone, and the stone itself poised on the side of the hill to listen and did not fall back. Tantalus heard and stopped lunging his head at the water; the music laved his thirst. Minos and Rhadamanthys and Aeacus, the great judges of the dead, heard the music on their high benches and fell dreaming about the old days on Crete where they had been young princes, about the land battles and the sea battles and the white bulls and the beautiful maidens and the flashing swords, and all the days gone by. They sat there, listening, eyes blinded with tears, deaf to litigants.

Then Hades, king of the underworld, lord of the dead, knowing his great proceedings disrupted, waited sternly on his throne as Orpheus approached.

“No more cheap minstrel tricks,” he cried. “I am a god. My rages are not to be assuaged, nor my decrees nullified. No one comes to Tartarus without being sent for. No one has before, and no one will again, when the tale is told of the torments I intend to put you to.”

Orpheus touched his lyre and sang a song that conjured up a green field and a grove of trees and a slender girl painting flowers and all the light about her head, with the special clearness there was when the world had just begun. He sang of how that girl made a sight so pleasing as she played with the flowers that the birds overhead gossiped of it, and the moles underground—until the word reached even gloomy Tartarus, where a dark king heard and went up to see for himself. Orpheus sang of that king seeing the girl for the first time in a great wash of early sunlight, and what he felt when he saw that stalk-slender child in her tunic and green shoes moving with her paintpot among the flowers; of the fever that ran in his blood when first he put his mighty arm about her waist, and drank her screams with his dark lips and tasted her tears; of the grief that had come upon him when he almost lost her again to her mother by Zeus’s decree; and of the joy that filled him when he learned that she had eaten of the pomegranate.

Persephone was sitting at Hades’ side. She began to cry. Hades looked at her. She leaned forward and whispered to him swiftly. The king turned to Orpheus. Hades did not weep, but no one had ever seen his eyes so brilliant.

“Your verse has affected my queen,” he said. “Speak. We are disposed to hear. What is it you wish?”

“My wife.”

“What have we to do with your wife?”

“She is here. She was brought here today. Her name is Eurydice. I wish to take her back with me.”

“Never done,” said Hades. “A disastrous precedent.”

“Not so, great Hades,” said Orpheus. “This one stroke of unique mercy will illumine like a lightning flash the caverns of your dread decree. Nature exists by proportion, and perceptions work by contrast, and the gods themselves are part of nature. This brilliant act of kindness, I say, will make cruelty seem like justice for all the rest of time. Pray give me back my wife again, great monarch. For I will not leave without her—not for all the torments that can be devised.”

He touched his lyre once again, and the Eumenides, hearing the music, flew in on their hooked wings, their brass claws tinkling like bells, and poised in the air above Hades’ throne. The terrible hags cooed like doves, saying, “Just this once, Hades. Let him have her. Let her go.”

Hades stood up then, black-caped and towering. He looked down at Orpheus and said, “I must leave the laurel leaves and the loud celebrations to my bright nephew Apollo. But I, even I, of such dour repute, can be touched by eloquence. Especially when it attracts such unlikely advocates. Hear me then, Orpheus. You may

have your wife. She will be given into your care, and you will conduct her yourself from Tartarus to the upper light. But if during your journey, you look back once, only once—if for any reason whatever you turn your eyes from where you are headed and look back toward where you were—then my leniency is revoked, and Eurydice will be taken from you again, and forever. Go...”

Orpheus bowed, once to Hades, once to Persephone, lifted his head and smiled a half-smile at the hovering Furies, turned and walked away. Hades gestured. And as Orpheus walked through the fields of Tartarus, Eurydice fell into step behind him. He did not see her. He thought she was there, he was sure she was there. He thought he could hear her footfall, but the black grass was thick; he could not be sure. But he thought he recognized her breathing—that faint sipping of breath he had heard so many nights near his ear; he thought he heard her breathing, but the air again was full of the howls of the tormented, and he could not be sure.

But Hades had given his word; he had to believe—and so he visualized the girl behind him, following him as he led. And he walked steadily, through the Field of Asphodel toward the gates of Tartarus. The gates opened as he approached. Cerberus was still asleep in the middle of the road. He stepped over him. Surely he could hear her now, walking behind him. But he could not turn around to see, and he could not be sure because of the cry of vultures which hung in the air above the river Styx like gulls over a bay. Then, on the gangplank, he heard a footfall behind him,

surely...Why, oh why, did she walk so lightly? Something he had always loved, but he wished her heavier-footed now.

He went to the bow of the boat and gazed sternly ahead, clenching his teeth, and tensing his neck until it became a thick halter of muscle so that he could not turn his head. On the other side, climbing toward the passage of Avernus, the air was full of the roaring of the great cataracts that fell chasm-deep toward Styx, and he could not hear her walking and he could not hear her breathing. But he kept a picture of her in his mind, walking behind him, her face growing more and more vivid with excitement as she approached the upper air. Then finally he saw a blade of light cutting the gloom, and knew that it was the sun falling through the narrow crevasse which is Avernus, and that he had brought Eurydice back to earth.

But had he? How did he know she was there? How did he know that this was not all a trick of Hades? Who calls the gods to judgment? Who can accuse them if they lie? Would Hades, implacable Hades, who had had the great Asclepius murdered for pulling a patient back from death, would that powerful thwarting mind that had imagined the terrain of Tartarus and the bolts of those gates and dreamed a three-headed dog—could such a mind be turned to mercy by a few notes of music, a few tears? Would he who made the water shrink always from the thirst of Tantalus and who toyed with Sisyphus' stone, rolling it always back and forth—could this will, this black ever-curdling rage, this dire fancy, relent

and let a girl return to her husband just because the husband had asked? Had it been she following him through the Field of Asphodel, through the paths of Tartarus, through the gates, over the river? Had it been she or the echoes of his own fancy—that cheating mourner’s fancy, which, kind but to be cruel, conjures up the beloved face and voice only to scatter them like smoke? Was it this, then? Was this the final cruelty? Was this the torment Hades had promised? Was this the final ironic flourish of death’s scepter, which had always liked to cudgel poets? Had he come back without her? Was it all for nothing? Or was she there? Was she there?

Swiftly he turned, and looked back. She was there. It was she. He reached his hand to take her and draw her out into the light—but the hand turned to smoke. The arm turned to smoke. The body became mist, a spout of mist. And the face melted. The last to go was the mouth with its smile of welcome. Then it melted. The bright vapor blew away in the fresh current of air that blew through the crevasse from the upper world.

Narcissus and Echo

OF ALL THE NYMPHS of river and wood, a dryad named Echo was the best beloved. She was not only very beautiful and very kind, but had a haunting musical voice. The other dryads and naiads and creatures of the wood begged her to sing to them and tell them stories—and she did. She was a great favorite of Aphrodite, who used to come all the way from Olympus to chat with Echo and listen to her tales. Being goddess of love, she was especially concerned with gossip—which is mostly about who loves whom and what they are doing about it. And Echo kept her entertained as no one else could.

Aphrodite said, “All the world asks me for favors, Echo. But not you. Tell me, is there not someone you would wish to love you? Some man, boy, god? Just name him, and I will send my son Eros, who will shoot him with his arrow and make him fall madly in love with you.”

But Echo laughed and said, “Alas, sweet Aphrodite, I have seen no man who pleases me. And gods are too fickle. Man and boy—I look at them all very carefully—but none seems beautiful enough to match my secret dream. When the time comes, I shall ask your help—if it ever comes.”

“Well, you are lovely enough to demand the best,” said Aphrodite. “On the other hand, the best happens only once. And

who can wait so long? However, I am always at your service.”

Now Echo did not know this, but at that moment the most beautiful boy in the whole world was lost in that very wood, trying to find his way out. His name was Narcissus, and he was so handsome that he had never been able to speak to any woman except his mother. For any girl who saw him immediately fainted. Of course this also gave him a very high opinion of himself. And as he went through the woods, he thought:

“Oh, how I wish I could find someone as beautiful as I. I will not be friends with anyone less perfect in face or form. Why should I? This leaves me lonely, true, but it’s better than lowering myself.”

So he walked along the path, but he was going the wrong way, getting more and more lost. In the other part of the wood Echo had just said farewell to Aphrodite, and was coming back to the hollow tree in which she lived. She came to a glade in the forest and there saw something that made her stop in astonishment and hide behind a tree. For whom did she see but Zeus himself—king of the gods, lord of the sky. He was leaning on his volt-blue lightning shaft, holding a river nymph by the shoulder, and she was smiling up at him.

“Well,” said Echo. “He’s at it again. Won’t Aphrodite enjoy hearing about *this!*”

But then her attention was caught by something else. She turned to see a tall purple-clad figure moving through the trees toward the glade. She recognized Hera, queen of the gods, jealous

wife of Zeus, and she realized that Hera must have heard of what Zeus was doing, and was coming to catch him. And so the kind-hearted nymph hurried forward and curtsied low before Hera, saying, “Greetings, great queen. Welcome to the wood.”

“Hush, fool!” whispered Hera. “Don’t say a word! I am trying to take someone by surprise.”

“This is a proud day for us,” said Echo, thinking swiftly, “to be visited by so many gods. Just two minutes ago, Zeus was here looking for you.”

“Zeus? Looking for *me*? Are you sure?”

“The great Zeus. Your husband. He asked me whether I had seen you. Said he had heard you were coming this way, and he wished very much to meet you. When I told him I had not seen you, he flew off looking very disappointed.”

“Really? Can it be so? Zeus looking for me? Disappointed? Well—miracles never cease. Which way did he go?”

“Oh—toward Olympus.”

“Thank you, child,” said Hera. “I’ll be going too.”

And she disappeared.

In the meantime Zeus, hearing voices, had hidden himself and the river nymph in the underbrush. When Hera left, he came out, and to thank Echo he gave her a shining blue sapphire ring from his own finger.

Hera, having returned to Olympus, found that Zeus was not there. She realized that something was wrong and sped back to the

forest. The first thing she saw was Echo admiring a large sapphire ring that burned on her finger like a fallen star. Hera recognized the ring and immediately understood that the nymph had tricked her in some way and had been given the ring as a reward.

“Wretched creature!” she cried. “I know what you have done. I see the gift you have been given. And I would not have it said that my husband is more generous than I. So I too shall reward you for what you have done. Because you have used your voice for lying, you shall never be able to say anything to anyone again—except the last words that have been said to you. Now try lying.”

“Try lying,” said Echo.

“No more shall you meddle in high concerns—no more shall you gossip and tell stories and sing songs—but endure this punishment evermore...”

“Evermore...” said Echo, sobbing.

And Hera went away to search for Zeus. And the nymph, weeping, rushed toward her home in the hollow tree. As she was going she saw once again the dazzling brightness that was the face of a god and she stopped to see. It was no god, but a lad about her own age, with yellow hair and eyes the color of the sapphire Zeus had given her. When she saw him, all the grief of her punishment dissolved and she was full of a great laughing joy. For here was the boy she had been looking for all her life, as beautiful as her secret dream—a boy she could love.

She danced toward him. He stopped and said, “Pardon me, but can you show me the path out of the wood?”

“Out of the wood...” said Echo.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m lost. I’ve been wandering here for hours, and I can’t seem to find my way out of the wood.”

“Out of the wood...”

“Yes. I’ve told you twice. I’m lost. Can you help me find the way?”

“The way...”

“Are you deaf, perhaps? Why must I repeat everything?”

“Repeat everything...”

“No, I will not! It’s a bore! I won’t do it!”

“Do it...”

“Look, I can’t stand here arguing with you. If you don’t want to show me the way, well then, I’ll just try to find someone who can.”

“Who can...”

Narcissus glared at her and started away. But she came to him and put her arms around him and tried to kiss his face.

“Oh, no—none of that!” said Narcissus, shoving her away. “You’re just like all the rest of them, aren’t you? They faint, and you say stupid things. Stop it! You can’t kiss me.”

“Kiss me...”

“No!”

“No...”

And she tried to kiss him again. Again he pushed her aside. She fell on her knees on the path and hugged his legs and lifted her lovely tear-streaked face to his, trying to speak. But she could not.

“No!” he said. “Let go! You can’t hold me here. I will not love you.”

“Love you...”

He tore himself from her grip and strode away. “Farewell,” he called.

“Farewell...”

She looked after him until he disappeared. And when he was gone, she felt such sadness, such terrible tearing grief, such pain in every part of her, that it seemed she was being torn apart by white-hot little pincers, torn flesh from bone. And since she could not speak, she said this prayer to herself:

“Oh, Aphrodite, fair goddess, you promised me a favor. Do me one now. Hear me though I am voiceless. My love has disappeared, and I must disappear too, for I cannot bear the pain.”

And Aphrodite, in the garden on Olympus, heard this prayer—for prayers do not have to be spoken to be heard. She looked down upon the grieving nymph and pitied her and made her disappear. Her body melted into thin cool air, so that the pain was gone. All was gone...except her voice, for Aphrodite could not bear to lose the sound of that lovely story-telling voice. The goddess said, “I grant you your wish—and one thing more. You have not asked vengeance upon the love that has betrayed you. You are too sweet

and kind. But *I* shall take vengeance, nevertheless. I decree now that whoever has caused you this pain will know the same terrible longing. He will fall in love with someone who cannot return his love—and will forever desire and never achieve.”

But Narcissus knew nothing of this—of Echo’s grief nor Aphrodite’s vow. He wandered the forest path, thinking, “All these girls who love me on sight—it’s too bad I cannot find one as beautiful as I. For until I do, I shall not love. And all their loving will be only vexation to me.”

He sat down on the bank of a river to rest. Not a river really, but a finger of the river—a clear little stream moving slowly through rocks. The sun shone on it; it became a mirror, holding the trees and the sky upside down, and a small silver trembling sun. And Narcissus, looking into the stream, saw a face.

He blinked his eyes and looked again. It was still there—the most beautiful face he had ever seen. As beautiful, he knew, as his own, but with a nimbus of light behind it so that the hair was blurred and looked long—like a girl’s. He gazed and gazed and could not have enough of it. He knew that he could look upon this face forever and still not be satisfied. He put out his hand to touch her. The water trembled and she disappeared.

“A water nymph,” he thought. “A lovely dryad—daughter of the river god, no doubt. The loveliest of his daughters. She is shy. Like me, she can’t bear to be touched. Ah—here she is again.”

The face looked at him out of the stream. Again, very timidly, he reached his hand. Again the water trembled and the face disappeared.

“I will stay here until she loves me,” he said to himself. “She may hide now, but presently she will recognize me too. And come out.” And he said aloud: “Come out, lovely one.”

And the voice of Echo, who had followed him to the stream, said, “Lovely one...”

“Hear that, hear that!” cried Narcissus, overjoyed. “She cares for me too. You do, don’t you? You love me.”

“Love me...”

“I do—I do—Finally I have found someone to love. Come out, come out—Oh, will you never come out?”

“Never come out...” said Echo.

“Don’t say that, please don’t say that. Because I will stay here till you do. This, I vow.”

“I vow...”

“Your voice is as beautiful as your face. And I will stay here, adoring you forever.”

“Forever...”

And Narcissus stayed there, leaning over the stream, watching the face in the water, watching, watching...sometimes pleading with it to come out, hearing its voice answer. Coaxing, begging, looking....Day after day he stayed there, night after night, never moving, never eating, never looking away from the face. He stayed

there so long that his legs grew into the bank of the river and became roots. His hair grew long, tangled, leafy. And his pale face and yellow hair became delicate yellow and white petals—the flower Narcissus, which lives on the riverbank and leans over watching its reflection in the water.

And there you can find it till this day. And in the woods too, when all is still, you will sometimes come upon Echo. And if you call to her in a certain way, she will answer your call.

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Eros and Psyche

THERE WAS A KING who had three daughters, and the youngest, named Psyche, was so beautiful that Aphrodite grew jealous and began to plan mischief.

“I’ll teach that little upstart,” she said to herself. “How dare she go around pretending to be as beautiful as I? When I get through with her, she’ll wish she’d been born ugly as a toad.”

She called her son Eros to her and said, “Son, your mother has been insulted. See that castle down there? In a bower there, a maiden lies asleep. You must go pierce her with one of your arrows.”

“While she is asleep? What good will it do?”

“No good at all. Just evil, which is exactly what I plan for her.”

“But she can fall in love only with the one she is looking at when the arrow pierces her. Why bother when she is asleep?”

“Because if you scratch her with the arrow while she sleeps, she will form a passion for the first one she sees when she awakes. And I will take care to supply her with someone very special—the castle dwarf, perhaps. Or the gardener, who has just celebrated his hundred-and-second birthday. Or a donkey—yes that’s possible too. I haven’t decided. But you can be sure it will be someone quite undesirable. Her family will be surprised.”

“This is a cruel trick, Mother.”

“Oh, yes—it’s meant to be cruel. I tell you the girl has irritated me. Now be off and do your work.”

Obediently, Eros flew down to the castle. He made himself invisible and flew through the window into the girl’s chamber. He stood looking at her.

“She is very beautiful,” he thought. “Too beautiful for her own safety, poor girl.”

He leaned over her, holding his dart so as to delicately scratch her shoulder. But he must have made some sound, for she opened her eyes then and looked straight into his, although she could not see him. And her huge black brilliant eyes startled him, so that the dart slipped and he scratched his own hand. He stood there feeling the sweet poison spread in his veins, confused, growing dizzy with joy and strangeness. He had spread love, but never felt it; shot others, but never been wounded himself. And he did not know himself this way.

The girl closed her eyes and went to sleep again. He stood looking at her. Suddenly she had become the most wonderful, the most curious, the most valuable thing in the world to him. And he knew that he would never let her come to any harm if he could prevent it. He thrust his dart into his quiver and flew back to Olympus.

When he told his mother what had happened, she fell into a rage and ordered him out of her sight. She then flung a curse upon

Psyche. She cast an invisible hedge of thorns about her, so that no suitor could come near. The beautiful young princess became very lonely and very sad. Her father and mother could not understand why no one offered to marry her.

Now the gods often quarrel, but Olympus had never seen such a feud as now flared between Aphrodite and her son.

“How dare you torment the girl like that?” he said to his mother. “So long as you keep this spell upon her, I will do no business of love. I will shoot no one with my arrows. Your praises will not be sung. And without praise you will dry up and become a vicious old harpy. Farewell.”

And indeed Eros refused to shoot his arrows. People stopped falling in love with one another. There was no praise for Aphrodite; her temples stood empty, her altars unadorned. No marriages were made, no babies born. The world seemed to grow old and dull in a day. Without love, work died. Farmers did not plough their fields. Ships crawled listlessly on the seas. Fishermen scarcely cast their nets. Indeed, there were not many fish to catch, for they had sunk sullenly to the very bottom of the sea. And Aphrodite herself, goddess of love and beauty, found herself wasting in the great parching despair that came off the earth like a desert wind.

She called her son to her and said, “I see that you must have your way. What is it you wish?”

“The girl,” he said.

“You shall have her. Sharpen your darts now and get back to work, or we shall all run melancholy mad.”

So Eros filled his quiver with arrows, stood upon a low cloud, and shot as fast as he could. And man and woman awakened to each other again. Fish leaped in the sea. Stallions trumpeted in the fields. Sounds of the earth holding revel came to the goddess on the mountain, and she smiled.

But the parents of Psyche still grieved. For now with all the world celebrating the return of love, and the most unlikely people getting married, still no one asked for their daughter. They went to the oracle, who said:

“Psyche is not meant for mortal man. She is to be the bride of him who lives on the mountain and vanquishes both man and god. Take her to the mountain and say farewell.”

As the king and queen understood this, they thought that their daughter was intended for some monster, who would devour her as so many other princesses had been devoured to appease the mysterious forces of evil. They dressed her in bridal garments and hung her with jewels and led her to the mountain. The whole court followed, mourning, as though it were a funeral instead of a wedding.

Psyche herself did not weep. She had a strange dreaming look on her face. She seemed scarcely to know what was going on. She said no word of fear, wept no tear, but kissed her mother and father goodbye, and waited on the mountain, standing tall, her white

bridal gown blowing about her, her arms full of flowers. The wedding party returned to the castle. The last sound of their voices faded. She stood there listening to a great silence. The wind blew hard, hard. Her hair came loose. The gown whipped about her like a flag. She felt a great pressure upon her and she did not understand. Then a huge breathy murmur, the wind itself howling in her ear, seemed to say, "Fear not. I am Zephyrus, the west wind, the groom's messenger. I have come to take you home."

She listened to the soft howling and believed the words she seemed to hear and was not afraid, even though she felt herself being lifted off the mountain, felt herself sailing through the air like a leaf. She saw her own castle pass beneath her and thought, "If they're looking up and see me now, they'll think that I'm a gull." And she was glad that they would not know her.

Past low hills, over a large bay, beyond forests and fields and another ring of hills, the wind took her. And now she felt herself coasting down steeps of air, through the failing light, through purple clumps of dusk, toward another castle, gleaming like silver on a hilltop. Gently, gently, she was set down within the courtyard. It was empty. There were no sentries, no dogs, nothing but shadows, and the moon-pale stones of the castle. She saw no one. But the great doors opened. A carpet unreeled itself and rolled out to her feet. She walked over the carpet, through the doors. They closed behind her.

A torch burned in the air and floated in front of her. She followed it. It led her through a great hallway into a room. The torch whirled. Three more torches whirled in to join it, then stuck themselves in the wall and burned there, lighting the room. It was a smaller room, beautifully furnished. She stepped onto the terrace which looked out over the valley toward the moonlit sea.

A table floated into the room and set itself down solidly on its three legs. A chair placed itself at the table. Invisible hands began to set the table with dishes of gold and goblets of crystal shells. Food appeared on the plates, and the goblets filled with purple wine.

“Why can I not see you?” she cried to the invisible servants.

A courteous voice said, “It is so ordered.”

“And my husband? Where is he?”

“Journeying far. Coming near. I must say no more.”

She was very hungry after her windy ride. She ate the food and drank the wine. The torch then led her out of the room to another room that was an indoor pool, full of fragrant warm water. She bathed herself. Fleecy towels were offered her, a jeweled comb, and a flask of perfumed oil. She anointed herself, went back to her room, and awaited her husband.

Presently she heard a voice in the room. A powerful voice speaking very softly, so softly that the words were like her own thoughts.

“You are Psyche. I am your husband. You are the most beautiful girl in all the world, beautiful enough to make the goddess of love herself grow jealous.”

She could not see anyone. She felt the tone of the voice press hummily upon her, as if she were in the center of a huge bell.

“Where are you?”

“Here.”

She reached out her arms. She felt mighty shoulders, hard as marble, but warm with life. She felt herself being enfolded by great muscular arms. And a voice spoke: “Welcome home.”

A swoon of happiness darkened her mind. The torches went out, one by one.

When she awoke next morning, she was alone. But she was so happy she didn't care. She went dancing from room to room, exploring the castle, singing as she went. She sang so happily that the great pile of stone was filled with the sound of joy. She explored the castle, the courtyard, and the woods nearby. One living creature she found, a silvery greyhound, dainty as a squirrel and fierce as a panther. She knew it was hers. He went exploring the woods with her and showed her how he could outrace the deer. She laughed with joy to see him run.

At the end of the day she returned to the castle. Her meal was served by the same invisible servants. She again bathed and anointed herself. At midnight again her husband spoke to her, and

she embraced him and wondered how it was that of all the girls in the world she had been chosen for this terrible joy.

Day after day went by like this, and night after night. And each night he asked her, “Are you happy, little one? Can I bring you anything, give you anything?”

“Nothing, husband, nothing. Only yourself.”

“That you have.”

“But I want to see you. I want to see the beauty I hold in my arms.”

“That will be, but not yet. It is not yet time.”

“Whatever you say, dear heart. But then, can you not stay with me by day as well, invisible or not. Why must you visit me only at night?”

“That too will change, perhaps. But not yet. It is too soon.”

“But the day grows so long without you. I wait for nightfall so, it seems it will never come.”

“You are lonely. You want company. Would you like your sisters to visit you?”

“My sisters—I have almost forgotten them. How strange.”

“Do you care to renew your acquaintance?”

“Well, perhaps. But I don’t really care. It is you I want. I want to see you. I want you here by day as well as by night.”

“You may expect your sisters here tomorrow.”

The next day the west wind bore Psyche’s elder sisters to the castle and landed them in the courtyard, windblown and

bewildered. Fearful at having been snatched away from their own gardens, they were relieved to find themselves deposited so gently in the courtyard. How much more amazed they were, then, to see their own sister, whom they thought long dead, running out of the castle. She was more beautiful than ever, blooming with happiness, more richly garbed than any queen. She stormed joyously out of the castle, swept them into her arms, embraced and kissed them, and made them greatly welcome.

Then she led them into the castle. The invisible servants bathed and anointed them and served them a sumptuous meal. And with every new wonder they saw, with every treasure their sister showed them, they grew more and more jealous. They too had married kings, but little local ones, and this castle made theirs look like dog kennels. They did not eat off golden plates and drink out of jewels. Their servants were the plain old visible kind. And they ate and drank with huge appetites and grew more and more displeased with every bite.

“But where is your husband?” said the eldest one. “Why is he not here to welcome us? Perhaps he didn’t want us to come.”

“Oh, he did, he did,” cried Psyche. “It was his idea. He sent his servant, the west wind, for you.”

“Oho,” sniffed the second sister. “It is he we have to thank for being taken by force and hurled through the air. Pretty rough transport.”

“But so swift,” said Psyche. “Do you not like riding the wind? I love it.”

“Yes, you seem to have changed considerably,” said the eldest. “But that’s still not telling us where your husband is. It is odd that he should not wish to meet us—very odd.”

“Not odd at all,” said Psyche. “He—he is rarely here by day. He—has things to do.”

“What sort of things?”

“Oh, you know—wars, peace treaties, hunting—you know the things that men do.”

“He is often away then?”

“Oh, no! No—that is—only by day. At night he returns.”

“Ah, then we will meet him tonight. At dinner, perhaps—”

“No—well—he will not be here. I mean—he will, but you will not see him.”

“Just what I thought!” cried the eldest. “Too proud to meet us. My dear, I think we had better go home.”

“Yes, indeed,” said the second sister. “If your husband is too high and mighty to give us a glimpse of his august self, then we’re plainly not wanted here.”

“Oh, no,” said Psyche. “Please listen. You don’t understand.”

“We certainly do not.”

And poor Psyche, unable to bear her sisters’ barbed hints, told them how things were. The two sisters sat at the table, listening.

They were so fascinated they even forgot to eat, which was unusual for them.

“Oh, my heavens!” cried the eldest. “It’s worse than I thought.”

“Much much worse,” said the second. “The oracle was right. You *have* married a monster.”

“Oh, no, no!” cried Psyche. “Not a monster! But the most beautiful creature in the world!”

“Beautiful creatures like to be seen,” said the eldest. “It is the nature of beauty to be seen. Only ugliness hides itself away. You have married a monster.”

“A monster,” said the second. “Yes, a monster—a dragon—some scaly creature with many heads, perhaps, that devours young maidens once they are fattened. No wonder he feeds you so well.”

“Yes,” said the eldest. “The better you feed, the better he will later.”

“Poor child—how can we save her?”

“We cannot save her. He’s too powerful, this monster. She must save herself.”

“I won’t listen to another word!” cried Psyche, leaping up. “You are wicked evil-minded shrews, both of you! I’m ashamed of you. Ashamed of myself for listening to you. I never want to see you again. Never!”

She struck a gong. The table was snatched away. A window flew open, and the west wind swept in, curled his arm about the

two sisters, swept them out and back to their own homes. Psyche was left alone, frightened, bitterly unhappy, longing for her husband. But there were still many hours till nightfall. All that long hideous afternoon she brooded about what her sisters had said. The words stuck in her mind like poison thorns. They festered in her head, throwing her into a fever of doubt.

She knew her husband was good. She knew he was beautiful. But still—why would he not let her see him? What did he do during the day? Other words of her sisters came back to her:

“How do you know what he does when he’s not here? Perhaps he has dozens of castles scattered about the countryside, a princess in each one. Perhaps he visits them all.”

And then jealousy, more terrible than fear, began to gnaw at her. She was not really afraid that he was a monster. Nor was she at all afraid of being devoured. If he did not love her she wanted to die anyway, but the idea that he might have other brides, other castles, clawed at her and sent her almost mad. She felt that if she could only see him her doubts would be resolved.

As dusk began to fill the room, she took a lamp, trimmed the wick, and poured in the oil. Then she lighted it and put it in a niche of the wall where its light could not be seen. She sat down and awaited her husband.

Late that night, when he had fallen asleep, she crept away and took the torch. She tiptoed back to where he slept and held the lamp over him. There in the dim wavering light she saw a god

sleeping. Eros himself, the archer of love, youngest and most beautiful of the gods. He wore a quiver of silver darts even as he slept. Her heart sang at the sight of his beauty. She leaned over to kiss his face, still holding the lamp, and a drop of hot oil fell on his bare shoulder.

He started up and seized the lamp and doused its light. She reached for him, felt him push her away. She heard his voice saying, “Wretched girl—you are not ready to accept love. Yes, I am love itself and I cannot live where I am not believed. Farewell, Psyche.”

The voice was gone. She rushed into the courtyard, calling after him, calling, “Husband! Husband!” She heard a dry cracking sound, and when she looked back, the castle was gone too. The courtyard was gone. Everything was gone. She stood among weeds and brambles. All the good things that had belonged to her vanished with her love.

From that night on she roamed the woods, searching. And some say she still searches the woods and the dark places. Some say that Aphrodite turned her into an owl, who sees best in the dark and cries, “Who...? Who...?”

Others say she was turned into a bat that haunts old ruins and sees only by night.

Others say her husband forgave her, finally; that he came back for her and took her up to Olympus, where she helps him with his work of making young love. It is her special task, they say, to undo

the talk of the bride's family and the groom's. When mother or sister visit bride or groom and say, "This, this, this...that, that, that...better look for yourself; seeing's believing, seeing's believing," then she calls the west wind, who whips them away, and she, herself, invisible, whispers to them that none but love knows the secret of love, that believing is seeing.

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Arion

WISE MEN OF SCIENCE have now decided that certain animals may be able to speak, and have begun to question dolphins to find out if this is true.

The old stories are full of clever beasts. Talking is the least they did. The dolphin, in particular, frisks through the blue waters of mythology. There is something about this playful fish which has always tickled the fancy of those who tell stories. So the scientists are in good company.

There is the story of Arion. He was the son of Poseidon and a naiad, and favored by Apollo, who taught him to play the lyre most beautifully. Arion lived in Corinth. He was a brave adventurous young man, and wanted very much to travel. But an oracle had said, "No ship will bring you back from any voyage you make."

So he was forced to stay at home. For his twentieth birthday Apollo gave him a golden lyre, and he was wild to try it out at music festivals held in Sicily and Italy.

"Oracles are gloomy by nature," he said to himself. "It is rare you hear of a happy prophecy. Besides, I must see the world no matter what happens."

Thereupon he took his lyre and set sail for Italy. He competed in the festival at Tarentum and won all the prizes. He played and sang so beautifully that the audience was mad with delight and

heaped gifts upon him: a jeweled sword, a suit of silver armor, an ivory bow and a quiver of bronze-tipped arrows. He was so happy and triumphant that he forgot all about the prophecy, and took the first ship back to Corinth, although the captain was a huge, ugly, dangerous-looking fellow, with an even uglier crew.

On the first afternoon out, Arion was sitting in the bow, gazing at the purple sea and absently fingering his lyre, when the captain strode up and said, “Pity...you’re young to die.”

“Am I to die young?” said Arion.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m going to kill you.”

“That does seem a pity,” said Arion. “When is this sad event to take place?”

“Soon—in fact, immediately.”

“But why? What have I done?”

“Something foolish. Permitted yourself to become the owner of a treasure which I must have. That jeweled sword, that silver armor—you should never show things like that to thieves.”

“Why don’t you take what you want without killing me?”

“No. We thought it over and decided it would be better to kill you. It usually is in these cases. Then the person who’s been robbed can’t complain, you see. Makes it safer for us.”

“Well, I see you’ve thought the matter over carefully,” said Arion. “So I have nothing more to say. One favor, though: Let me

sing a last song before I die.”

At the music festival Arion had invented a song of praise, called the dithyramb. He sang one now—praising first Apollo, who had taught him music, and then his father, Poseidon, master of the sea. Then he sang a song of praise to the sea itself and all who dwell there—the naiads and Nereids and gliding fishes. He sang to the magical changefulness of these waters, which put on different colors as the sun climbs and sinks, silver and amethyst in the early light, hot blue at noon, smoky purple at dusk. He sang to the sea, smiling, treacherously kind, offering the gift of cool death for any hot grief.

So singing, he leaped from the bow of the vessel, lyre in hand, and plunged into the sea.

He had sung so beautifully that the creatures of the deep had risen to hear him. His most eager listeners were a school of dolphins, who love music. The largest dolphin dived under him and rose to the surface lifting Arion on his back.

“Thank you, friend,” said Arion.

“A poor favor to return for such heavenly music,” said the dolphin.

The dolphin swam away with Arion on his back, the other dolphins frisking about, dancing on the water, as Arion played. They swam very swiftly, and Arion arrived at Taenarus and made his way to Corinth a day before the ship was due. He went immediately to the palace, to his friend, Periander, King of Corinth,

and told him his story. Then he took the king down to the water front to introduce him to the dolphin. The king ordered his smith to make a gold saddle for the dolphin, and invited it to stay in the castle moat whenever it was in the neighborhood.

The next day the ship arrived in port. Captain and crew were seized by the king's guard and taken to the castle. Arion stayed hidden.

"Why have you taken us captive, O King?" said the captain. "We are peaceable law-abiding sailors."

"My friend Arion took passage on your ship!" roared the king. "Where is he? What have you done with him?"

"Poor lad," said the captain. "He was quite mad. He was on deck singing to himself one day, and then suddenly jumped overboard. We put out a small boat, circled the spot for hours. We couldn't find a trace. Sharks, probably. The sea's full of them there."

"And what do you sailors do to a man-eating shark when you catch him?" asked the king.

"Kill him, of course," said the captain. "Can't let them swim free and endanger other sailors."

"A noble sentiment," said Arion, stepping out of his hiding place. "And that's exactly what we do to two-legged sharks in Corinth."

So captain and crew were taken out and hanged. The ship was searched, and Arion's property restored to him. He insisted on

dividing the rich gifts with the king. When Periander protested, Arion laughed and said, “Treasures are trouble. You’re a king and can handle them. But I am a minstrel. I must travel light.”

And all his life he sang songs of praise. His music grew in power and beauty until people said he was a second Orpheus. When he died, Apollo set him in the sky, him and his lyre and the dolphin too. And they shine in the night sky still, the stars of the constellation Arion. They shine on pirates and minstrels, on wise men trying to learn the language of animals, and on simple men who have always known it.

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DEMIGODS

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Perseus

KING ACRISIUS OF ARGOS was uncertain in battle, unlucky in the hunt, and of fitful, flaring temper. He sat brooding in his throne-room.

“My daughter, Danae, grows tall and ripe,” he said to himself. “Her eyes fog over when I speak to her. She is ready for a husband, but am I ready for a son-in-law? I dislike the idea and always have. A son-in-law will be a younger man waiting for me to die so he can take the throne. Perhaps he will even try to hasten that sad event. Such things are not unknown. I loathe the idea of a son-in-law. But she is ready for a husband, and princesses must not be spinsters...a grave decision...I shall consult the oracle.”

THE PROPHECY

He sent to the oracle at Delphi, and the messenger returned with this prophecy: “Your daughter will bear a son who will one day kill you.”

Acrisius had the messenger beheaded for bringing bad news and retired to his throne-room to continue his brooding.

“The auguries of the Pythoness are supposed to be immutable.” he said to himself. “But are they? How can they be? What if I were to slay my daughter now while she is still childless;

how then could she have a son to kill me? But, must I kill her to keep her childless? Is it not sufficient to forbid her male company all her days? Would I not be accomplishing the same purpose without calling upon my head the vengeance of the gods? Yes, that is a much better plan.”

Thereupon he shut the beautiful young girl in a brass tower which he had specially built with no doors and only one window, a slit too narrow for a child to put an arm through. The tower was surrounded by a high spiked wall patrolled by armed sentries and savage dogs. Here Acrisius locked his daughter away, and so murderous was his temper in those days that no one dared asked him what had become of the laughing young girl.

Acrisius stayed away from the tower and waited for someone to bring him word that his daughter had died; but the news he was waiting for did not come, and he wondered what was keeping her alive. How could a girl like that, a princess used to hunting, swimming, and running free on the hillsides, a girl who had never had her wishes crossed in her life—how could she stand this imprisonment?

He rode past the brass tower which glittered in the hot sunlight. The brass helmets of the sentries glittered as did the brass collars, on the necks of the huge dogs. As he rode past, he tried to see through the slit, tried to glimpse her face looking out, but the brass glitter was so bright he could not see.

The king took to watching the tower from his own castle wall, but the tower was far away, across a valley on the slope of a hill. The tower was only a splinter of light, but it seemed to glow more and more hotly until it hurt his eyes. One night he could not sleep so he went out on his castle wall in the night wind and looked out across the valley. It was a black night—no moon, no stars. The hill was only a thicker darkness. Then, suddenly, as if a torch were lighted, the tower burned clear, shining as brightly as if it were day instead of night; but the tower was lit from the inside now—the brass walls flaring more whitely, like silver, casting a dim radiance over the valley and throwing the giant shadow of trees past the hill.

Amazed and fearful, Acrisius summoned his soldiers, leaped on his horse, and rode to the tower. As they galloped toward it, the light died, and the burning tower subsided into the hillside. He led his soldiers up to the black wall. The dogs were howling. The sentries recognized the king and opened the gate. He galloped through and rode up to the slit window. Then, through the snarling of the sounds and the clatter of weapons, he heard another sound, sudden as an arrow—the sound of a baby crying.

The brass tower had no doors, having been built with no doors, so now Acrisius bade his soldiers take sledges and batter the brass walls. When the wall was breached the king stepped through and entered his daughter's cell. There in the torchlight he saw her sitting on a bench nursing a baby. She looked up at him and,

smiling secretly, said, "I have named him Avenger." The word for avenger in Greek is *Perseus*.

The king's first thought was to kill mother and child, but he had a second thought. "She must be under special protection; of Apollo himself, perhaps, master of the Delphic Oracle, who does not wish his prophecies thwarted. I can die but once, true enough; but if she is being protected by the gods, and I kill her, then they will torture me through eternity. Well, we shall test the quality of her protectors."

Acrisius ordered that Danae and the baby be taken from the prison and put in a wooden boat without sails, without oars, and without food or water. "Yes," he said to himself, "we shall test the drift of events. If she is under divine patronage, the ship will be guided safely to harbor. If, on the other hand, it runs into misfortune, then, obviously, she is not being protected by the gods, and the accident of her death will bring upon me no high reprisal. Yes, I like this idea."

Thereupon, the princess and her infant son were set adrift in an empty skiff without sails and without oars. Acrisius returned to his castle and went to sleep.

Danae sat up straight in the boat and tasted the night wind as it sang past her face and whipped her hair about her shoulders. The baby laughed for joy and reached his hands to catch the glittering points of the waves. All night they drifted, and the next day, and the next night. A light rain fell, giving them water to drink; and a gull

dropped a fish right into the boat, giving them food. On the second morning Danae saw that they had drifted into the lee of an island. Fishing boats stood off the shore, and fishermen were casting their nets.

She shouted. One of the slender boats sailed toward them. The fisherman was a huge, bearded fellow named Dictys who took them on board and put into shore. He was amazed by the beauty of the girl and by the impudence of the baby who pulled boldly at his beard and gurgled, but did not cry.

Dictys took mother and child to King Polydectes of the island of Sephiros. Polydectes too was amazed at the beauty of the young woman. He called her daughter and offered her the hospitality of the island—a house to live in and servants to wait upon her—and paid Dictys the value of a month's catch for the prize he had drawn from the sea.

THE ISLAND

Perseus grew to be a strong, fearless lad. He loved to run, to swim, to hunt, to fight with the other boys. At night, lying near the fire, he loved to hear his mother tell stories that made his brain flame with excitement—stories of the gods, of heroes, of monsters, of battles, of transformations, and of strange loves.

She told him about the three sisters called the Gorgons who were very tall and beautiful with long golden hair and golden wings. She told of how the youngest and most beautiful, named

Medusa, flew into one of Athene's temples to meet with Poseidon, risen secretly from the sea. Athene, learning of this, became enraged and wove a spell upon her loom; and Poseidon, below, awakened to find that he was holding a monster in his arms. Medusa's eyes bulged as if someone were strangling her, and a swollen blackened tongue forced her mouth open, showing the yellow fangs of her teeth. Her fingers and toes were brass claws; and, worst of all, each golden hair was now a live, hissing snake. Poseidon roared with fury, cast her aside, and dived into the sea. Medusa spread her wings and flew away, weeping, to find her sisters. She was so horrible to look upon that everyone who saw her face was turned to stone. So her sisters took her to a far place, a secret place, where they lived together plotting revenge upon Athene.

Perseus made his mother tell this story over and over again for, like many children, he was fond of stories that frightened him. Best of all, though, he liked to hear of the days when his mother had been shut up in the brass tower: how she had been so sad she thought she must die; how she would look out of the slit in the wall and see nothing but a single star; how she gazed at that star, magnified by her tears, until it seemed to fill the whole sky. Its light fell keen as a sword-blade through the blackness; and, as she watched, the blade of light flashed through the slit in the brass wall filling the dark chamber with a golden light. The gold pulsed, thickened, and gathered itself into a tall column of light and formed

itself into the shape of a man, but such a man as she had never seen...taller than mortal man with golden hair and hot golden eyes, wearing gold bracelets on his mighty arm, and carrying a volt-blue zigzag shaft of pure light as other men carry spears.

She knelt before him. She knew he was a god, but he raised her up and said, "Yes, I am a god, but do not be afraid. I come as a man."

"He rode the golden light every night into my dungeon," she said to Perseus, "and was always gone by dawn...as the morning star vanishes when day begins."

"And was he my father?" asked Perseus.

"He was your father. And some day he will return to me, I know. That is why I must not take another husband, for how can I love an ordinary man, remembering him?"

"So I am the son of a god?" said Perseus.

"Yes."

"What does that make me?"

"A hero. Or a very great scoundrel." She smiled and drew the boy to her. "But let us hope that you too will rescue maidens and thwart mad kings. Sometimes, as now, with the firelight in your eyes, you look quite like him, but not so tall, not so tall."

So Perseus grew to manhood. He was the most splendid young man on all the island. He could outrace, outswim, outclimb, outfight any other lad on Sephiros; but he raged at the peacefulness of the times because he wished to try himself in battle.

Now there was one who had watched Perseus grow with great displeasure. King Polydectes, long in love with the beautiful Danae, was very eager to get rid of her fierce, young son so that he might compel her to marry him. He was a sly one, Polydectes, sly and patient and very cruel in his quiet way, and he made a skillful plan to rid himself of Perseus. He spread the news he was to marry a princess of another island and invited all the young men of Sephiros to the palace. There he asked them, as was the custom, for gifts which he would bring to the bride.

“What she loves above all else is a fine horse,” he told the young men. “And I have promised her fifty splendid stallions. Will each of you select the best of his herd?”

All the young nobles promised, except Perseus, for he had nothing of his own, living as he did on the bounty of the king.

“Well, Perseus,” said Polydectes. “I hear nothing but silence from you. What gift will you bring? What do you offer your king and your host who has been so generous with you and your dear mother over the years?”

Polydectes had studied Perseus well and felt sure that the boy’s flaming pride would lead to some rash offer—that was the whole point of his pretended marriage and the gathering at the palace.

“I do not wish to embarrass you, Perseus,” he said. “I know that you do not have the resources of these other young men; but

surely I can expect a token gift, a rabbit you might snare, perhaps, or a fish you might catch.”

“Oh, King,” cried Perseus. “Oh, Host and Benefactor, I owe you too much gratitude to repay you with the common gift of a horse. I shall bring you the head of Medusa!”

The throne-room rang with laughter, but Polydectes’ face was grave. “You choose to jest,” he said. “That is not courteous for a guest of such long standing.”

“I do not jest,” cried Perseus. “Promises are sacred to me. I will bring you the head of Medusa, or you can take my own. This is a pact of blood, Polydectes.”

Perseus turned and strode out of the throne-room. He went to a cliff overlooking the sea and, stretching his arms to the sky, said, “Oh, unknown father on Olympus—Zeus, or Apollo, or Ares, or whoever you may be who visited my mother in a shower of gold—grant your son one boon. Not the head of Medusa. I shall win that for myself, but I need to know where she is and how to get there. Please help me.”

He dropped his arms and stared at the blank sky, which seemed more blue and more empty than ever before.

“Good day, brother,” he heard a voice say.

He whirled around. There stood a magnificent creature with a round hat, a laughing face, a jaunty beard, winged sandals, and a golden staff entwined with serpents. Perseus knew that it was the

god, Hermes, and that he should fall on his knees; but his knees would not bend, so he bowed instead.

“Our father, Zeus, is away on one of his trips,” said Hermes, “but in his absence I do some of his business so I am here to serve you. What is all this now about the head of Medusa?”

Perseus told him of the rash promise he had made to Polydectes.

“Rash, indeed,” murmured Hermes. “Foolhardy, in fact. It’s a family trait, I suppose. God-seed and human make a strange mixture, a ferment in the blood; leads to great exploits or great folly. But...folly itself can be the seed of exploit. Let us see what we can do.”

“I need...”

“Please, allow me to tell you what you need. First of all, I must tell you that sister Athene takes a special interest in your case. She is responsible for Medusa’s petrifying aspect, you know, and is a sworn enemy of the Gorgon sisters. She sends you these.”

Hermes reached into his pouch and pulled out a pair of Talaria, silver-winged sandals like those he himself wore. “She is not only a potent spinster,” he said, “but she cobbles magically too. She made me my winged shoes, and now she has made you a pair. With these you can fly more swiftly than an eagle. Now, listen, and I will tell you what to do. Set out today. Fly north. Search until you find the Gray Sisters. When you find them you must force them to tell where you can find the Nymphs of the West; no one else can

tell you. These Nymphs have in their keeping certain pieces of equipment which you will need to kill Medusa. Without these implements you must fail...Come down, Perseus! How can I speak to you when you're up there? Come down. You can practice later."

Perseus laughed with joy, turned a somersault in the air, then hovered above Hermes' head, ankle-wings whirring like the wings of a humming bird.

"I heard you," he cried. "I heard you. Gray Sisters, Nymphs of the West...their secrets will be my weapons. Thank you, dear brother. Thank you, Hermes. Thank Athene for me. Farewell."

He turned so that the setting sun was on his left hand and sped away, shouting, "I can fly! I can fly!"

THE QUEST

Gulls screamed, amazed, at the tall thing which flew but did not fish; falcons stooped for a closer look, then flew away; and Perseus flashed over the sea to where the land began again—a fair, rich land. He flew over fields of wheat and groves of olive trees, herds of sheep and cows, tiny villages and white cities. The land became wilder, and mountains stood up with only a few poor villages clinging to their sides. Behind the first mountains were taller crags topped with snow, the first snow Perseus had ever seen. He flew past these mountains, great forests, a plain full of rivers, and another range of mountains where neither man nor beast was to

be seen. A hailstorm raged, spitting hard sharp pieces of ice at Perseus so that he had to wrap his face in his cloak as he flew.

When the storm blew itself out, Perseus found himself over the sea again, a sea of ice, not flat but full of great billows and troughs as if it had frozen all at once during a gale. The sun was a huge pale moon peering heavily over the edge of the sky. The air was so cold he could hardly breathe.

Perseus heard a thin cackling, keener than the wind. He dipped and saw three hunched figures. Thereupon, he raised his arms, pointed his toes, and plunged to earth feet-first, landing among the three Gray Sisters. Three hags they were, very long and lean. They had been born old countless years before time began and had grown older every day since. They had gray hair, never cut, so long it fell to the ground and dragged behind them as they walked. Their skin was gray; they wore no clothes, just their long gray hair; and their skin was tough and wrinkled as an alligator's. Their bare feet were like leather claws.

They sat in a close circle, scolding and jabbering and tittering. They kept snatching at each other's hands, and then Perseus saw that they had but a single eye and a single tooth for the three of them. They quarreled constantly, snatching the eye and tooth away from each other.

“Give me the eye!” cried one. “I want to see! My turn to see!”

“Give me the tooth—then you will see me, see me...you will see me smiling.”

“I want the tooth for biting. If you take the tooth, then I must have the eye.”

“And what will *I* have—I, I, I?...”

Swiftly Perseus stepped among them, shuddering as his hand touched their withered claws. Swiftly he seized the tooth and eye and stepped back.

“Where’s the tooth? Give me the tooth!”

“Where’s the eye? Give me the eye!”

“It’s my turn! You’ve had it too long!”

“My turn...my turn.”

“I don’t have it.”

“I don’t have it.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Where is it?...Where’s the tooth?...Where is it, where’s the eye?...You have it...You must have it...No, you, you, you—”

“I have it,” said Perseus. “I have them both, tooth and eye.”

“A stranger!”

“A thief!”

“A *man!*”

“A man! Give me the eye so that I may see him!”

“A man! Give me the tooth so that I may smile at him!”

“But *he* has them.”

“Oh, yes, he has them.”

“Give them back to us, young sir, so that we may see you and smile at you...Please...please...”

“I have your tooth and your eye,” said Perseus, “and I will return them to you only in exchange for your secret.”

“What secret? What secret?”

“Where do I find the Nymphs of the West?”

“Oh, that secret. No, we may not tell. No, it’s a secret within a secret, and they are for keeping, not for telling. We dare not tell. It’s a Gorgon secret; they will rip us to pieces if we tell.”

“You belong to the Immortals and cannot die,” said Perseus, “so you will crouch here through the ages with no tooth in your mouth, no eye for your head. And while you may do without smiling or without chewing, you will soon be wanting your eye. Oh, yes...think how long and dark the moments are for two of you when the third sister has the eye. Think of your darkness now. Think of the torment of hearing a voice and not being able to see who is speaking, and it has only been a few minutes. Think then of these minutes stretching into hours, and the hours into days, and the days into months, and the months into years—dark years, endless, boring, heavy, dark years with mind and memory growing emptier and emptier...”

“Give us the eye, the eye! Keep the tooth, and give us the eye!”

“There is a little jelly in my hand. It lies between my thumb and forefinger. Just a bit of pressure, a bit more, and it will be crushed, useless, unable to see. I am impatient. I must have the secret. I must know where to find the Nymphs of the West. The

secret! Quickly! My finger is pressing my thumb. The jelly trembles. Can you not feel the pain in your empty sockets?”

“Aieeee...”

“Stop!”

“Do not crush it! We will tell...We will tell...”

“Quickly then.”

And, speaking together swiftly, sobbing and tittering and sighing, they told him how to find the Nymphs of the West, who alone could give him what he needed to overcome Medusa.

Now who were these nymphs, and why were they the guardians of this secret?...Ages past, when Hera married Zeus, Mother Earth gave her as a wedding present a tree that bore golden apples. Hera loved this tree very much, but after a while she found she could not keep it in her own garden for Zeus would steal the beautiful golden apples and distribute them as favors to the nymph or dryad or naiad or Titaness or human girl he happened to be courting at the time. Therefore, Hera took her magic tree and planted it at the very end of the earth, on the uttermost western isle, a place of meadows and orchards of which Zeus knew nothing. Here it was that the Titan, Atlas, stood, shoulders bowed, forehead knotted, legs braced, holding up the end of the sky. It was the three daughters of Atlas, enchantingly beautiful nymphs, whom Hera appointed to guard the treasure. It was a wise decision. These lush and fragrant dryads made better guards than any dragon or three-headed dog or sea-serpent for such monsters could be killed or

chained or outwitted, but no one could get past the nymphs. They danced among the trees and shouted gay invitations to the marauder until he forgot all about his quest and came to dance with them. Then they would stroke him and give him wine to drink and dance him about in circles until he was so befuddled they could do what they chose with him. Then they would dance him to the edge of the cliff and push him into the sea. They did all this under the eye of their father, Atlas, who groaned occasionally under his burden, or stamped his foot, making the earth shake, or shrugged his shoulders, making comets fall. These strange storms of the Titan's grief gave the island a bad name; fishermen avoided it, and sailors. Other dark secrets came to be buried here with the Nymphs of the West, and they guarded them with the same fatal skill with which they guarded the golden apples. So it was that they held the Gorgon secret.

Now, following the directions of the Gray Ones, Perseus flew west. He flew and flew over a strange misty sea until he saw the mighty hunched figure of Atlas holding up the sky. Then he dipped toward earth. The nymphs were dancing when a shadow flew over the grove.

“It's Hermes!”

“Welcome, sweet Herald! Welcome, dear cousin!”

“Come down!...Come quickly! Tell us all the news!”

Perseus came lower and hovered a few feet above the ground.

“*He's* not Hermes!”

“But he has Hermes’ sandals. Hermes has a helper! Oh joy!”

“Not a god at all, a man! A lovely young one. All fresh and clean and lovely.”

“Come down, man!”

“Come play with us, stay with us...”

“Come dance with us.”

“You must be a great thief to steal Hermes’ sandals; come tell us how you did it.”

“Come down...Come down...”

Still standing on air, Perseus bowed. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to dance with you and tell you stories, but I have a promise to keep first, a promise to keep, weapons to get, an enemy to kill.”

“Oh, you foolish men with your ridiculous quests, your oaths and enemies and impossible voyages. When will you learn to eat the fruit and spit out the pits and sleep without dreaming in the arms of your beloved? Have you ever slept in a woman’s arms, sweet young sir?”

“My mother’s.”

“Your mother’s...Good for a start, but not enough, not enough. Come kiss us, lad—we need kissing. It has been a dry summer.”

“I cannot kiss you now,” said Perseus. “Even up here I smell your apple-blossom scent, and grow bewildered, and almost forget who I am. What then if I were to come close and touch your apple-

ruddy skin and drink your cider breath? I would grow drunk as bees among honey suckle, lose my sting, and forget my oath. Please help me, Nymphs. Do not bewilder me.”

“Come down...stop this talking, and come down...Forget your quest, we’ll give you something better. Come down...”

“Look, you lovelies,” said Perseus. “My father was Zeus who wooed my mother as a shaft of fire, a fountain of light. My birth was strange, and the auguries thereof. Deeds are my destiny, adventure my profession, and fighting my pleasure. Unless I fight and win, I am no good for love either. Have you ever seen a rooster after he is beaten in a fight? His comb sags, he is unfit for love, he disappoints his hens. Tell me your secret. Give me what I need to fight Medusa. Tell me where to find her, and I will go there. By the gods, I will come back with her head in my pouch. Then, then, then I will be fit for you, beautiful ones. I will come back and tell you the tale of my battle, and other tales too, and dance with you, and do your pleasure.”

“He speaks well, sisters. He must be the son of a god.”

“He is our cousin then. We owe him loyalty.”

“The Gorgons are our cousins too.”

“But so ugly. So ugly and so foul. I prefer this handsome new cousin.”

“Yes, I like this one, this flyer with his bright yodel and silver spurs. He will keep his promise, I know. He will come back and tread his chicks most nobly.”

“Let us tell him...quickly...the sooner we tell, the sooner he will go, and the sooner he will return.”

“I smell rain on the wind. With any luck the clouds will come and hide the eyes of Father Atlas so he cannot see us dance with the stranger and grow jealous.”

“Quickly, then...”

They ran to Perseus and, seizing his ankles, pulled him down, and clung to him, kissing and whispering. He grew dizzy with their apple fragrance and the touch of their smooth hands and the taste of their lips; but they were not trying to befuddle him now, only to touch him because they were unable to reveal anything to anyone they could not touch. And when he put their whisperings and murmurings together he learned what he had to know about where the Gorgons dwelt and how to find Medusa.

Then they pulled him to a huge tree whose twisted roots stood half out of the ground. They searched among these roots and gave him three things: a shield of polished bronze, bright as a mirror, and he was told that he must never look at Medusa herself but only at her reflection in the shield; a sword, sickle-shaped, slender and bright as the new moon; and, lastly, a Cap of Darkness—when he put it on he disappeared altogether, and they had to grope about to catch him and to extract three kisses each for the three gifts.

He took off his Cap of Darkness and rose a bit in the air, gleaming with happiness. “Thank you, sweet Nymphs. Thank you, beautiful cousins. With these gifts I cannot fail.”

“Will you keep your promise?...Will you come back and tell us your story?...Will you come back to dance and play? Will you come back another day?...”

“Farewell...Farewell...” cried Perseus. He rose to the top of the trees, smiled at the sight of Hera’s golden apples shining among the leaves, and resolved to steal one when he came back to take home to his mother. Then he soared away past Atlas’ angry face, scowling back at him; he flashed past the mighty shoulder of the Titan and flew northward again, following the outer rim of the earth.

With the Cap of Darkness on his head, invisible as the wind, Perseus followed the curve of the dark sea that girdles the earth until he came to the Land Beyond—the Land of the Hyperboreans where the sea is a choked marsh, and the sky is low and brown, and the weeds give off a foul stench. Here, he had been told, was where the Gorgons dwelt.

He came to earth, picked his way through the rattling weeds, and came to a kind of stone orchard which looked like one of our own graveyards, a grove of statues. Looking closer, he saw that they were the old, worn-down stone figures of men and beasts; and he realized that he was looking at those who had seen Medusa’s face and had been turned to stone between one breath and the next. There was a stone child running, a stone man dismounting from a stone horse, and stone lovers, touching. Perseus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He drew his new-moon sword, held it ready,

and raised his bright shield. He had to judge all his movements by the weight of things because the Cap of Darkness made him invisible even to himself.

Now, going silently as he could, he made his way among the terrible stone figures until he heard a sound of snoring. He stood still and looked. Glittering in the muddy light were brass wings. He raised his shield now, not daring to look directly, and held it as a mirror and guided himself by the reflection. In a covering of weeds lay three immensely long, bulky shapes. He saw brass wings and brass claws. Two of them slept as birds sleep with their heads tucked under their wings. But the third one slept with her face uncovered. Perseus saw the hair of her head stand up and writhe as he looked into his mirror shield, and he knew that it was Medusa. He felt the roots of his own hair prickling with horror as if they too were turning into snakes.

He kept the shield in front of his face and walked backward. The head of Medusa grew larger in the shield. He saw the snakes swelling, writhing furiously, darting their tongues, biting each other in their fury at the stranger's approach so that their blood ran like sweat over her forehead. He tilted his shield to keep her head in the center because she was directly below him now. He smelled the terrible stench of the bleeding snakes. Then he raised his sword, and, guiding himself by the reflection, struck a savage downward backhand blow, feeling the horror, anger, pride, and pleasure of battle mingling in him like a mighty potion, firing him with the

furious triumph of the deed done at the very moment of the doing. His sword whipped with a magical momentum, shearing its way through the snakes, through the thick muscles and tendons, through the lizard toughness of her hide, through bone and gristle and sinew, striking off the monster head as a boy whips off the head of a dandelion in the field.

Swiftly he stooped, scooped up the head by its limp dead snakes, stuffed it into his pouch, and stood amazed for where her blood had fallen, two creatures sprang up, a warrior holding a golden sword and a beautiful white horse with golden mane and golden hooves and astounding golden wings. They were Chrysaor and Pegasus, children of Poseidon, whom Medusa had been unable to bear while she lived as a monster, and who had grown full-size in her womb.

But Perseus did not stop to look as the sisters were waking. He sprang into the air and flew off as fast as he could. The Gorgons, without losing an instant, spread their brass wings and climbed into the air and sped after him, howling. He wore the Cap of Darkness, and they could not see him; but they could smell the blood of the cut-off head and followed the spoor like hounds of the air, howling. He did not dare look back but heard the clatter of their brass wings and the snapping of their great jaws. Athene, however, had cobbled well, magically well. His sandals carried him faster than the Gorgons could fly. He drew away from them until he heard only a

very faint tinkle and a cry like wind-bells chiming. Then he lost them altogether.

THE RETURN

Perseus had his prize. Medusa's head was wet and fresh in his pouch, and he was eager to get back to Sephiros to boast to his mother and make Polydectes eat his words; but first he had promises to keep.

Therefore, he flew back to the Island of the Hesperides and danced with the three Apple Nymphs. All night they danced in the orchard. They danced him as they had never danced a marauder before. They whirled him among the trees, one after the other, then all together, faster and faster. He grew drunk as a bee on their apple fragrance, their ruddy skin, and their petal touch. He was a hero! He had just finished his first quest; killed his first enemy. He was drunk on triumph too, strong with joy. He danced and strutted and gleamed. When dawn came he saluted it with a great bawling golden-voiced challenge. He celebrated like a hero, and the nymphs were so giddy with pleasure that they watched him helping himself to a golden apple from Hera's tree and only smiled.

But now the ground trembled. The sky growled thunderously. It was full morning now. The mist that had been hiding the eyes of Atlas had blown away, and the Titan looked down and saw his daughters enjoying themselves in the orchard, a sight he could not endure. He stamped his foot and made the earth shake, roared

thunderously, and shrugged his shoulders making comets fall, huge flaming bolts of rock that bombarded the orchard, setting fire to the apple trees.

Perseus' blood rose as murder sang in his heart. He flew straight toward Atlas' mighty face, poised there before the gargantuan frown, and, standing on air, opened his pouch and drew out Medusa's head. The Titan turned to stone. He was a mountain now, holding up the western end of the sky. It is a mountain till this day—Mt. Atlas.

“Farewell!” shouted Perseus. “Farewell, sweet cousins... beautiful nymphs. Farewell, my apple-lovelies.”

“Will you come again? Will you come again?...”

“Will I not?” cried Perseus. “Every mid-summer I will return, and we will do the orchard dance again until the trees flame. Farewell...” and he flew away.

Southward he flew, then eastward. He crossed a desert; and now, far below, he saw the first gleam of that matchless blue that belonged to his own sea. But as he followed the Philistine shoreline which is the eastern boundary of that sea, he saw a very strange sight: a naked girl chained to a rock and, pushing toward that rock, the huge blunt head of a sea monster. The shore was black with people, an ant-swarm of people, watching.

He came lower and saw that the girl was wearing magnificent jewels. She was not weeping, but gazing straight ahead, blankly. On the shore, in front of the crowd, stood a tall man and woman

wearing crowns. Perseus took a quick look and saw that the monster was still some way off. He dropped to earth and, taking off his Cap of Darkness, spoke to the man wearing the crown, “Who are you? Who is the girl, and what is the sacrifice? Is it a private ceremony or one decreed by the gods? My name is Perseus, and I wish to know.”

The Queen put her face in her hands, and wept. The King said, “I am Cepheus, king of Joppa. This is my wife, Cassiopeia, and that unfortunate girl is my daughter, Andromeda. My wife, foolish, boastful woman was vain of her beauty and that of our daughter—not without reason, as you see; but she took it into her head to praise herself among the people, saying that she and Andromeda were more beautiful than any Nereid, who, as you may know, are very jealous and enjoy the patronage of Poseidon. So they went weeping to the god of the sea, saying my wife had insulted them and demanding vengeance. Poseidon sent that sea serpent, longer than a fleet of warships, whose breath is fire, to harry our coast, destroy our shipping, burn our villages, and devour our cattle. I consulted the oracle who told me that the only way I could wipe out my wife’s offense was to sacrifice my daughter to the monster. I love my daughter; but I am king, and private woe must yield to public welfare. Therefore you see her, the lovely innocent child, bound to the rock, and the beast swims near, swims near...”

Perseus said, “When public welfare battens on private woe, there is a great disorder in events, a filmy confusion that needs the

cleanliness of a sword. Poseidon is my uncle, King, and I feel free to play with his pets.”

Perseus heard the water hiss, saw spouts of steam rise as the monster’s scorching breath ruffled the surface and made the sea boil. He knew they had spoken too long. Without waiting to put on his Cap of Darkness, he drew his sword and leaped into the air. Over the beast’s head he flashed and fell like lightning, right onto the great scaly back. He rode the monster there, in the water, hacking at the huge head with his new-moon sword until the flames of the beast’s breath were laced with blood, and the great neck split like a log under the woodman’s ax.

The monster sank. Perseus flew off his back, dripping wet, flew to the rock, struck away Andromeda’s chains, lifted her in his arms, and bore her gently through the air to where her mother and father stood.

“Here is your daughter,” said Perseus, “but only briefly, very briefly, for I claim her as my bride.”

“As your bride?” shouted Cepheus. “What do you mean? Do you think I shall give my daughter, Andromeda, the most richly dowered princess in me East, to an unknown vagabond?”

“I may be a vagabond,” said Perseus, “but I shall not long be unknown. If you were not going to be my father-in-law, Cepheus, I should explain to you what kind of fool you are. For the sake of family harmony, however, I forbear. You were content to serve your daughter up as dead meat to this monster as the price of your wife’s

vanity because he came well-recommended, but you refuse to give her, warm and alive, to him who slew the monster. And why? Simply because it is unexpected. Father-in-law or not, you are a fool, Cepheus, a pitiful fool; and if by word or deed you seek to prevent me from taking your daughter, you will be a dead fool. I do not ask your leave, I am announcing my intention. Say goodbye to your parents, Andromeda.” Perseus lifted her in his arms again and flew away.

When he landed on Sephiros, he was amazed to find the island deserted. His mother was not at home, nor was anyone in the village. He hurried to the castle and found it blazing with light. There was a clamor of shouting and laughter and a clatter of weapons. He forced his way through a crowd of revellers, and entered the throne-room.

There he saw his mother, deathly pale, but loaded with jewels, sumptuously garbed, her beautiful bare white arm in the swarthy clutch of Polydectes. Now Perseus understood that the king had taken advantage of his absence to force Danae to marry him. He had returned just in time.

His great voice clove the uproar. “Polydectes—ho!”

All voices ceased. The king stood rigid, staring at him, his face fixed in an amazed snarl. Perseus saw him gesture to his guards. They drew their swords and stepped forward, twenty of them.

“I have brought you your gift, Polydectes,” said Perseus. “Your wedding gift. Remember? Different bride, same gift.”

He put his hand into his pouch. “Mother!” he shouted. “Close your eyes!”

He drew out the head of Medusa, and the throne-room became a grove of statues. Stone guards stood with stone swords upraised. One held a javelin, about to plunge it into Perseus’ back. A statue of Polydectes, mouth frozen in a scream. Among all the frozen shapes of terror and wrath, the white beloved trembling figure of his mother, Danae.

He put the head in his pouch, stepped to Danae, and took her in his arms. “Be happy, mother,” he said. “I am home now. Your danger is a dream, your enemy has become his own monument.”

“It is the gods,” she whispered. “Their whim is implacable; their caprice, our fate. Look, Perseus...” She led him to one of the stone figures. A bearded old man wearing a crown.

“Who is that?”

“Your grandfather, Acrisius, one of the guests, attending the nuptials of a fellow-king. He did not know that I was the bride.”

“Your father? He who shut you in the tower?”

“Shut me there to thwart the prophecy...that his grandson would kill him.”

“Delighted to oblige,” said Perseus. “I never did fancy his style. Shut you up in a dungeon...Met another parent like that

recently. Oh, that reminds me. Come home. I want you to meet your daughter...”

It was Perseus’ own wedding night; but before he received his bride, he went to the temple of Athene and the temple of Hermes to thank them for what they had done. He made them gifts: he gave the bright shield to Athene, a very curious shield now, permanently emblazoned with the reflection of Medusa’s head which had burned itself on the metal; the Cap of Darkness to Hermes. He very much wanted cap and shield for himself, but he knew that gods who give gifts expect a rich return. However, he did keep the winged sandals and the new-moon sword. He knew that his deeds had just begun and that he would have a great deal of traveling and fighting to do in days to come.

As for Medusa’s head, it was too dangerous to keep. He threw it into the sea. It sank to the bottom, where it still rests, pushed here and there by the tides, passing islands, making coral where it goes.

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Daedalus

THE GODS, BEING ALL-POWERFUL, needed a more subtle praise than obedience. They preferred their intention to become man's aspiration, their caprice, his law. Athene, in particular, liked to be served this way. The gray-eyed goddess of wisdom, whose sign was the owl, taught men the arts they needed to know, not through gross decree, but through firing the brightest spirits to a white heat wherein they perceived the secret laws of nature and made discoveries and inventions.

Now, in those times, her favorite among all mortals was an Athenian named Daedalus. In the white city of the goddess Daedalus was honored among all men, and treasure after treasure flowed from his workshop—the wheel, the plough, the loom. Finally, as happens to many men, his pride raced away with his wits; and he fell into a black envy of his own nephew, Talos, a most gifted lad, whom he had taken into his workshop, and who, everyone said, was bound to follow in his footsteps.

“Aye, but he's following too fast,” grumbled Daedalus to himself. “He's treading on my heels.”

Daedalus, at that time, was working on a special project, a blade to cut wood more quickly than knife or ax. He had puzzled, tested, and tried many things, but nothing seemed to work. Then, one day, coming early to his workshop, he heard a curious sound. It

was his nephew, Talos, who had come even earlier. He was leaning over, holding a board pinned to a low table under his knee, and swiftly cutting into it with what looked like the backbone of a fish.

The boy turned to him, smiling. “Look, uncle,” he cried. “See, how splendid! Yesterday I saw a large fish stranded on the beach, half-eaten by gulls, and a notion came to me that his spine with its many sharp teeth might be just the thing we’re looking for. So I took it from the fish who had no more need of it and tried it right there. I cut through a great piece of driftwood. Isn’t it wonderful? Don’t you think the goddess, Athene, herself, washed the fish on shore for me to see? Why are you looking at me that way, uncle? Are you not pleased?”

“Very pleased, my boy. I have long been considering your case and have been weighing how to reward you according to your merit. Well, now I think I know. But first we must go to Athene’s temple to give thanks for this timely inspiration.”

He took the boy by the hand and led him up the sunny road to the top of the hill, to the Acropolis where the temple of Athene stood—and still stands. Daedalus led him to the roof of the marble building; and there, as the lad stretched his arms toward heaven, Daedalus stepped softly behind him, placed his hands on his shoulders, and pushed. The boy went tumbling off the temple, off the hill, to the rocks below. But Athene who had heard the first words of the boy’s prayer, caught him in mid-air, and turned him

into a partridge, which flew away, drumming. She then withdrew her favor from Daedalus.

Word of the boy's death flashed through the city. Nothing could be proved against Daedalus, but he was the target of the darkest suspicions, which, curiously enough, he took as an affront, for nothing could be proved, and so he felt unjustly accused.

“Ungrateful wretches!” he cried. “I will leave this city. I will go elsewhere and find more appreciative neighbors.”

He had not told them about his invention of the saw, but took the model Talos had made and set out for Crete. Arriving there, he went directly to the palace of King Minos, who, at that time, was the most powerful king in all the world, and made him a gift of the marvelous tool that could cut wood more swiftly than knife or ax. Minos, delighted, immediately appointed Daedalus Court Artificer, Smith Extraordinary, and fitted out a workshop for him with the likeliest lads for apprentices. Minos also gave the old fellow a beautiful young slave girl for his own.

Now, the Cretan women were the loveliest in the world, and Crete's court the most glittering. The capital city of Knossos made Athens seem like a little village. Women and girls alike wore topless dresses, gems in their hair, and a most beguiling scent made by slaves who had been blinded so that their noses would grow more keen. Daedalus was an honored figure at this court—and a novelty besides. The Cretans were mad for novelties so the old man was much flattered and content.

He was a special favorite with the young princesses, Ariadne and Phaedra, who loved to visit him at his workshop and watch him make things. He became very fond of the girls and made them marvelous jointed wooden dolls with springs cunningly set and coiled so that they curtsied and danced and winked their eyes. Queen Pasiphae also came to see him often. He made her a perfume flask that played music when it was uncorked and a looking glass that allowed her to see the back of her head. She spent hours with him gossiping for she was very bored.

The queen kept coaxing Daedalus to tell her why he had really left Athens for she sensed a secret; but all he would ever say was that the goddess, Athene, had withdrawn her favor, so he had been forced to leave her city.

“Goddess Athene!” she cried. “Goddess this and god that... What nonsense! These are old wives’ tales, nursery vapors, nothing for intelligent men and women to trouble themselves about.”

“Oh, my lady,” cried Daedalus. “In heaven’s name, take care what you say. The gods will hear, and you will be punished.”

“And I took you for a sophisticated man,” said the queen. “A man of the world, a traveler, a scientist. I am disappointed in you. Gods, indeed! And are you not, my smith, more clever by far than that lame Hephaestus? And am I not more beautiful than Aphrodite?”

She stood up tall and full-bodied, and, indeed, very beautiful. The old man trembled.

“Come here. Come closer. Look at me. Confess that I am more beautiful than the Cytherean...Aphrodite. Of all the gods, she is the one I disbelieve in most. Love...my serving maids prate of it, my daughters frisk with the idea. All through the island men meet women by rock and tree, their shadows mingle; and I, I have Minos, the crown on a stick who loves nothing but his own decrees.”

“Softly, madame, softly,” said Daedalus. “You are not yourself. It is midsummer, a confusing time for women; what they say then must be discounted. Your wild words will be forgiven, but please do not repeat them. Now, see what I have made for you, even as you were saying those foolish things: a parasol, lighter than a butterfly’s wing, and yet so constructed that it opens by itself like a flower when it feels the sun.”

But Aphrodite had heard, and she planned a terrible vengeance.

Now, Minos had always been very fond of bulls, especially white ones. He was not aware that this was a matter of heredity, that his mother, Europa, had been courted by Zeus who had assumed the guise of a white bull for the occasion. The king knew only that he liked white bulls. And, since he was in a position to indulge his preferences, he sent through all the world for the largest, the finest, and the whitest. Finally, one arrived, the most splendid bull he had ever seen. It was dazzling white, with hot black eyes, polished hooves, and coral-pink nostrils; its long sharp horns seemed to be

made of jet. The king was delighted and sent for all the court to see his fine new bull.

He had no way of knowing that the animal had been sent there by Aphrodite, and neither did Pasiphae. As soon as the queen saw the bull, she felt herself strangling with a great rush of passion. She fell violently, monstrously, in love with the bull. She came to Daedalus and told him.

“What shall I do?” she moaned. “What can I do? I’m going mad. It’s tearing me to pieces. You are the cleverest man in the world. Only you can help me. Please, please, tell me what to do.”

Daedalus could not resist the beautiful queen; besides she had touched his vanity. He had to prove himself clever enough to help her in her impossible wish. He thought and thought, and finally went to work. He fashioned a wooden cow with amber eyes, real ivory horns, and ivory hooves and tenderly upholstered it with the most pliant cowhide. It was hollow, and so shaped that Pasiphae could hide herself inside. He put wheels on the hooves, and springs in the wheels. That night, as the moon was rising, the great white bull saw the form of a graceful cow gliding toward him over the meadow, mooing musically.

The next morning, Pasiphae came to the workshop. She gave Daedalus a great leather bag full of gold, and said, “Be careful, old friend. This secret is a deadly one.”

Both Pasiphae and Daedalus were good at keeping secrets; but this was one that had to come out for, after a while, the queen gave

birth to a child, who attracted a great deal of notice as he was half bull. People derisively called him the Minotaur, or Minos' bull.

Even in his most cruel fury, Minos was a careful planner. He decided to hide his shame, knowing that the world forgets what it does not see. He had Daedalus construct a tangled maze on the palace grounds, a place of thorny hedges and sudden rooms called the Labyrinth. There were paths running this way and that, becoming corridors, plunging underground, crossing each other, crossing themselves, each one leading back to the middle, so there was no way out.

Here King Minos imprisoned Pasiphae and the Minotaur—and Daedalus too. Minos wanted to make very sure that the old craftsman would never divulge the secret of the Labyrinth so here Daedalus dwelt. His workshop was in the Labyrinth, but he did not work well. At his bench he could hear Pasiphae howling, and the hideous broken bellowing of the bull-man, who grew more loathsome and ferocious each day.

His only comfort was his son, Icarus, who, of his own free will, chose to live with him because he so loved and admired his father. It was Icarus who said to him one day, “Father, I grow weary of this maze. Let us leave this place and go to places I have not seen.”

“Alas, dear boy,” said Daedalus, “we cannot. It is forbidden to leave the Labyrinth.”

“You know the way out, do you not? You built the thing, after all.”

“Yes, certainly, I know the way out. But I dare not take it. Minos would have us put to death immediately. All I can do is petition the king to allow you to go, but I must remain.”

“No. We go together.”

“But I have explained to you that we cannot.”

“Minos is a great king,” said Icarus. “But he does not rule the whole earth. Let us leave the island. Let us leave Crete and cross the sea.”

“You are mad, dear boy. How can we do this? The sea is locked against us: Every boatman on every craft, large and small, is under strict interdict against allowing me voyage. We cannot leave the island.”

“Oh, yes, we can,” said Icarus. “I’ll tell you how. Just make us wings.”

“Wings?”

“To fly with. Like the birds—you know—wings.”

“Is it possible? Can I do this?”

“Birds have them; therefore, they have been made. And anything, dear father, that has been made you can duplicate. You have made things never seen before, never known before, never dreamed before.”

“I will start immediately,” cried Daedalus.

He had Icarus set out baits of fish and capture a gull. Then, very carefully, he copied its wings—not only the shape of them, but the hollow bone struts, and the feathers with their wind-catching overlaps and hollow stems, and he improved a bit on the model. Finally, one day, he completed two magnificent sets of wings with real feathers plucked from the feather cloaks the Cretan dancers used. They were huge, larger than eagles' wings.

He fitted a pair to Icarus, sealing the pinions to the boy's powerful shoulders with wax. Then he donned his own.

“Goodbye to Crete!” cried Icarus joyfully.

“Hear me, boy,” said Daedalus. “Follow me closely and do not go off the way. Do not fly too low or the spray will wet your wings, not too high or the sun will melt them. Not too high and not too low, but close by me, through the middle air.”

“Oh come, come,” cried Icarus, and he leaped into the air, spreading his wings and soaring off above the hedges of the Labyrinth as if he had been born with wings. Daedalus flew after him.

They flew together over the palace grounds, over the beaches, and headed out to sea. A shepherd looked up and saw them; and a fisherman looked up and saw them; and they both thought they saw gods flying. The shepherd prayed to Hermes, and the fisherman prayed to Poseidon, with glad hearts. Now, they knew, their prayers would be answered.

Icarus had never been so happy. In one leap his life had changed. Instead of groveling in the dank tunnels of the Labyrinth, he was flying, flying free under the wide bright sky in a great drench of sunlight, the first boy in the history of the world to fly. He looked up and saw a gull, and tried to hold his wings steady and float on the air as the gull was doing, as easily as a duck floats on water. He felt himself slipping, and he slipped all the way in a slanting dive to the dancing surface of the water before he could regain his balance. The water splashing his chest felt deliciously cool.

“No...no...,” he heard his father call from far above. “Not too low and not too high. Keep to the middle air...”

Icarus yelled back a wordless shout of joy, beat his wings, and soared up, up, toward the floating gull.

“Ha...,” he thought to himself. “Those things have been flying all their lives. Wait till I get a little practice. I’ll outfly them all.”

Crete was a brown dot behind them now; there was no land before them, just the diamond-glittering water. Old Daedalus was beating his way through the air, steadily and cautiously, trying this wing-position and that, this body angle and that, observing how the gulls thrust and soared. He kept an eye on Icarus, making mental notes about how to improve the wings once they had landed. He felt a bit tired. The sun was heavy on his shoulders. The figures spun in his head.

“I must not go to sleep,” he said to himself. “I must watch the boy. He may do something rash.”

But Icarus was flying easily alongside so Daedalus hunched his shoulders, let his chin fall on his chest, and half-coasted on a column of air. He shut his eyes for a moment...just for a moment...

In that moment Icarus saw a great white swan climb past him, wings spread, shooting like a great white arrow straight for the sun and uttering a long honking call. Icarus looked after him; he had already dwindled and was a splinter of light, moving toward the sun.

“How splendid he is, flying so swiftly, so proudly, so high. How I should like to get a closer look at the sun. Once and for all I should like to see for myself what it really is. Is it a great burning eye looking through an enormous spyhole, as some Libyans say; or is it Apollo driving a golden coach drawn by golden horses, as the Athenians believe; or perhaps is it a great flaming squid swimming the waters of the sky, as the barbarians say; or, maybe, as my father holds, is it a monster ball of burning gas which Apollo moves by its own motion. I think I shall go a bit closer, anyway. The old man seems to be napping. I can be up and back before he opens his eyes. How splendid if I could get a really good look at the sun and be able to tell my father something he doesn't know. How that would delight him. What a joke we will have together. Yes...I must follow that swan.”

So Icarus, full of strength and joy, blood flaming in his veins, stretched his home-made wings and climbed after the swan. Up, up, up, he flew. The air seemed thinner, his body heavier; the sun was swollen now, filling the whole sky, blazing down at him. He couldn't see any more than he had before; he was dazed with light.

“Closer...” he thought. “Higher...closer...up and up...”

He felt the back of his shoulders growing wet.

“Yes,” he thought. “This is hot work.”

But the wetness was not what he supposed; it was wax—melting wax. The wax bonds of his wings were melting in the heat of the sun. He felt the wings sliding away from him. As they fell away and drifted slowly down, he gazed at them, stupefied. It was as if a great golden hand had taken him in its grasp and hurled him toward the sea. The sky tilted. His breath was torn from his chest. The diamond-hard sea was rushing toward him.

“No,” he cried. “No...no...”

Daedalus, dozing and floating on his column of air, felt the cry ripping through his body like an arrow. He opened his eyes to see the white body of his son hurtling down. It fell into the sea and disappeared.

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Theseus

YOUNG THESEUS HAD A secret. He lived with his mother in a little hut on a wild sea-battered part of the coast called Troezen. For all his poor house and worn-out clothes, he was very proud, for he had a secret: he knew that he was the son of a king. His mother had told him the story one night when their day's catch of fish had been very bad and they were hungry.

“A king, truly,” she said. “And one day you will know his name.”

“But mother, then why are you not a queen and I a prince? Why don't we live in a palace instead of a hovel?”

“Politics, my son,” she said sadly. “All politics...You're too young to understand, but your father has a cousin, a very powerful lord with fifty sons. They are waiting for your father to die so they can divide the kingdom. If they knew he had a son of his own to inherit it, they would kill the son immediately.”

“When can I go to him? When can I go there and help my father?”

“When you're grown. When you know how to fight your enemies.”

This was Theseus' secret...and he needed a secret to keep him warm in those long, cold, hard years. One of his worst troubles was his size. His being small for his age bothered him terribly for how

could he become a great fighter and help his father against terrible enemies if he couldn't even hold his own against the village boys? He exercised constantly by running up and down the cliffs, swimming in the roughest seas, lifting logs and rocks, bending young trees; and indeed he grew much stronger, but he was still very dissatisfied with himself.

A VOICE FROM THE SEA

One day, when he had been beaten in a fight with a larger boy, he felt so gloomy that he went down to the beach and lay on the sand watching the waves, hoping that a big one would come along and cover him.

“I will not live this way!” he cried to the wind. “I will not be small and weak and poor. I will be a king, a warrior...or I will not be at all.”

And then it seemed that the sound of the waves turned to a deep-voiced lullaby, and Theseus fell asleep—not quite asleep, perhaps, because he was watching a great white gull smashing clams open by dropping them on the rocks below. Then the bird swooped down and stood near Theseus' head looking at him, and spoke, “I can crack clams open because they are heavy. Can I do this with shrimps or scallops? No...they are too light. Do you know the answer to my riddle?”

“Is it a riddle?”

“A very important one. The answer is this: do not fear your enemy’s size, but use it against him. Then his strength will become yours. When you have tried this secret, come back, and I will tell you a better one.”

Theseus sat up, rubbing his eyes. Was it a dream? Had the gull been there, speaking to him? Could it be? What did it all mean? Theseus thought and thought; then he leaped to his feet and raced down the beach, up the cliff to the village where he found the boy who had just beaten him and slapped him across the face. When the boy, who was almost as big as a man, lunged toward him swinging his big fist, Theseus caught the fist and pulled in the same direction. The boy, swung off balance by his own power, went spinning off his feet and landed headfirst.

“Get up,” said Theseus. “I want to try that again.”

The big fellow lumbered to his feet and rushed at Theseus, who stooped suddenly. The boy went hurtling over him and landed in the road again. This time he lay still.

“Well,” said Theseus, “that was a smart gull.”

One by one, Theseus challenged the largest boys of the village; and, by being swift and sure and using their own strength against them, he defeated them all.

Then, he returned to the beach and lay on the sand, watching the waves, and listening as the crashing became a lullaby. Once again, his eyes closed, then opened. The great white seagull was pacing the sand near him.

“Thank you,” said Theseus.

“Don’t thank me,” said the gull. “Thank your father. I am but his messenger.”

“My father, the king?”

“King, indeed. But not the king your mother thinks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen now...Your father rules no paltry stretch of earth. His domain is as vast as all the seas, and all that is beneath them, and all that the seas claim. He is the Earthshaker, Poseidon.”

“Poseidon...my father?”

“You are his son.”

“Then why does my mother not know? How can this be?”

“You must understand, boy, that the gods sometimes fall in love with beautiful maidens of the earth, but they cannot appear to the maidens in their own forms. The gods are too large, too bright, too terrifying, so they must disguise themselves. Now, when Poseidon fell in love with your mother, she had just been secretly married to Aegeus, king of Athens. Poseidon disguised himself as her new husband, and you, you are his son. One of many, very many; but he seems to have taken a special fancy to you and plans great and terrible things for you...if you have the courage.”

“I have the courage,” said Theseus. “Let me know his will.”

“Tomorrow,” said the seagull, “you will receive an unexpected gift. Then you must bid farewell to your mother and go to Athens

to visit Aegeus. Do not go by sea. Take the dangerous overland route, and your adventures will begin.”

The waves made great crashing music. The wind crooned. A blackness crossed the boy’s mind. When he opened his eyes the gull was gone, and the sun was dipping into the sea.

“Undoubtedly a dream,” he said to himself. “But the last dream worked. Perhaps this one will too.”

The next morning there was a great excitement in the village. A huge stone had appeared in the middle of the road. In this stone was stuck a sword half-way up to its hilt; and a messenger had come from the oracle at Delphi saying that whoever pulled the sword from the stone was a king’s son and must go to his father.

When Theseus heard this, he embraced his mother and said, “Farewell.”

“Where are you going, my son?”

“To Athens. This is the time we have been waiting for. I shall take the sword from the stone and be on my way.”

“But, son, it is sunk so deeply. Do you think you can? Look... look...the strongest men cannot budge it. There is the smith trying...And there the Captain of the Guard...And look...look at that giant herdsman trying. See how he pulls and grunts. Oh, son, I fear the time is not yet.”

“Pardon me,” said Theseus, moving through the crowd. “Let me through, please. I should like a turn.”

When the villagers heard this, heard the short fragile-looking youth say these words, they exploded in laughter.

“Delighted to amuse you,” said Theseus. “Now, watch this.”

Theseus grasped the sword by the hilt and drew it from the stone as easily as though he were drawing it from a scabbard; he bowed to the crowd and stuck the sword in his belt. The villagers were too stunned to say anything. They moved apart as he approached, making room for him to pass. He smiled, embraced his mother again, and set out on the long road to Athens.

THE ROAD

The overland road from Troezen to Athens was the most dangerous in the world. It was infested not only by bandits but also giants, ogres, and sorcerers who lay in wait for travelers and killed them for their money, or their weapons, or just for sport. Those who had to make the trip usually went by boat, preferring the risk of shipwreck and pirates to the terrible mountain brigands. If the trip overland had to be made, travelers banded together, went heavily armed, and kept watch as though on a military march.

Theseus knew all this, but he did not give it a second thought. He was too happy to be on his way...leaving his poky little village and his ordinary life. He was off to the great world and adventure. He welcomed the dangers that lay in wait. “The more, the better,” he thought. “Where there’s danger, there’s glory. Why, I shall be disappointed if I am *not* attacked.”

He was not to be disappointed. He had not gone far when he met a huge man in a bearskin carrying an enormous brass club. This was Corynetes, the cudgeler, terror of travelers. He reached out a hairy hand, seized Theseus by the throat and lifted his club, which glittered in the hot sunlight.

“Pardon me,” said Theseus. “What are you planning to do?”

“Bash in your head.”

“Why?”

“That’s what I do.”

“A beautiful club you have there, sir,” said Theseus. “So bright and shiny. You know, it’s a positive honor to have my head bashed in with a weapon like this.”

“Pure brass,” growled the bandit.

“Mmm...but is it really brass? It might be gilded wood, you know. A brass club would be too heavy to lift.”

“Not too heavy for me,” said the bandit, “and it’s pure brass. Look...”

He held out his club, which Theseus accepted, smiling. Swinging it in a mighty arc he cracked the bandit’s head as if it were an egg.

“Nice balance to this,” said Theseus. “I think I’ll keep it.” He shouldered the club and walked off.

The road ran along the edge of the cliff above the burning blue sea. He turned a bend in the road and saw a man sitting on a rock.

The man held a great battle-ax in his hand; he was so large that the ax seemed more like a hatchet.

“Stop!” said the man.

“Good day,” said Theseus.

“Now listen, stranger, everyone who passes this way washes my feet. That’s the toll. Any questions?”

“One. Suppose I don’t?”

“Then I’ll simply cut off your head,” said the man, “unless you think that little twig you’re carrying will stop this ax.”

“I was just asking,” said Theseus. “I’ll be glad to wash your feet, sir. Personal hygiene is very important, especially on the road.”

“What?”

“I said I’ll do it.”

Theseus knelt at the man’s feet and undid his sandals, thinking hard. He knew who this man was; he had heard tales of him. This was Sciron who was notorious for keeping a pet turtle that was as large for a turtle as Sciron was for a man and was trained to eat human flesh. This giant turtle swam about at the foot of the cliff waiting for Sciron to kick his victims over. Theseus glanced swiftly down the cliffside. Sure enough, he saw the great blunt head of the turtle lifted out of the water, waiting.

Theseus took Sciron’s huge foot in his hand, holding it by the ankle. As he did so, the giant launched a mighty kick. Theseus was ready. When the giant kicked, Theseus pulled, dodging swiftly out

of the way as the enormous body hurtled over him, over and down, splashing the water cliff-high as it hit. Theseus saw the turtle swim toward the splash. He arose, dusted off his knees, and proceeded on his journey.

The road dipped now, running past a grove of pines.

“Stop!”

He stopped. There was another huge brute of a man facing him. First Theseus thought that Sciron had climbed back up the cliff somehow; but then he realized that this must be Sciron’s brother, of whom he had also heard. This fellow was called Pityocamptes, which means “pine-bender.” He was big enough and strong enough to press pine trees to the ground. It was his habit to bend a tree just as a passerby approached and asked the newcomer to hold it for a moment. The traveler, afraid not to oblige, would grasp the top of the tree. Then Pityocamptes with a great jeering laugh would release his hold. The pine tree would spring mightily to its full height, flinging the victim high in the air, so high that the life was dashed out of him when he hit the ground. Then the bandit would search his pockets, chuckling all the while; he was a great joker. Now he said to Theseus, “Wait, friend. I want you to do me a favor.”

He reached for a pine tree and bent it slowly to earth like an enormous bow. “Just hold this for a moment like a good fellow, will you?”

“Certainly,” said Theseus.

Theseus grasped the tree, set his feet, clenched his teeth, let his mind go dark and all his strength flow downward, through his legs, into the earth, anchoring him to the earth like a rock. Pityocampes let go, expecting to see Theseus fly into the air. Nothing happened. The pine stayed bent. The lad was holding it, legs rigid, arms trembling. The giant could not believe his eyes. He thought he must have broken the pine while bending it. He leaned his head closer to see. Then Theseus let go. The tree snapped up, catching the giant under the chin, knocking him unconscious. Theseus bent the tree again, swiftly bound the giant's wrists to it. He pulled down another pine and tied Pityocampes' legs to that... and then let both pines go. They sprang apart. Half of Pityocampes hung from one tree, half from the other. Vultures screamed with joy and fed on both parts impartially. Theseus wiped the pine tar from his hands and continued on his way.

By now it was nightfall, and he was very weary. He came to an inn where light was coming from the window, smoke from the chimney. But it was not a cozy sight; the front yard was littered with skulls and other bones.

"They don't do much to attract guests," thought Theseus. "Well...I'm tired. It has been a gruesome day. I'd just as soon go to bed now without any more fighting. On the other hand, if an adventure comes my way, I must not avoid it. Let's see what this bone-collector looks like."

He strode to the door and pounded on it, crying, “Landlord! Landlord, ho!”

The door flew open. In it was framed a greasy-looking giant, resembling Sciron and the pine-bender, but older, filthier, with long, tangled gray hair and a blood-stained gray beard. He had great meaty hands like grappling hooks.

“Do you have a bed for the night?” said Theseus.

“A bed? That I have. Come with me.”

He led Theseus to a room where a bed stood—an enormous ugly piece of furniture, hung with leather straps, and chains, and shackles.

“What are all those bolts and bindings for?” said Theseus.

“To keep you in bed until you’ve had your proper rest.”

“Why should I wish to leave the bed?”

“Everyone else seems to. You see, this is a special bed, exactly six feet long from head to foot. And I am a very neat, orderly person. I like things to fit. Now, if the guest is too short for the bed, we attach those chains to his ankles and stretch him. Simple.”

“And if he’s too long?” said Theseus.

“Oh, well then we just lop off his legs to the proper length.”

“I see.”

“But don’t worry about that part of it. You look like a stretch job to me. Go ahead, lie down.”

“And if I do, then you will attach chains to my ankles and stretch me—if I understand you correctly.”

“You understand me fine. Lie down.”

“But all this stretching sounds uncomfortable.”

“You came here. Nobody invited you. Now you’ve got to take the bad with the good.”

“Yes, of course,” said Theseus. “I suppose if I decided not to take advantage of your hospitality...I suppose you’d *make* me lie down, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

“How? Show me.”

The inn-keeper, whose name was Procrustes, reached out a great hand, put it on Theseus’ chest, and pushed him toward the bed. Theseus took his wrist, and, as the big man pushed, he pulled...in the swift shoulder-turning downward snap he had taught himself, Procrustes flew over his shoulder and landed on the bed. Theseus bolted him fast, took up an ax, and chopped off his legs as they dangled over the footboards. Then, because he did not wish the fellow to suffer, chopped off his head too.

“As you have done by travelers, so are you done by,” said Theseus. “You have made your bed, old man. Now lie on it.”

He put down the ax, picked up his club, and resumed his journey, deciding to sleep in the open because he found the inn unpleasant.

ATHENS

Athens was not yet a great city in those days, but it was far more splendid than any Theseus had seen. He found it quite beautiful with arbors and terraces and marble temples. After the adventures of the road, however, he found it strangely dull. He suffered too from humiliation for, although he was the king's son, his father was in a very weak position so he could not be a real prince. It was his father's powerful cousin, the tall black-browed Pallas with his fifty fierce sons, who actually ran things. Their estate was much larger and finer than the castle, their private army stronger than the Royal Guard, and Theseus could not bear it.

"Why was I given the sign?" he stormed. "Why did I pull the sword from the stone and come here to Athens? To skulk in the castle like a runaway slave? What difference does it make, Father, how *many* there are? After we fight them, there will be many less. Let's fight! Right now!"

"No," said Aegeus, "we cannot. Not yet. It would not be a battle, it would be suicide. They must not know you are here. I am sorry now I had you come all the way to Athens. It is too dangerous. I should have kept you in some little village somewhere, outside of town, where we could have seen each other every day, but where you would not be in such danger."

"Well, if I am no use here let me go to Crete!" cried Theseus. "If I can't fight our enemies at home, let me try my hand abroad."

“Crete...Oh, my dear boy, no, no...” and the old man fell to lamenting for it was in these days that Athens, defeated in a war with Crete, was forced by King Minos to pay a terrible tribute. He demanded that each year the Athenians send him seven of their most beautiful maidens, seven of their strongest young men. These were taken to the Labyrinth and offered to the monster who lived there—the dread Minotaur, half man and half bull—son of Pasiphae and the bull she had fallen in love with. Year after year they were taken from their parents, these seven maidens and seven youths, and were never heard of again. Now the day of tribute was approaching again.

Theseus offered to go himself as one of the seven young men and take his chances with the monster. He kept hammering at his father, kept producing so many arguments, was so electric with impatience and rage, that finally his father consented, and the name Theseus was entered among those who were to be selected for tribute. The night before he left, he embraced Aegeus and said, “Be of good heart, dear sire. I traveled a road that was supposed to be fatal before and came out alive. I met quite a few unpleasant characters on my journey and had a few anxious moments, but I learned from them that the best weapon you can give an enemy is your own fear. So...who can tell. I may emerge victorious from the Labyrinth and lead my companions home safely. Then I will be known to the people of Athens and will be able to rouse them against your tyrant cousins and make you a real king.”

“May the gods protect you, son,” said Aegeus. “I shall sacrifice to Zeus and to Ares, and to our own Athene, every day, and pray for your safety.”

“Don’t forget Poseidon,” said Theseus.

“Oh, yes, Poseidon too,” said Aegeus. “Now do this for me, son. Each day I shall climb the Hill of the Temple, and from there watch over the sea...watching for your ship to return. It will depart wearing black sails, as all the sad ships of tribute do; but if you should overcome the Minotaur, please, I pray you, raise a white sail. This will tell me that you are alive and save a day’s vigil.”

“That I will do,” said Theseus. “Watch for the white sail...”

CRETE

All Athens was at the pier to see the black-sailed ship depart. The parents of the victims were weeping and tearing their clothing. The maidens and the young men, chosen for their beauty and courage, stood on the deck trying to look proud; but the sound of lamentation reached them, and they wept to see their parents weep. Then Theseus felt the cords of his throat tighten with rage. He stamped his foot on the deck and shouted, “Up anchor, and away!” as though he were the captain of the vessel. The startled crew obeyed, and the ship moved out of the harbor.

Theseus immediately called the others to him.

“Listen to me,” he said. “You are not to look upon yourselves as victims, or victims you will surely be. The time of tribute has

ended. You are to regard this voyage not as a submission but as a military expedition. Everything will change, but first you must change your own way of looking at things. Place your faith in my hands, place yourselves under my command. Will you?"

"We will!" they shouted.

"Good. Now I want every man to instruct every girl in the use of the sword and the battle-ax. We may have to cut our way to freedom. I shall also train you to respond to my signals—whistles, hand-movements—for if we work as a team, we may be able to defeat the Minotaur and confound our enemies."

They agreed eagerly. They were too young to live without hope, and Theseus' words filled them with courage. Every day he drilled them, man and maiden alike, as though they were a company of soldiers. He taught them to wrestle in the way he had invented. And this wild young activity, this sparring and fencing, so excited the crew, that they were eager to place themselves under the young man's command.

"Yes," he said. "I will take your pledges. You are Athenians. Right now that means you are poor, defeated, living in fear. But one day 'Athenian' will be the proudest name in the world, a word to make warriors quake in their armor, kings shiver upon their thrones!"

Now Minos of Crete was the most powerful king in all the world. His capital, Knossos, was the gayest, richest, proudest city in the world; and the day, each year, when the victims of the Minotaur

arrived from Athens, was always a huge feast-day. People mobbed the streets—warriors with shaven heads and gorgeous feathered cloaks, women in jewels and topless dresses, children, farmers, great swaggering bullherders, lithe bullfighters, dwarfs, peacocks, elephants, and slaves, slaves, slaves from every country known to man. The streets were so jammed no one could walk freely, but the King’s Guard kept a lane open from quayside to Palace. And here, each year, the fourteen victims were marched so that the whole city could see them—marched past the crowds to the Palace to be presented to the king to have their beauty approved before giving them to the Minotaur.

On this day of arrival, the excited harbormaster came puffing to the castle, fell on his knees before the throne, and gasped, “Pity, great king, pity...”

And then in a voice strangled with fright the harbormaster told the king that one of the intended victims, a young man named Theseus, demanded a private audience with Minos before he would allow the Athenians to disembark.

“My warships!” thundered Minos. “The harbor is full of triremes. Let the ship be seized, and this Theseus and his friends dragged here through the streets.”

“It cannot be, your majesty. Their vessel stands over the narrow neck of the harbor. And he swears to scuttle it right there, blocking the harbor, if any of our ships approach.”

“Awkward...very awkward,” murmured Minos. “Quite resourceful for an Athenian, this young man. Worth taking a look at. Let him be brought to me.”

Thereupon Theseus was informed that the king agreed to see him privately. He was led to the Palace, looking about eagerly as he was ushered down the lane past the enormous crowd. He had never seen a city like this. It made Athens look like a little fishing village. He was excited and he walked proudly, head high, eyes flashing. When he came to the Palace, he was introduced to the king’s daughters, two lovely young princesses, Ariadne and Phaedra.

“I regret that my queen is not here to greet you,” said Minos. “But she has become attached to her summer house in the Labyrinth and spends most of her time there.”

The princesses were silent, but they never took their eyes off Theseus. He could not decide which one he preferred. Ariadne he supposed—the other was really still a little girl. But she had a curious cat-faced look about her that intrigued him. However, he could not give much thought to this; his business was with the king.

Finally, Minos signaled the girls to leave the room, and motioned Theseus toward his throne. “You wanted to see me alone,” he said. “Here I am. Speak.”

“I have a request, your majesty. As the son of my father, Aegeus, King of Athens, and his representative in this court, I ask you formally to stop demanding your yearly tribute.”

“Oh, heavens,” said Minos. “I thought you would have something original to say. And you come with this threadbare old petition. I have heard it a thousand times and refused it a thousand times.”

“I know nothing of what has been done before,” said Theseus. “But only of what I must do. You laid this tribute upon Athens to punish the city, to show the world that you were the master. But it serves only to degrade you and show the world that you are a fool.”

“Feeding you to the Minotaur is much too pleasant a finale for such an insolent rascal,” said Minos. “I shall think of a much more interesting way for you to die—perhaps several ways.”

“Let me explain what I mean,” said Theseus. “Strange as it seems, I do not hate you. I admire you. You’re the most powerful king in the world and I admire power. In fact, I intend to imitate your career. So what I say, I say in all friendliness, and it is this: when you take our young men and women and shut them in the Labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur, you are making the whole world forget Minos, the great general Minos, the wise king. What you are forcing upon their attention is Minos, the betrayed husband, the man whose wife disliked him so much she eloped with a bull. And this image of you is what people remember. Drop the tribute, I say, and you will once again live in man’s mind as warrior, law-giver, and king.”

“You are an agile debater,” said Minos, “as well as a very reckless young man, saying these things to me. But there is a flaw

in your argument. If I were to drop the tribute, my subjects would construe this as an act of weakness. They would be encouraged to launch conspiracies against me. Other countries under my sway would be encouraged to rebel. It cannot be done.”

“I can show you a graceful way to let the tribute lapse. One that will not be seen as a sign of weakness. Just tell me how to kill the monster.”

“Kill the monster, eh? And return to Athens a hero? And wipe out your enemies there? And then subdue the other cities of Greece until you become leader of a great alliance? And then come visit me again with a huge fleet and an enormous army, and topple old Minos from his throne...? Do I describe your ambitions correctly?”

“The future does not concern me,” said Theseus. “I take one thing at a time. And the thing that interests me now is killing the Minotaur.”

“Oh, forget the Minotaur,” said Minos. “How do you know there is one? How do you know it’s not some maniac there who ties sticks to his head? Whatever it is, let him rot there in the Labyrinth with his mad mother. I have a better plan for you. My sons are dead. My daughter Ariadne, I notice, looks upon you with favor. Marry her, and become my heir. One day you will rule Crete and Athens both...and all the cities of the sea.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your offer. But I came here to fight a monster.”

“You are mad.”

“Perhaps. But this is the only way I know how to be. When I am your age, when the years have thinned my blood, when rage has cooled into judgment, then I will go in for treaties, compromises. Now, I must fight.”

“Why is the young fool so confident?” thought Minos to himself. “He acts like a man who knows he is protected by the gods. Can it be true what they say? Is he really the son of Poseidon? Do I have that kind of enemy on my hands? If so, I will make doubly sure to get rid of him.”

Then he said aloud, “You are wrong to refuse my offer. I suppose you are made so wildly rash by some old wives’ gossip in your little village that you are the son of this god or that. Those mountain villages of yours, they’re ridiculous. Every time a child does something out of the way, all the crones and hags get together and whisper, ‘He’s the son of a god, really the son of a god.’ Is that the way of it? Tell the truth now.”

“My truth,” said Theseus, “is that I am the son of Poseidon.”

“Poseidon, eh? No less. Well, how would you like to prove it?”

“Why should I care to prove it? *I* know. That’s enough for me. The whole world has heard that you are the son of Zeus, who courted your mother, Europa, in the guise of a white bull. Everyone has heard this tale; few disbelieve it. But can you prove it?”

“Come with me,” said Minos.

He led him out of the Palace, beyond the wall, to a cliff overlooking the sea. He stood tall, raised his arms, and said, “Father Zeus, make me a sign.”

Lightning flashed so furiously that the night became brighter than day, and the sky spoke in thunder. Then Minos dropped his arms; the light stopped pulsing in the sky, and the thunder was still.

“Well,” said Minos. “Have I proved my parentage?”

“It’s an impressive display. I suppose it proves something.”

“Then show me you are the son of Poseidon.”

Minos took the crown from his head and threw it over the cliff into the sea. They heard the tiny splash far below.

“If you are his son, the sea holds no terror for you. Get me my crown,” said Minos.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Theseus stepped to the edge of the cliff and leaped off. As he fell, he murmured, “Father, help me now.”

Down he plunged, struck the black water and went under, shearing his way through until he felt his lungs bursting. But he did not kick toward the surface. He let out the air in his chest in a long tortured gasp, and then, breathed in. No strangling rush of water, but a great lung-full of sweet cool air...and he felt himself breathing as naturally as a fish. He swam down, down, and as he swam his eyes became accustomed to the color of the night sea; he moved in a deep green light. And the first thing he saw was the crown gleaming on the bottom. He swam down and picked it up.

Theseus stood on the ocean bottom holding the crown in his hand and said, "All thanks, Father Poseidon."

He waited there for the god to answer him, but all he saw were dark gliding shapes, creatures of the sea passing like shadows. He swam slowly to the surface, climbed the cliff, and walked to where Minos was waiting.

"Your crown, sir."

"Thank you."

"Are you convinced now that Poseidon is my father?"

"I am convinced that the water is more shallow here than I thought. Convinced that you are lucky."

"Luck? Is that not another word for divine favor?"

"Perhaps. At any rate, I am also convinced that you are a dangerous young man. So dangerous that I am forced to strip you of certain advantages allowed those who face the Minotaur. You will carry neither sword nor ax, but only your bare hands...And your luck, of course. I think we will not meet again. So farewell." He whistled sharply. His Royal Guard appeared, surrounded Theseus, and marched him off to a stone tower at the edge of the Labyrinth. There they locked him up for the night.

An hour before dawn Ariadne appeared in his cell and said, "I love you, Theseus. I will save you from death if you promise to take me back to Athens with you."

"And how do you propose to save me, lovely princess?"

“Do you know what the Labyrinth is? It is a hedge of a thousand lanes, all leading in, and only one leading out. And this one is so concealed, has so many twists and turns and secret windings that no one can possibly find his way out. Only I can travel the Labyrinth freely. I will lead you in and hide you. I will also lead you around the central chamber where the Minotaur is and lead you out again. You will not even see the monster. Since no one has ever found his way out of the maze, Minos will assume that you have killed the Minotaur, and you will have a chance to get to your ship and escape before the trick is discovered. But you must take me with you.”

“It cannot be,” said Theseus.

“Don’t you believe me? It’s all true. Look...”

She took from her tunic a ball of yellow silk thread and dropped it on the floor. The ball swiftly rolled across the room, unwinding itself as it went. It rolled around the bench, wrapped itself around one of Theseus’ ankles, rolled up the wall, across the ceiling and down again. Then Ariadne tugged sharply on her end of the thread, and the ball reversed itself, rolling back the way it had come, reeling in its thread as it rolled. Back to Ariadne it rolled and leaped into her hand.

“This was made for me by old Daedalus,” said Ariadne. “It was he who built the Labyrinth, you know. And my father shut him up in it too. I used to go visit him there. He made me this magic

ball of thread so that I would always be able to find my way to him, and find my way back. He was very fond of me.”

“I’m getting very fond of you too,” said Theseus.

“Do you agree?” cried Ariadne. “Will you let me guide you in the Labyrinth and teach you how to avoid the monster, and fool my father. Say you will. Please...”

“I’ll let you guide me through the maze,” said Theseus. “Right to where the monster dwells. You can stay there and watch the fight. And when it’s over, you can lead me back.”

“No, no, I won’t be able to. You’ll be dead! It’s impossible for you to fight the Minotaur.”

“It is impossible for me not to.”

“You won’t even be armed.”

“I have always traveled light, sweet princess, and taken my weapons from the enemy. I see no reason to change my habits now. Are you the kind of girl who seeks to change a man’s habits? If you are, I don’t think I will take you back to Athens.”

“Oh, please, do not deny me your love,” she said. “I will do as you say.”

The next morning when the Royal Guard led Theseus out of the tower and forced him into the outer lane of the Labyrinth, Ariadne was around the first bend, waiting. She tied one end of the thread to a branch of the hedge, then dropped the ball to the ground. It rolled slowly, unwinding; they followed, hand in hand. It was pleasant, walking in the Labyrinth. The hedge grew tall above their heads

and was heavy with little white sweet-smelling flowers. The lane turned and twisted and turned again, but the ball of thread ran ahead, and they followed it. Theseus heard a howling.

“Sounds like the wind,” he said.

“No, it is not the wind. It is my mad mother, howling.”

They walked farther. They heard a rumbling, crashing sound.

“What’s that?”

“That is my brother. He’s hungry.”

They continued to follow the ball of thread. Now the hedges grew so tall the branches met above their heads, and it was dark. Ariadne looked up at him, sadly. He bent his head and brushed her lips in a kiss.

“Please don’t go to him,” she said. “Let me lead you out now. He will kill you. He has the strength of a bull and the cunning of a man.”

“Who knows?” said Theseus. “Perhaps he has the weakness of a man and the stupidity of a bull.” He put his hand over her mouth. “Anyway, let me think so because I must fight him, you see, and I’d rather not frighten myself beforehand.”

The horrid roaring grew louder and louder. The ball of thread ran ahead, ran out of the lane, into an open space. And here, in a kind of meadow surrounded by the tall hedges of the Labyrinth, stood the Minotaur.

Theseus could not believe his eyes. The thing was more fearsome than in his worst dreams. What he had expected was a

bull's head on a man's body. What he saw was something about ten feet tall shaped like a man, like an incredibly huge and brutally muscular man, but covered with a short dense brown fur. It had a man's face, but a squashed, bestialized one, with poisonous red eyes, great blunt teeth, and thin leathery lips. Sprouting out of its head were two long heavy polished horns. Its feet were hooves, razor sharp; its hands were shaped like a man's hands, but much larger and hard as horn. When it clenched them they were great fists of bone.

It stood pawing the grass with a hoof, peering at Theseus with its little red eyes. There was a bloody slaver on its lips.

Now, for the first time in all his battles, Theseus became unsure of himself. He was confused by the appearance of the monster. It filled him with a kind of horror that was beyond fear, as if he were wrestling a giant spider. So when the monster lowered its head and charged, thrusting those great bone lances at him, Theseus could not move out of the way.

There was only one thing to do. Drawing himself up on tiptoe, making himself as narrow as possible, he leaped into the air and seized the monster's horns: Swinging himself between the horns, he somersaulted onto the Minotaur's head, where he crouched, gripping the horns with desperate strength. The monster bellowed with rage and shook its head violently. But Theseus held on. He thought his teeth would shake out of his head; he felt his eyeballs rattling in their sockets. But he held on.

Now, if it can be done without one's being gored, somersaulting between the horns is an excellent tactic when fighting a real bull; but the Minotaur was not a real bull; it had hands. So when Theseus refused to be shaken off but stood on the head between the horns trying to dig his heels into the beast's eyes, the Minotaur stopped shaking his head, closed his great horny fist, big as a cabbage and hard as a rock, and struck a vicious backward blow, smashing his fist down on his head, trying to squash Theseus as you squash a beetle.

This is what Theseus was waiting for. As soon as the fist swung toward him, he jumped off the Minotaur's head, and the fist smashed between the horns, full on the skull. The Minotaur's knees bent, he staggered and fell over; he had stunned himself. Theseus knew he had only a few seconds before the beast would recover his strength. He rushed to the monster, took a horn in both hands, put his foot against the ugly face, and putting all his strength in a sudden tug, broke the horn off at the base. He leaped away. Now he, too, was armed, and with a weapon taken from the enemy.

The pain of the breaking horn goaded the Minotaur out of his momentary swoon. He scrambled to his feet, uttered a great choked bellow, and charged toward Theseus, trying to hook him with his single horn. Bone cracked against bone as Theseus parried with his horn. It was like a duel now, the beast thrusting with his horn, Theseus parrying, thrusting in return. Since the Minotaur was much stronger, it forced Theseus back—back until it had Theseus pinned

against the hedge. As soon as he felt the first touch of the hedge, Theseus disengaged, ducked past the Minotaur, and raced to the center of the meadow, where he stood, poised, arm drawn back. For the long pointed horn made as good a javelin as it did a sword, and so could be used at a safer distance.

The Minotaur whirled and charged again. Theseus waited until he was ten paces away, and then whipped his arm forward, hurling the javelin with all his strength. It entered the bull's neck and came out the other side. But so powerful was the Minotaur's rush, so stubborn his bestial strength, that he trampled on with the sharp horn through his neck and ran right over Theseus, knocking him violently to the ground. Then it whirled to try to stab Theseus with its horn; but the blood was spouting fast now, and the monster staggered and fell on the ground beside Theseus.

Ariadne ran to the fallen youth. She turned him over, raised him in her arms; he was breathing. She kissed him. He opened his eyes, looked around, and saw the dead Minotaur; then he looked back at her and smiled. He climbed to his feet, leaning heavily on Ariadne.

“Tell your thread to wind itself up again, Princess. We're off to Athens.”

When Theseus came out of the Labyrinth there was an enormous crowd of Cretans gathered. They had heard the sound of fighting, and, as the custom was, had gathered to learn of the death of the hostages. When they saw the young man covered with dirt and

blood, carrying a broken horn, with Ariadne clinging to his arm, they raised a great shout.

Minos was there, standing with his arms folded. Phaedra was at his side. Theseus bowed to him and said, “Your majesty, I have the honor to report that I have rid your kingdom of a foul monster.”

“Prince Theseus,” said Minos. “According to the terms of the agreement, I must release you and your fellow hostages.”

“Your daughter helped me, king. I have promised to take her with me. Have you any objection?”

“I fancy it is too late for objections. The women of our family haven’t had much luck in these matters. Try not to be too beastly to her.”

“Father,” said Phaedra, “she will be lonesome there in far-off Athens. May I not go with her and keep her company?”

“You too?” said Minos. He turned to Theseus. “Truly, young man, whether or not Poseidon has been working for you, Aphrodite surely has.”

“I will take good care of your daughters, king,” said Theseus. “Farewell.”

And so, attended by the Royal Guard, Theseus, his thirteen happy companions, and the two Cretan princesses, walked through the mobbed streets from the Palace to the harbor. There they boarded their ship.

It was a joyous ship that sailed northward from Crete to Athens. There was feasting and dancing night and day. And every

young man aboard felt himself a hero too, and every maiden a princess. And Theseus was lord of them all, drunk with strength and joy. He was so happy he forgot his promise to his father—forgot to tell the crew to take down the black sail and raise a white one.

King Aegeus, keeping a lonely watch on the Hill of the Temple, saw first a tiny speck on the horizon. He watched it for a long time and saw it grow big and then bigger. He could not tell whether the sail was white or black; but as it came nearer, his heart grew heavy. The sail seemed to be dark. The ship came nearer, and he saw that it wore a black sail. He knew that his son was dead.

“I have killed him,” he cried. “In my weakness, I sent him off to be killed. I am unfit to be king, unfit to live. I must go to Tartarus immediately and beg his pardon there.”

And the old king leaped from the hill, dived through the steep air into the sea far below, and was drowned. He gave that lovely blue, fatal stretch of water its name for all time—the Aegean Sea.

Theseus, upon his return to Athens, was hailed as king. The people worshipped him. He swiftly raised an army, wiped out his powerful cousins, and then led the Athenians forth into many battles, binding all the cities of Greece together in an alliance. Then, one day he returned to Crete to reclaim the crown of Minos which once he had recovered from the sea.

Atalanta

ATALANTA'S BAD LUCK BEGAN when she was born, for her father, the king of Arcadia, wanted a son. In his rage at being given a girl, he ordered that she be left on a mountainside to die. The nearest mountain, as it happened, was in the neighboring country of Calydon so the infant girl was taken there. She was stuck in a cleft of rock and left under the cold stars.

Her cries attracted the attention of a she-bear who was prowling the slope looking for a lost cub. The huge blunt-headed furry beast came nosing up to the squalling infant. It was not her cub, but it was alive; its tiny hand came out and clutched the shaggy ruff of the bear. She lifted the baby gently in her jaws and carried it off to her cave.

Across the valley from the she-bear's cave stood a castle belonging to the king of Calydon, whose son named Meleager also had a curious infancy. When he was three days old, his mother, Queen Althaea, was visited by a tall, gray-faced old woman carrying a pair of long silver shears in her hand. The queen knew it was Atropos, one of the three Fates, and she was afraid. The old woman said to her, "We are being kind to you. We usually strike without warning. See that stick of wood at the edge of the fire, just beginning to burn? Your son's life will last just as long as that stick remains un-burned."

Atropos then disappeared.

Althaea leaped to the fireplace, snatched the stick out of the flames, and locked it in a great brass chest.

The prince was not the same as other children; from the time he could run he was interested in nothing but hunting. His father was delighted with the boy. He had his smith make a tiny spear and a bow that shot arrows no larger than darts, but they were not toys. Meleager practiced with them constantly and learned to use them well. As soon as he could sit on a pony, he followed his father on the hunt; and by the time he was a young man, he was accounted the best hunter in all Greece. He had taken enough pelts to cover the floors of the huge castle...skin of lion, wolf, and bear. The walls were hung with stag-horns and bear-tusks. He hunted on horseback in the lowlands; on foot among the hills.

However, Meleager was a worry to his parents in one respect because he snubbed all the eligible maidens of Calydon.

“Father, please,” he said. “I can’t stand them...soft, squealing little things; no good with spear or bow, hopeless on horseback. I’ll not marry until I find a girl who can hunt by my side.”

One day, on the slope of a near mountain, he cornered an enormous bear. It lashed out with its great paw and struck Meleager’s javelin from his hand. Then the bear charged so swiftly that the lad barely had time to draw his dagger before the beast was upon him. He slipped under the swinging paws and stabbed the bear in the back of its neck, and then was knocked off his feet by its

backward lurch. As he sprang up, he was just in time to see the bear charging away up the slope, the dagger still stuck in his neck, blood welling from the wound. Meleager scrambled after it.

Despite his terrible wound, the beast moved swiftly, and Meleager soon lost sight of him; but he followed the trail of blood, knowing that it was only a question of time till the animal dropped. It had been early morning when he fought the bear; now the burning summer sun was directly overhead, and he was panting with heat as he followed the trail of blood. Then, rounding a spur of rock, he saw an amazing sight: a tall, bare-legged maiden came running down the hill with long strides, wearing a great shaggy fur cloak. Just as he thought, “Why is she wearing that heavy cloak in all this heat?” he saw that blood was dripping from her and realized that it was not a fur cloak she was wearing, but that on her back was the huge bear he had fought. The animal’s head was lolling on her shoulder, its blood was dripping on her; he saw the hilt of his dagger still protruding from its neck.

He stood in the path. The girl stopped. Gently she slid the body of the bear to the ground, straightened, and faced him. He was dazed by her beauty. She was as tall as he, long-legged as a deer, clad in a brief tunic of wolf-skin, her rich brown hair hanging to her thighs. Her face was streaked with dirt, her bare arms and shoulders blotched with blood; he knew instantly that this was the one girl in the world for him.

“That’s my bear,” he said. “But I give him to you.”

“Your bear?”

“My kill. That’s my dagger sticking from his neck. I’ve been tracking him all day. But you can...”

He was interrupted by her hoarse cry of rage. She stooped swiftly, picked up a huge stone as if it were a pebble, and hurled it at his head. He ducked but felt it graze his hair. He saw her bend again and pull his dagger from the bear’s neck. Then, holding the dagger, she came slowly toward him.

“This bear is my brother,” she said. “You have killed my brother. Now I must kill you.”

“Sweet maiden...”

“Sweet? You’ll find me bitter as death. Come, pick up your spear and fight.”

He picked up his spear and hurled it in the same motion. It sang through the air and split a sapling neatly in two. He turned and stood facing her with empty hands.

“Why have you disarmed yourself?” she said. “I mean to kill you.”

“Come ahead then. Use the dagger, by all means. It will make things more even.”

She howled with rage, and flung the dagger away. “I need no favors from you!” she cried. “I’ll do it with my bare hands.”

She rushed upon him. He caught her by the arms and tried to handle her gently; but it was impossible as she was as strong as a wild mare. She caught him in a great bear-hug that almost cracked

his spine. Grunting, twisting, he broke her hold and then wrestled in earnest. There, under the hot sun, before the glassy dead eyes of the bear, they wrestled.

Atalanta was a powerful fighter because she had been adopted by the she-bear, raised in the bear's cave, and treated like a cub. She had grown up among successive litters of bear cubs, wrestling with them, hunting with them; she had grown into a gloriously tanned, supple, fleet-footed young woman, strong as a she-bear herself. Wrestling Meleager seemed an easy matter to her. She planned to crush him in her hug and hurl him over the cliff.

However, as she wrestled with Meleager under the hot sun among the fragrance of thyme and crushed grass, something new happened. She had been used to wrestling shaggy bears, noticing with wonder how smooth her own arms and legs seemed against their mass of fur. She had wondered why she was so different, so hairless, and yet glad somehow that she was different. And now, as she held the young man in her mighty clutch, she felt his smoothness; and it was as though she were touching herself for the first time. Her own body seemed strange to her, yet deeply familiar. As she struggled, she found she could no longer know where his body ended and hers began. When she realized this, it seemed to her that the fragrance of the crushed grass rose like a sweet fog, making her dizzy. She found her knees buckling. She who could run miles up the steep slope of a mountain, outrunning even the mountain goats, felt her legs weakening. Her last thought, as her

mind swooped and darkened was, "It's magic. He's doing some magic. He's fighting me with magic."

When her head cleared, she found they were sitting with their backs against a twisted olive tree near the edge of the cliff and looking out onto a great gulf of blueness where a brown eagle turned. Their arms were still about each other as if they were wrestling, but their bodies were still. She was telling her name.

"I am Atalanta. I belong to this mountain, to the clan of mountain bears."

"I am Meleager," he said. "I belong to Atalanta."

So Meleager found the huntress he had dreamed of; they hunted together on hill and lowland, in forest and swamp and field, on foot and horseback, with dogs, or with long-legged hunting cats brought over from Egypt called Cheetahs, but more often, by themselves. They hunted so happily together and brought back so much game that word came to Artemis, Goddess of the Chase, Lady of the Wild Things; word came of Meleager, the handsome prince, the great spearman, and of his companion Atalanta, so tall and fleet and strong that people were saying she was Artemis herself come to earth. The goddess grew very angry.

"I'll show them there is only one Artemis," she cried. "I will set them a hunt they will never forget."

She dug her hands into the muck of the river Scamander and molded a huge boar, mud-colored, with evil red eyes. Far larger than any boar seen by man, large as a rhinoceros, armed with tusks,

so long, heavy, and sharp he could shear down a tree with a toss of his head. She made this huge beast, filled him with a raging blood-thirst, and set him in Calydon to ravage the countryside.

THE HUNT

Immediately the beast began to spread death and terror throughout the land. He uprooted crops, killed horses, cattle, goats—and also those who tended them. He attacked men working in the fields, goring and trampling them into bloody rags. And, in a rage, the beast charged a farmhouse, knocking it over, and rooted among the rubble, killing those who had not been crushed by the falling beams. Shepherds and goatherds refused to graze their flocks on the hills; farmers feared to harvest their crops. The king, Meleager's father, was desperate. He asked his son's advice. Meleager was mad with excitement. He swore to his father that he would kill the boar.

“Just I, myself, and one companion. We can do it, Father. No beast can escape us.”

But the king said: “No, my son. This is no ordinary beast. It is too large, too irresistibly strong. It is a curse sent by some god whom we have unwittingly offended. Yet I have sacrificed to all the gods, and still the beast roams my poor country, destroying, killing...”

“I must hunt him, father! It is the quarry we have dreamed of—something worthy of our skill.”

“I forbid it. You are my only son. If you are killed, the country will fall into the hands of your mother’s foolish brothers. What we must do, Meleager, is invite all the heroes of Greece to hunt the beast. It will be a famous affair.”

Thereupon messages were sent to all the heroes of Hellas, inviting them to Calydon to hunt the giant boar. They all accepted the invitation, kings, princes, and fierce soldiers of fortune who later sailed with Jason and fought at Troy.

However, the old king was not altogether pleased to be playing host to so many great men.

“I shall not be able to join the hunt,” he said to his wife. “Meleager will have to do the honors while I stay home and guard the castle.”

“Is that necessary?” said the queen. “Don’t you trust your neighbors?”

“Yes, I trust them to act like themselves. These neighbors of ours didn’t become so rich in land and cattle by right of purchase, my dear. They are men who have always taken when they wanted; this is how they have gained their property and their reputation. Frankly, I fear them more than I do the boar, and yet my heart tells me that my son may die on this hunt and that I should ride with him. I don’t know what to do.”

“You need not fear for our son,” said Queen Althaea. “The Fates have made me the guardian of his life. Look...”

She unlocked the chest, showed him the charred brand of wood, and told him how she had been visited by Atropos, Lady of the Shears, who had promised that the prince would live while the brand remained un-burned.

“So you may set your mind at rest, dear husband, and let him lead the hunt while you stay home and guard the castle. Besides, I am sending my two brothers to keep an eye on him. No, don’t frown. I know your opinion of my brothers, but they are less lenient than you about certain matters. They will prevent him from bringing that wild girl of his to join the hunt.”

“It is a mistake to interfere,” said the king. “He loves that girl and will never love another.”

“He shall not have her!” cried Althaea. “While I draw a breath he shall never bring her home as his wife.”

“Well, I can’t worry about her at the moment,” said the king. “I have more important things on my mind. Fearsome beasts, fearsome guests—the wild girl will have to wait.”

“She will wait long before she marries my son,” said Althaea.

The next morning, everyone assembled for the hunt. The heroes were amazed when their host, Meleager, rode up with Atalanta at his side. They gazed dumbfounded at the lovely, lithe young huntress, clad in a wolfskin tunic, bow and quiver slung, holding a javelin. A murmur rose. All were surprised; some of them were angry; a few of the younger ones were inflamed by her beauty

and grew jealous of Meleager. The prince's solemn uncles rode toward him, beards bristling with outrage.

"It's a disgrace," they said. "You are bringing dishonor on yourself and on your noble guests. They do not wish to ride with this bear's-whelp from the hills."

Meleager thrust his horse between them and grasped their arms, squeezing them until they felt their elbows cracking in his iron hands.

"Listen to me," he whispered. "One more word out of you, and I will call off this hunt, send our guests home, and Atlanta and I will hunt the boar alone, as we have always wanted to do. But first I will smash your heads together just to show our guests where the fault lies."

The uncles said no more. Meleager sounded a call upon his horn that rang through the hills, and the glittering company rode out to find the boar.

They did not have far to ride. Their quarry came to meet them, taking up its position as wisely as a general disposing troops; it came to earth in a canyon where the walls narrowed so that it could be attacked only from the front, and by only two men at a time. This rocky bottleneck was overgrown with willows, and the boar crouched in there unseen, waiting for the hunters.

However, the hunters were old hands at this. They did not rush in to attack him, but strung themselves out before the entrance to his lair, shouting, clashing spear on shield, trying to taunt him into

the open. They succeeded only too well, not knowing his size and speed. The boar came hurtling out of the willow brush with the crashing force of a huge boulder falling down a mountainside. He ploughed into a party of hunters, knocking them in all directions, whirling his huge bulk lightly as a fox, and cutting two of the men to shreds under his razor-sharp hooves. He charged again at the fleeing hunters, lunging at one with his tusks, and shearing his leg off at the hip.

The two warrior brothers, Telamon and Peleus, who became the father of Achilles, showed their great courage by walking slowly in on the boar, spears out-thrust. Their attack inspired two of the others, Ancaeus and Eurytion, to walk in behind the boar from opposite sides. But the beast broke out of the circle of spears by charging Telamon. Peleus flung his spear; it grazed the boar's shoulder, was deflected, and pierced Eurytion, who fell dead. Now Ancaeus, swinging his battle-ax at the boar, had his thrust parried by a sweep of one tusk; and then with a counter-thrust the boar ripped out the man's belly, gutting him as a fisherman does a fish. The beast then whirled and charged Peleus, who might have died on the spot, leaving no son named Achilles (and Hector might have gone unslain, and Troy, perhaps, might have stood unburned), but Atalanta drew her bow and sent a shaft into the vulnerable spot behind the boar's ear. It sank in up to the feathers. Another beast would have been killed instantly, but the boar still lived and remained murderously strong.

Screaming with pain the boar chased Atalanta. Theseus rose from behind a rock and flung a javelin; he missed. Atalanta swiftly notched another arrow and stood facing the beast as it hurtled toward her. There was just enough time for her to send the shaft into his eye.

But Meleager, shouting a wild war-cry, flung himself in the boar's path, hurling a javelin as he ran. It went into the boar under his shoulder, turning him from his charge toward Meleager, who kept running, and leaped clear over the charging beast like a Cretan bull-dancer. He came down on the other side, and before the animal could turn, thrust his sword under the great hump of muscle, cutting the spinal cord and breaking the cable of hot life; the boar fell dead.

Meleager pulled out his sword, and then calmly as though on a stag-hunt, knelt at the side of the giant beast and skinned him. He walked to Atalanta with the bloody pelt in his arms, bowed, and offered it to her, saying, "Your arrow struck him first. The pelt belongs to you."

Now this boarhide was a most valuable present. It was so thick and tough that it made a wonderful flexible war vest, lighter and stronger than armor, able to turn spearthrust and flying arrow. There was much resentment when Meleager gave the hide to the girl; the uncles, seeing this resentment, reproached Meleager again, accusing him of favoritism and inhospitality. The elder uncle,

Plexippus, began to curse Atalanta, calling her by filthy names; his brother echoed him.

Meleager wiped the blood from his sword and carefully dried it with a handful of rushes. He inspected the gleaming blade, and then swung it twice; the heads of his uncles rolled in the dust so swiftly severed that they still seemed to be cursing as they fell. Then Meleager said, "I beg you, sirs, pardon this unseemly family brawl; but if any one of you feels too much offended, I shall be glad to measure swords with him. If not, you are all invited to the castle, to a feast celebrating the death of the boar, and honoring his fair executioner, the huntress, Atalanta, whom I intend to make my wife."

The heroes raised a great shout. Many of them were still angry, others jealous, but they all admired courage when they saw it; besides they had had enough fighting for the day so they rode back to the castle, and Atalanta and Meleager rode off to be alone for a few hours before the feast.

When the hunters returned to the castle, they were met by the king and queen who eagerly demanded to hear their tale. But when they were told of the dispute over the hide and of how Meleager had killed his uncles and presented Atalanta to the company as his bride, the queen grew white with fury and rushed to her room.

There she sank to her knees on the stone floor and cried, "Bad prince, disobedient son, you have dispatched my two brothers to Tartarus, and in their noble stead propose to bring home this wild

nameless nymph of the hills. This shall not be, my son, my enemy. The Fates have given your mother the power to end your evil ways...”

Mad with grief, Althaea sprang to the chest, flung it open, pulled the charred stick from its hiding place, and threw it on the fire. She watched it burn.

At this time Meleager and Atalanta were in their favorite place under the twisted olive tree on the cliff, looking out into the great blue gulf of space and speaking softly.

“I want to be your wife,” said Atalanta. “You are the only one I shall ever love, but why must we live in a castle? Why must I be a queen, and wear dresses, and sit on a throne? Why can’t we stay as we are, roaming the hills, hunting, fighting?”

“We will, we will!” cried Meleager. “For every day we spend indoors being king and queen and making laws and such, for each day spent so poorly, we will spend ten days riding, hunting, fighting, you and I together side by side. I promise you, Atalanta. And this I promise too...”

He stopped. She saw him clutch at his chest, saw his eyes bulge, his face blacken. She caught him in her arms. His head snapped back; his scorched lips parted. He uttered a strangling howl of agony; his head lolled, and he was dead.

In the castle, Queen Althaea prodded the fire with her toe, scattering the last ashes. Then she straightened her robes and went down to tend to her guests.

THE RACE

AFTER MELEAGER'S DEATH, CALYDON became hateful to Atalanta. She left its familiar crags and slopes, and made her way to Arcadia. Obeying some dim instinct, a dumb homeward impulse that was the only thing she felt in her terrible grief, she went back to Arcadia where she had been born.

The king, her father, now very old, realized from her story that she was his daughter, whom, as an infant, he had exposed on the mountain...and that she had grown up to be as mighty a hunter and warrior as any son he could have hoped for. He recognized her as his child, and she lived in the castle.

But hunting was hateful to Atalanta now, and everything that reminded her of her murdered lover. Her fame had spread throughout the land, and the heroes who had gone on the Calydonian Hunt, and others too, came to woo the warrior-maiden for she was an orphan no more, but a princess who would inherit land and cattle and gold. So they came a-courting.

Atalanta could not bear the sight of them. "I will never marry another," she said to her father. "That part of me died with Meleager. I will never love another man. Send them away."

"I cannot insult them," said her father. "They are too powerful. If I seek to drive them away, they will make war upon me, conquer me; and you will be dragged off, a captive instead of a wife."

“Whoever takes me captive won’t live long enough to enjoy it,” said Atalanta. “However, let us do this: announce to them that I will marry only the man who can outrun me in a foot race. If he wins, he marries me; if he loses, he loses his head.”

The king agreed. Atalanta’s terms were announced. Most of the heroes who had watched her in action on the hunt, had observed her speed of movement, and had studied her long legs, knew what the outcome of a race must be, and decided to seek brides elsewhere. But some of the younger men were rash enough to persist. One by one, they raced Atalanta. The entire court turned out to see these races. Race followed race; she wanted no rest in between, and it seemed to the spectators that the young men still scrambled at the starting post as Atalanta flashed across the finish line.

She was merciless about imposing the penalty. Each losing suitor walked to the chopping block and paid with his head. Now, there was one young man, Hippomenes, who had also been at the Calydonian Hunt, although he had played no great role there. But he had fallen violently in love with Atalanta, so much in love that he was grieved at the death of Meleager because he knew that it would pain her so. Without ever being bold enough to make himself known to her, he had followed her at a distance, trailing her from Calydon to Arcadia and taking up residence there. He planned each day so that he would get a glimpse of her and this was enough to carry him to the next day. Still she had never met him.

When the races were announced, Hippomenes experienced a curious mixture of feelings. He was happy, on the one hand, that she was showing her scorn of other suitors; sad, on the other hand, because he realized that her scorn would extend to himself, if she knew him. He went each day to watch the races and again felt confused for he became each young man in the race and felt death crawl in his veins as he saw her flash across the finish line. He was each young man who laid his head on the bloody block, yet he was glad when the head rolled because there was one more rival gone. And through it all ran a curious thread of bitter joy, for his torment, he knew, had to end soon. The race would give him the chance to pay for this terrible love with his life.

When all the suitors had been beheaded, he announced himself as an entry. Everyone pleaded with him not to run. He was a gentle young man, with a soft voice and an easy smile. He did not look much like anyone's idea of a hero, and no one believed he had a chance. Even cruel Atalanta said, "Don't be a fool. Go lose your head over some other girl. I'm not for you."

But for all his gentleness, he could not be moved. He insisted so the race was set. Now, all the other young men who had raced Atalanta had prayed to various gods to give them victory: to Hermes, the wing-footed, god of games; to Ares, god of victories; to Artemis, mistress of the chase. They prayed to Athene for strategy, to Zeus, for strength. But Hippomenes prayed to none of

these. He thought to himself, “The others want to coerce her. I want her to want me.”...So he prayed to Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Aphrodite appeared to him when he was asleep, gave him three golden apples, and told him how to use them. When he awoke he knew that he had been dreaming, but there were the three golden apples gleaming on his bed. He hid them in his tunic and went out to race.

It was a brilliant sunny day; all the court was there. Atalanta had never appeared more beautiful than she looked that day walking to the starting post in her short white tunic, her long dark hair falling free. Hippomenes smiled at her and wished her good morning, holding tight to the slippery golden apples under his tunic so that they would not roll away before the race began. She received his greeting, and nodded, gravely. Then she studied him, frowning. Why was he clutching at his clothes in that odd way? That was no way to hold yourself before a race.

She felt a strange, hot lump form at the base of her throat; something about his hands, something terrible about the pose of those hands grasping at his tunic. Then she remembered, remembered the way her beloved Meleager had clutched at his belly when the curse was burning in him, just before he died in her arms.

She was so sunk in memory that she did not hear the trumpet call, starting the race, and Hippomenes was far in the lead when she woke up and began to run. He heard her light footfalls behind

him, heard the easy music of her breathing. Then a great shout from the crowd, and he knew that she had closed the gap. He let one of the golden apples slip away and roll across her path.

And Atalanta, still remembering, running in a dream, saw the golden flash and automatically stooped to scoop up the rolling apple. She loped along slowly as she examined the glittering thing. She saw her face in it, distorted, made gross, and she thought, "That's how I will look when I am old..."

Then she heard the crowd shout, raised her head, and saw Hippomenes far in the lead. She darkened her mind, and let the speed surge through her legs and into her drumming feet until she was running just behind him again.

"Poor boy," she thought. "Am I tormenting him with hope? Or is such torture love's gift too? Would it have been better never to have seen Meleager, never to have loved him, never to have suffered by losing him? No! Worse, worse, worse!"

Just then Hippomenes dropped the second apple. It rolled, flashing.

"What a pretty thing," she thought. "Like one of Aphrodite's apples from that magic tree in the Hesperides. I will take it and the other one and bring them both to Calydon, to Meleager's grave."

Now Hippomenes had thrown this apple harder; it had rolled quite a way before she decided to go back for it. When she had picked it up, she saw Hippomenes far up the track, almost at the

finish line. She ran with desperate speed then and caught him just two steps before the end.

He dropped the third apple. She laughed with scorn. “The fool...does he think I’ll stop for that one and let him win? I’ll simply cross the finish line and come back for the apple while he’s being led to the block.”

The apple lay before her feet. It was not rolling. All she had to do was bend in her course and scoop it up. But did she have time? The apple burned. It became a head bright with blood. Hippomenes’ head falling under the ax. It changed into the head of Meleager’s uncle being scythed off by the flashing sword...became Meleager’s face bright with sweat and agony...became her own face, reflected, gross, distorted, old...growing now, swelling, blown up by the roaring of the crowd, mushrooming into the golden radiance of the sun—so enormous, so indifferently hot—touching the earth with seasons, budding flowers, beasts, hunters, nymphs, horses, amorous princes, angry queens...birth and murder....

She held the three golden apples, dreaming into their polished fire, her face wet with tears, and the roaring of the crowd was dim, lost thunder, like the pounding of the surf. She stood there on the course, lost in her dream, as Hippomenes crossed the finish line and came back to claim his prize.

FABLES

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Midas

THERE WAS A KING named Midas, and what he loved best in the world was gold. He had plenty of his own, but he could not bear the thought of anyone else having any. Each morning he awoke very early to watch the sunrise and said, “Of all the gods, if gods there be, I like you least, Apollo. How dare you ride so unthriftilly in your sun-chariot scattering golden sheaves of light on rich and poor alike—on king and peasant, on merchant, shepherd, warrior? This is an evil thing, oh wastrel god, for only kings should have gold; only the rich know what to do with it.”

After a while these words of complaint, uttered each dawn, came to Apollo, and he was angry. He appeared to Midas in a dream and said, “Other gods would punish you, Midas, but I am famous for my even temper. Instead of doing you violence, I will show you how gracious I can be by granting you a wish. What is it to be?”

Midas cried, “Let everything I touch turn to gold!”

He shouted this out of his sleep in a strangling greedy voice, and the guards in the doorway nodded to each other and said, “The king calls out. He must be dreaming of gold again.”

Wearied by the dream, Midas slept past sunrise; when he awoke it was full morning. He went out into his garden. The sun was high, the sky was blue. A soft breeze played among the trees. It

was a glorious morning. He was still half asleep. Tatters of the dream were in his head.

“Can it be true?” he said to himself. “They say the gods appear in dreams. That’s how men know them. On the other hand I know that dreams are false, teasing things. You can’t believe them. Let us put it to the test.”

He reached out his hand and touched a rose. It turned to gold—petals and stalk, it turned to gold and stood there rigid, heavy, gleaming. A bee buzzed out of its stiff folds, furious; it lit on Midas’ hand to sting him. The king looked at the heavy golden bee on the back of his hand and moved it to his finger.

“I shall wear it as a ring,” he said.

Midas went about touching all his roses, seeing them stiffen and gleam. They lost their odor. The disappointed bees rose in swarms and buzzed angrily away. Butterflies departed. The hard flowers tinkled like little bells when the breeze moved among them, and the king was well pleased.

His little daughter, the princess, who had been playing in the garden, ran to him and said, “Father, Father, what has happened to the roses?”

“Are they not pretty, my dear?”

“No! They’re ugly! They’re horrid and sharp and I can’t smell them anymore. What happened?”

“A magical thing.”

“Who did the magic?”

“I did.”

“Unmagic it, then! I hate these roses.”

She began to cry.

“Don’t cry,” he said, stroking her head. “Stop crying, and I will give you a golden doll with a gold-leaf dress and tiny golden shoes.”

She stopped crying. He felt the hair grow spiky under his fingers. Her eyes stiffened and froze into place. The little blue vein in her neck stopped pulsing. She was a statue, a figure of pale gold standing in the garden path with lifted face. Her tears were tiny golden beads on her golden cheeks. He looked at her and said, “This is unfortunate. I’m sorry it happened. I have no time to be sad this morning. I shall be busy turning things into gold. But, when I have a moment, I shall think about this problem; I promise.” He hurried out of the garden which had become unpleasant to him.

On Midas’ way back to the castle he amused himself by kicking up gravel in the path and watching it tinkle down as tiny nuggets. The door he opened became golden; the chair he sat upon became solid gold like his throne. The plates turned into gold, and the cups became gold cups before the amazed eyes of the servants, whom he was careful not to touch. He wanted them to continue being able to serve him; he was very hungry.

With great relish Midas picked up a piece of bread and honey. His teeth bit metal; his mouth was full of metal. He felt himself

choking. He reached into his mouth and pulled out a golden slab of bread, all bloody now, and flung it through the window. Very lightly now he touched the other food to see what would happen. Meat...apples...walnuts...they all turned to gold even when he touched them with only the tip of his finger...and when he did not touch them with his fingers, when he lifted them on his fork, they became gold as soon as they touched his lips, and he had to put them back onto the plate. He was savagely hungry. Worse than hunger, when he thought about drinking, he realized that wine, or water, or milk would turn to gold in his mouth and choke him if he drank. As he thought that he could not drink, thirst began to burn in his belly. He felt himself full of hot dry sand, felt that the lining of his head was on fire.

“What good is all my gold?” he cried, “if I cannot eat and cannot drink?”

He shrieked with rage, pounded on the table, and flung the plates about. All the servants ran from the room in fright. Then Midas raced out of the castle, across the bridge that spanned the moat, along the golden gravel path into the garden where the stiff flowers chimed hatefully, and the statue of his daughter looked at him with scooped and empty eyes. There in the garden, in the blaze of the sun, he raised his arms heavenward, and cried, “You, Apollo, false god, traitor! You pretended to forgive me, but you punished me with a gift!”

Then it seemed to him that the sun grew brighter, that the light thickened, that the sun-god stood before him in the path, tall, stern, clad in burning gold. A voice said, "On your knees, wretch!"

He fell to his knees.

"Do you repent?"

"I repent. I will never desire gold again. I will never accuse the gods. Pray, revoke the fatal wish."

Apollo reached his hand and touched the roses. The tinkling stopped, they softened, swayed, blushed. Fragrance grew on the air. The bees returned, and the butterflies. He touched the statue's cheek. She lost her stiffness, her metallic gleam. She ran to the roses, knelt among them, and cried, "Oh, thank you, Father. You've changed them back again." Then she ran off, shouting and laughing.

Apollo said, "I take back my gift. I remove the golden taint from your touch, but you are not to escape without punishment. Because you have been the most foolish of men, you shall wear always a pair of donkey's ears."

Midas touched his ears. They were long and furry. He said, "I thank you for your forgiveness, Apollo...even though it comes with a punishment."

"Go now," said Apollo. "Eat and drink. Enjoy the roses. Watch your child grow. Life is the only wealth, man. In your great thrift, you have been wasteful of life, and that is the sign you wear on your head. Farewell."

Midas put a tall pointed hat on his head so that no one would see his ears. Then he went in to eat and drink his fill.

For years he wore the cap so that no one would know of his disgrace. But the servant who cut his hair had to know so Midas swore him to secrecy, warning that it would cost him his head if he spoke of the king's ears. But the servant who was a coward was also a gossip. He could not bear to keep a secret, especially a secret so mischievous. Although he was afraid to tell it, he felt that he would burst if he didn't.

One night he went out to the banks of the river, dug a little hole, put his mouth to it, and whispered, "Midas has donkey's ears, Midas has donkey's ears..." and quickly filled up the hole again, and ran back to the castle, feeling better.

But the river-reeds heard him, and they always whisper to each other when the wind seethes among them. They were heard whispering, "Midas has donkey's ears...donkey's ears..." and soon the whole country was whispering, "Have you heard about Midas? Have you heard about his ears?"

When the king heard, he knew who had told the secret and ordered the man's head cut off; but then he thought, "The god forgave me, perhaps I had better forgive this blabbermouth." Therefore he let the treacherous man keep his head.

Then Apollo appeared again and said, "Midas, you have learned the final lesson, mercy. As you have done, so shall you be done by."

And Midas felt his long hairy ears dwindling back to normal.

He was an old man now. His daughter, the princess, was grown. He had grandchildren. Sometimes he tells his smallest granddaughter the story of how her mother was turned into a golden statue, and he says, “See, I’m changing you too. Look, your hair is all gold.”

And she pretends to be frightened.

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Pygmalion

THE WOMEN OF CYPRUS were displeased with Pygmalion. He was one of the few unmarried young men on the island, and it seemed that he meant to stay that way. He was a sculptor who lived alone in a house he had knocked together out of an old stable, one enormous room on a hill overlooking the sea, far away from any neighbor. Here he spent the days very happily. Great unhewn blocks of marble stood about, and tubs of clay, and a crowd of figures, men and women, nymphs, satyrs, wolves, lions, bulls, and dolphins. Some of them were half-carved, some of them clay daubs, almost shapeless; and others were finished statues, marvelous gleaming shapes of white marble.

Sometimes people came and bought Pygmalion's figures. He sold only those he was tired of looking at, but would never set a price. He took anything offered. Often, he would give his work away, if he thought that someone enjoyed looking at it and had no money to pay. He ate when he was hungry, slept when he was tired, worked when he felt like it, swam in the sea when hot, and spent days without seeing anyone.

“Oh, I have plenty of company,” he'd say. “Plenty of statues around, you know. Not very good conversationalists, but they listen beautifully.”

Now, all this irritated the mothers and daughters of Cyprus exceedingly. A bachelor is bad enough, a happy bachelor is intolerable. And so they were resolved that he should marry.

“He’s earning enough to keep a wife...or he would be if he charged properly. That’s another reason he needs one. My Althea is a very shrewd girl. She’d see he got the right prices for his work...”

“My Laurel is an excellent housekeeper. She’d clean out that pig-sty of his, and make it fit to live in...”

“My daughter has very strict ideas. She’d make him toe the mark. Where does he get the models for those nymph statues? Tell me that? Who knows what goes on in that stable of his?...”

“My daughter...”

And so it went. They talked like this all the time, and Pygmalion was very much aware of their plans for him. More than ever he resolved to keep himself to himself.

Now Cyprus was an island sacred to Aphrodite, for it was the first land she touched when she arose from the sea. The mothers of the island decided to use her favor for their own purposes. They crowded into the temple of Aphrodite and recited this prayer:

“Oh, great goddess of Love, you who rose naked and dripping from the sea and walked upon this shore, making it blossom with trees and flowers, you, Aphrodite, hear our plea: touch the heart of young Pygmalion, who has become as hard as his own marble. Weave your amorous spell, plaiting it into the tresses of one of the

maidens, making it a snare for his wild loneliness. Bid your son, the Archer of Love, plant one of his arrows in the indifferent young man so that he becomes infected with a sweet sickness for which there is only one cure. Please, goddess, forbid him all solitary joy. Bind him to one of our maidens. Make him love her and take her as his wife.”

That night Pygmalion, dreaming, was visited by the goddess who said, “Pygmalion, I have been asked to marry you off. Do you have any preferences?”

Pygmalion, being an artist, was acquainted with the terrible reality of dreams and knew that the matter was serious, that he was being threatened. He said, “There is one lady I fancy. But she is already married.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You, Aphrodite, queen of beauty, lady of delight. How can you think that I who in my daily work will accept nothing less than the forms of ideal beauty, how can you think that I could pin my highest aspiration on any but the most perfect face and form? Yours, Aphrodite. Yours, yours. I love you, and you alone. And until I can find a mortal maid of the same perfection, I will not love.”

Now, Aphrodite, although a goddess, was also a woman. In fact, her divinity was precisely this, womanliness raised to its

highest power. She was much pleased by this ardent praise. She knelt beside Pygmalion and, stroking his face, said, "Truly, you are a fair-spoken young man. I find your arguments very persuasive. But what am I to do? I have promised the mothers of Cyprus that you shall wed, and I must not break my promise."

"Did you tell them *when*?"

"No, I set no time."

"Then grant me this: permit me to remain unwed until I do one more statue. It will be my masterwork, the thing I have been training myself for. Let me do it now, and allow me to remain unmarried until I complete it for the vision is upon me, goddess. The time has come. I must do this last figure."

"Of whom?"

"Of you, of course! Of you, of you! I told you that I have loved you all my life without ever having seen you. And now that you have appeared to me, now that I do see you, why then I must carve you in marble. It is simple. This is what my life is for; it is my way of loving you, a way that you cannot deny me."

"I see...And how long will this work take?"

"Until it is finished. What else can I say? If you will be good enough to visit me like this whenever you can spare the time, I will fill my eyes with you and work on your image alone, putting all else aside. Once and for all I shall be able to cast in hard cold marble the flimsy, burning dream of man, his dream of beauty, his dream of you..."

“Very well,” said Aphrodite, “you may postpone your marriage until my statue is completed.” She smiled at him. “And every now and again I shall come to pose.”

Pygmalion worked first in clay. He took it between his hands and thought of Aphrodite—of her round arms, of the strong column of her neck, of her long, full thighs, of the smooth swimming of her back muscles when she turned from the waist—and his hands followed his thinking, pressing the clay to the shape of her body. She came to him at night, sliding in and out of his dreams, telling him stories about herself. He used a whole tub-full of clay making a hundred little Aphrodites, each in a different pose. He caught her at that moment when she emerged from the sea, shaking back her wet hair, lifting her face to the sky which she saw for the first time. He molded her in the Hall of the Gods receiving marriage offers, listening to Poseidon, and Hermes, and Apollo press their claims, head tilted, shoulders straight, smiling to herself, pleasing everyone, but refusing to answer. He molded her in full magnificent fury, punishing Narcissus, kneeling on the grass, teasing the shy Adonis, and then mourning him, slain.

He caught her in a hundred poses, then stood the little clay figures about, studying them, trying to mold them in his mind to a total image that he could carve in marble. He had planned to work slowly. After all, the whole thing was a trick of his to postpone marriage; but as he made the lovely little dolls and posed them among her adventures, his hands took on a schedule of their own.

The dream invaded daylight, and he found himself working with wild fury.

When the clay figures were done, he was ready for marble. He set the heavy mass of polished stone in the center of the room and arranged his clay studies about it. Then he took mallet and chisel, and began to work—it was as if the cold tools became living parts of himself. The chisel was like his own finger, with a sharp fingernail edge; the mallet was his other hand, curled into a fist. With these living tools he reached into the marble and worked the stone as if it were clay, chopping, stroking, carving, polishing. And from the stone a body began to rise as Aphrodite had risen from the white foam of the sea.

He never knew when he had finished. He had not eaten for three days. His brain was on fire, his hands flying. He had finished carving; he was polishing the marble girl now with delicate files. Then, suddenly, he knew that it was finished. His head felt full of ashes; his hands hung like lumps of meat. He fell onto his pallet and was drowned in sleep.

He awoke in the middle of the night. The goddess was standing near his bed, he saw. Had she come to pose for him again? It was too late. Then he saw that it was not Aphrodite, but the marble figure standing in the center of the room, the white marble gathering all the moonlight to her. She shone in the darkness, looking as though she were trying to leap from the pediment.

He went to the statue and tried to find something unfinished, a spot he could work on. But there was nothing. She was complete. Perfect. A masterwork. Every line of her drawn taut by his own strength stretched to the breaking point, the curvings of her richly rounded with all the love he had never given to a human being. There she was, an image of Aphrodite. But not Aphrodite. She was herself, a marble girl, modeled after the goddess, but different; younger; human.

“You are Galatea,” he said. “That is your name.”

He went to a carved wooden box and took out jewels that had belonged to his mother. He decked Galatea in sapphires and diamonds. Then he sat at the foot of the statue, looking at it, until the sun came up. The birds sang, a donkey brayed; he heard the shouting of children, the barking of dogs. He sat there, looking at her. All that day he sat, and all that night. Still he had not eaten. And now it seemed that all the other marble figures in the room were swaying closer, were shadows crowding about, threatening him.

She did not move. She stood there, tall, radiant. His mother’s jewels sparkled on her throat and on her arms. Her marble foot spurned the pediment.

Then Aphrodite herself stepped into the room. She said, “I have come to make you keep your promise, Pygmalion. You have finished the statue. You must marry.”

“Whom?”

“Whomever you choose. Do you not wish to select your own bride?”

“Yes.”

“Then choose. Choose any girl you like. Whoever she is, whatever she is, she shall love you. For I am pleased with the image you have made of me. Choose.”

“I choose—her,” said Pygmalion, pointing to the statue.

“You may not.”

“Why not?”

“She does not live. She is a statue.”

“My statues will outlive all who are living now,” said Pygmalion.

“That is just a way of speaking. She is not flesh and blood; she is a marble image. You must choose a living girl.”

“I must choose where I love. I love her who is made in your image, goddess.”

“It cannot be.”

“You said, ‘whoever she is, whatever she is...’”

“Yes, but I did not mean a statue.”

“I did. You call her lifeless, but I say my blood went into her making. My bones shaped hers. My fingers loved her surfaces. I polished her with all my knowledge, all my wit. She has seen all my strength, all my weakness, she has watched me sleep, played with my dreams. We *are* wed, Aphrodite, in a fatal incomplete way. Please, dear goddess, give her to me.”

“Impossible.”

“You are a goddess. Nothing is impossible.”

“I am the Goddess of Love. There is no love without life.”

“There is no life without love. I know how you can do it. Look...I stand here. I place my arm about her; my face against hers. Now, use your power, turn me to marble too. We shall be frozen together in this moment of time, embracing each other through eternity. This will suffice. For I tell you that without her my brain is ash, my hands are meat; I do not wish to breathe, to see, to be.”

Aphrodite, despite herself, was warmed by his pleas. After all, he had made the statue in her image. It was pleasing to know that her beauty, even cast in lifeless marble, could still drive a young man mad.

“You are mad,” she said. “Quite mad. But in people like you, I suppose, it is called inspiration. Very well, young sir, put your arms about her again.”

Pygmalion embraced the cold marble. He kissed the beautiful stiff lips, and then he felt the stone flush with warmth. He felt the hard polished marble turn to warm silky flesh. He felt the mouth grow warm and move against his. He felt arms come up and hug him tight. He was holding a live girl in his arms.

He stepped off the pediment, holding her hand. She stepped after him. They fell on their knees before Aphrodite and thanked her for her gift.

“Rise, beautiful ones,” she said. “It is the morning of love. Go to my temple, adorn it with garlands. You, Pygmalion, set about the altar those clever little dolls of me you have made. Thank me loudly for my blessings for I fear the mothers of Cyprus will not be singing my praises so ardently for some time.”

She left. Galatea looked about the great dusty studio, littered with tools, scraps of marble, and spillings of clay. She looked at Pygmalion—tousled, unshaven, with bloodshot eyes and stained tunic—and said, “Now, dear husband, it’s my turn to work on you.”

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MYTHOLOGY BECOMES LANGUAGE

MANY OF THE CHARACTERS, events, and places of the Greek myths have entered the English language. It is interesting to see how these words have been derived from Greek tales, and how the names of gods, goddesses, heroes, and monsters have become a part of our everyday speech.

Aphrodisiac, a love-potion, was named for Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Arachne, meaning “spider” in Greek, was adopted to describe in science the spider family which includes scorpions, mites, and ticks: arachnida or arachnoidea. The adjective *arachnoid* means anything resembling a spider’s web.

Athene was also known as Pallas Athene. Pallas signifies “brandisher,” that is, as a spear. An asteroid was named Pallas as well as a very rare metallic element called palladium which was named after the asteroid. Because a statue of Pallas Athene which stood in front of the city of Troy was supposed to have helped preserve the city from danger, the word *palladium* also has come to mean a potent safeguard.

Atlas, a map, was named after the Titan who bore the sky on his shoulders and was turned to stone by Perseus.

Calliope is the name of a musical instrument. The mother of Orpheus was named Calliope because she was the Muse of Eloquence and Heroic Poetry. The name comes from two words meaning “beauty” and “voice.”

Cloth is a plain little word with a very dramatic history. The Greeks believed that destiny was controlled by three terrible sisters called the Fates. Clotho spun the thread of life on her spindle; Lachesis measured the thread; and the most dangerous sister, Atropos, Lady of the Shears, snipped the thread of life when it had been measured out. Our word *cloth* comes from Clotho, the spinner.

Cronos refers to the god of time. From this word we have the noun *chronology* which describes an arrangement of events in order of occurrence. *Chronic* describes something that continues over a long period of time. A chronicler is one who records a historical account of events in the order of time. A timepiece of great accuracy is called a chronometer.

Cyclops, plural Cyclopes, is derived from two Greek words meaning “circle” and “eye.” We have adopted *cyclops* in the field of biology to describe the group of tiny, free-swimming crustaceans which have a single eye. *Cyclopic* is an adjective meaning monstrous; *cyclopia* is a noun used for a massive abnormality in which the eyes are partly or wholly fused. The word has been used as a root to describe a wheel in such words as tricycle, bicycle, and motorcycle. It is used to describe a

violent storm which moves in a circle: cyclone. It also appears in the word encyclopedia to describe circular (or complete) learning. A cyclotron is a large apparatus used for the multiple acceleration of ions to very high speeds.

Echo is derived from the name of the nymph *Echo*, who fell in love with Narcissus. She could not tell him of her love because she was under a curse which allowed her to repeat only the last word of what was said to her.

Elysian Fields, which means a “place of great happiness,” inspired the French to call their famous boulevard in Paris the Champs Elysees.

Erinyes, or the Furies, punished people for their crimes on the earth. They were called the Eumenides, which meant “the kindly ones.” This name reveals the Greek habit of calling unpleasant things by pleasant names. We use the word *euphemism* to describe words which do not say the unpleasant idea intended.

Erotic, relating to love, is derived from *Eros*, Aphrodite’s son, the secret archer, whose arrows were tipped with the sweet poison of love.

Fortune is a very common word that is derived from *Fortuna*, the Roman goddess of luck and vengeance, mistress of destiny. Actually, her name was a variant of the Latin word, *vortumna*, meaning “turner,” because she turned the giant wheel of the year, stopping it at either happiness, sorrow, life, or death.

Galatea was the name of the statue which Pygmalion carved to the shape of his heart's desire.

Hades is used today to describe the home of the dead. Hades comes from the Greek word meaning "the unseen." Hades was also known in Roman mythology as Pluto, the god of wealth—from the Greek word *plutus*, meaning "wealth." We use the word *plutocracy* to describe a government run by wealthy people.

Icarian, meaning "of bold, vaulting ambition," is derived from Icarus, son of Daedalus, who insisted on flying too near the sun and died doing it.

Jove, one of the names for Jupiter and Zeus, has come to mean "born under a lucky planet and therefore happy and healthy." The adjective *jovial*, and the noun *joviality* all derive from the word *Jove*. We even hear the expression, "By Jove." The planet Jupiter is the largest body in the solar system except the sun.

Junoesque, meaning stately, majestic, is a word used to describe women only and comes from Juno, the Roman Queen of Heaven, who was of imposing figure.

Labyrinth, a "maze," is derived from the name of the prison-garden full of puzzling paths, built by Daedalus at King Minos' command to confine the Minotaur. Actually, the Cretan word, *labys*, means "ax"; the double-headed ax was the royal symbol in Crete. The palace of the king at Knossos was known as the

“Ax-House,” and it was in the garden of this palace that Daedalus built his maze.

Martial, meaning “warlike,” comes from Mars, the Roman god of war.

Medusa locks, meaning “wild hair,” is a phrase named after the hissing snake coiffure of the fearsome Gorgon sister, Medusa, whom Perseus killed.

Mercurial, meaning “swift, unstable, changeable,” refers to the disposition of Mercury, the Roman messenger-god.

Midas touch, the golden touch, is said of those who are good at making money.

Muses refers to the nine goddesses of dancing, poetry and astronomy. We use the verb *muse* to describe the act of pondering or meditating. The words *music*, *musician* and *musical* all come from this word.

Narcissistic means to be obsessed by the idea of one’s own beauty. It is taken from *Narcissus*, the boy who fell in love with his own reflection in a stream and knelt there admiring it until he became rooted to the ground and was changed into a flower.

Narcissus is the name of a family of flowers which includes daffodils and jonquils. The word *narcissist* is a psychological term meaning a person who loves himself.

Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, has given his name to countless restaurants and inns, especially those emphasizing sea food.

Olympus was the home of the Greek gods. The term has come to mean something which is grand, imposing, or heavenly. The great festival of games was called Olympian Games and today we call the world-famous athletic contest the Olympics.

Oracle is derived from the Greek word meaning “to pray.” It is used to refer to places where people pray: oratories; to great speakers: orators; and even great speeches: orations. A person who seems to possess great knowledge or intuition is called an oracle, and his statements are described as oracular.

Orpheum refers to Orpheus, the sweetest singer to ever sing. This term is used by many theaters and places of entertainment.

Pandora has the same prefix as Pantheon and means, of course, all. The root *doron* is a Greek word for gift; therefore, Pandora was all-gifted.

Panic is derived from the god *Pan*, the goat-footed, flute-playing king of field and wood whose war cry was supposed to spread frenzy and fear among his enemies.

Pantheon is made up of two Greek words: *pan* meaning “all,” and *theos* meaning “god,” or “having something to do with gods.” The prefix *pan* is used in such words as panacea, Panama, and even Pan American. The root *theos* is used in such words as theology and theocracy.

Procrustes bed is a phrase meaning any difficult situation which cannot be changed but to which man must adapt himself. It comes from the uncomfortable hospitality offered by the

innkeeper Procrustes, who bolted guests to the bed. If they were too short, he stretched them; if too long, he chopped off their legs to fit. However, Theseus made him lie in his own bed.

Prometheus means “forethinker.” It has come to mean something that is life-giving, daringly original, or creative. An element which is a fission product of uranium is called promethium. The prefix *pro* is used in countless words today.

Psyche is perhaps the most misused word in the language. In Greek it meant “soul” and was personified in myth by a beautiful princess, beloved of Eros himself, who lost her husband and her sense of herself through mistrust but regained both when she dropped her suspicions and took on the risks that love brings. In English, however, the word has come to mean the entire mental apparatus and has given birth to a host of words like psychotic, psychology, psychoanalysis, etc.

Pygmalion, the term applied to a man who can train a girl to be the way he wants, is derived from Pygmalion, the sculptor of Cyprus, who carved a statue in the shape of his heart’s desire.

Python, which comes from the Greek word “to rot,” is used to describe snakes such as the boa which kill its prey by crushing it. The adjective *pythogenic* is used to describe something which is produced by putrefaction or filth.

Saturday is named for the god Saturn, a Roman name for Cronos.

Stygian comes from the river Styx. It has come to be used when describing anything from the underworld. Stygian darkness is a

favorite expression of poets.

Terpsichorean, relating to the dance, is derived from the Muse, Terpsichore, who presided over dance.

Titan, which referred to the race of giants, has been used to describe anything which is enormous in size or strength. The famous ship which sank when it hit an iceberg was called the *Titanic*.

Typhoon, a violent wind, comes from Typhon, a terrible monster. He was half donkey, half serpent; he had great leathery wings and flew through the air shrieking horribly, spitting flames.

Vestal means nunlike. The term is derived from Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. In ancient Rome, maidens were consecrated to the service of this goddess; their duty was to keep the sacred flame burning upon her altar night and day. They lived in her temple always and never married.

Volcano is derived from Vulcan, the Roman smith-god, who took a mountain as his smithy. When he heated up his forge, clouds of smoke arose from the mountain.

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A Note from the Author

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ONE

THIS STORY BEGINS VERY soon after the world began, when great raw things called monsters roamed the unfinished places eating whatever they could catch. The earth was flat then, as anyone could tell; it had been broken into islands and the pieces flung upon a huge puddle of sea. The islands bobbed uneasily on the heaving purple water and had to be pinned down by mountains or they would have blown away altogether; that's how strong the winds were.

On top of one of these mountains, called Olympus, lived a family of gods. They had chosen Olympus because it was high enough to look down upon the pasture lands of the restless new herds they had inherited: strange, wild, and clever creatures, neither god nor beast but something in between, who called themselves men and women and were difficult to manage.

The gods loved to hunt and soon found that men and women, although lacking horns or claws and absurdly slow-footed, nevertheless offered fine sport, for human prey, unlike any other, kept trying to understand what was happening to them. But, try as they might, they could make no sense of these arrows that struck out of nowhere, taking the young and strong as well as the old and feeble. And their anguished confusion amused the gods mightily.

Finally, Zeus, the king of the gods, saw that the human herd was shrinking before the invisible arrows faster than it could replace itself, and he decided to lay down some game laws. It was forbidden to kill more than a certain small quota of humans each month, and the penalties were severe. He decreed that anyone who broke the new law would be chained to the roots of a mountain in Tartarus and kept there in suffocating darkness through eternity.

The gods feared Zeus. They knew how ferocious he could be when crossed. So they pretended to obey. But as time passed, they found a way to break the law without suffering the penalties.

They employed monsters—particularly dragons, who developed a taste for heroes.

And now that we know something about the games gods play, and the reason for dragons, we can better follow the adventures of those who shipped with Jason on his quest for the Golden Fleece.

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TWO

EKION

LET'S START WITH ME, Ekion.

I am a son of Hermes by one of the Nymphs of the Grove, which one I'm not sure. Hermes married all three one summer night and planted a son in each. Consequently, we were all born on the same summer afternoon, and our mothers found it convenient to swap us around, giving one another more time to do what nymphs do. We were shifted around so much that the sisters forgot who had borne whom, and none of them ever cared whether it was a son or a nephew she was suckling at her breast.

But if we were unclear who was our mother and who were our aunts, we did know who our father was. Hermes visited the grove from time to time bringing a hot silver moonlight with him, always, and the music of pipe and lyre—which he had invented—and danced with the sisters all night long.

So there were the three boys: myself, Autolycus, and Daphnis. We'll get to them; they became Argonauts, too, but let's consider me first.

Let's take my name. Do you know what "Ekion" means in our language? It means "viper." *Viper*. Perhaps it began as a pet name. The nymphs played rough—seizing us and tossing us from one to

the other, tickling, biting, kissing us all over. Their speech could be wild and rough, too. But of the three I was the only one given an unkind name. “Daphnis” means “laurel.” “Autolycus” means “wolfish,” but in a noble sense. And I was called Ekion, a poisonous little snake, swift and deadly. What a name for an innocent child to bear. For I was innocent, until the age of two anyway.

Two brothers—I hated one and feared the other. Daphnis was chubby, clinging, clumsy in movement, and slow in speech, and everyone loved him best—except me. His eyes were like wet violets, and I wanted to poke them out with a sharp stick. Oddly enough, he was so cuddly and smelled so delicious that I liked to hug and kiss him, too, and disliked him more for confusing me.

The three of us were exactly the same age, as I told you, but anyone looking at us would have thought that Autolycus was two years older. He was a tall, sturdy boy with a brown-gold shock of hair thick as a pelt and a narrow fierce face. He had the quickest pair of hands anyone had ever seen; to fight him was madness. His fists were a blur, and he could blacken my eyes and bloody my nose before I could get in a blow. This was the reason Daphnis was more or less safe from me. Autolycus had appointed himself his protector and thrashed me every time I began to educate the little half-wit.

Those same fast hands later gave him his vocation. He became a master thief.

In Daphnis, feeble-mindedness turned lyrical: he became a poet.

Hermes seemed to find us entertaining. Upon one visit he gathered us about him and said, “Sons of the grove, I rejoice in the sight of you. For it is a sad fact that god spawn are not always godlike. Handsome Dionysus and gorgeous Aphrodite, for instance, did not breed true. They produced a misshapen little gargoyle called Priapus. But I have been luckier here in the grove. I see in each of you some expression of my godhead. I am Lord of Thieves, as you know—and you, Autolycus of the swift hands, shall raise larceny to an art. I am also he who invented the lyre, and so am associated with that sweet primal utterance called poetry—wherein speech partakes of song—and you, Daphnis, heaven help you, show symptoms of that vocation.”

“Why must heaven help me, Da-da?” lisped Daphnis, making me want to kill him on the spot.

“Because, my son, poetry can be a cruel gift. A very mixed blessing. Nevertheless, I have bred true, and I am proud of you.”

They were all looking at me now. I stood there waiting. Hermes didn’t say anything. But I saw laughter smoldering in his gray eyes, tugging at the corner of his lips. He can read my heart and knows that I love him more than all the others put together, that I worship him, and it amuses him to tease me. He lolled there on the grass now, the silvery one, smiling that subtle smile.

I couldn’t stand it any longer. “How about me, Father?”

“What about you?”

“What have I inherited?”

“What indeed, little viper?”

“Viper,” I said slowly. “Yes-ss. Perhaps I am your true heir.”

He threw back his head and chortled. “You are quick-witted, suave in manner, fancy of speech, with more taste for negotiation than combat. If you can but learn to smile when you want to kill, you might make a pretty fair herald. And I am also Patron of Heralds, you know.”

“I’ve never thought of myself that way,” I said.

“Fortunately, you have an affectionate father to do your thinking for you. Herald I have named you, and herald you shall be—a profession that will make you the confidant of kings and put you squarely in the middle of great events. A profession more profitable than theft, and less hazardous. A calling more comfortable in every way than that of poet. Your person shall be inviolate, you shall bear the sacred truce and most closely resemble me, Herald to the High Gods.”

“I thank you, Father.”

“Come kiss me.”

I did. He sprang into the air, ankle wings whirring, and I didn’t see him again until that fateful day when he first told us about Jason.

Of envy and hatred am I compounded.

The very glands under my jaw grow heavy with venom. My teeth grow hollow for it; my body dwindles and moves in stealth when I think of that Jason whom my father called the most beautiful boy on this disk of earth.

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THREE

JASON'S TROUBLES BEGAN WHEN he was still a baby, on the day that his father, Diomedes II, suddenly stopped being king of Iolcus. The king was a gentle man, still young, and would have reigned many more years if it had not been for his stepbrother, Pelius the Impatient. He knocked Diomedes on the head and rolled him off a cliff into the sea, then named himself regent because the crown prince was an infant.

Pelius's first royal act was to declare war on a neighboring country to give people something else to think about. Because he had plans for his nephew. He meant to solve the problem of succession very simply by dropping the baby out the window. But when he went to the nursery that night, he found the crib empty. He was frantic. He ordered the palace turned inside out. Every cottage, barn, and haystack for miles around was searched and searched again, but the infant prince had been swallowed by the night.

Thereupon Pelius announced that, in the light of the royal baby's disappearance, it was the clear duty of the regent, who happened to be himself, to choose a new king, also himself. And now, as king, he could get on with the business of winning the war and celebrating that victory with another war, and on and on, until every patriotic Iolchian would thank the gods for allowing them to

be ruled by a winner, even if he had been lethal about gaining the throne.

Pelius prospered. He grew in fame and wealth, getting meaner and fatter each year. But even as paunch and power grew, he kept being haunted by the idea that the little prince was alive somewhere and would turn up one day to claim his kingdom. He gave orders that every young stranger in the kingdom was to be watched very closely and killed on the spot if he came within ten miles of the castle.

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FOUR

ZEUS HAD A BROTHER NAMED Hades who ruled the dead. Tartarus was his kingdom, an underground realm of linked caverns where the homeless spirits were taken after being evicted from their bodies. Squeaking and gibbering, each day's draft of fresh ghosts were herded through vast, shifting shadows toward the Place of Judgment. Invisible hands seized them; they were made to shuffle past a throne of ebony and pearl, where sat Hades—huge, black-robed, silent. With one glance he judged each spirit, and with a flick of his hand he sent it off to be indulged, ignored, or tormented through eternity.

Upon this day, Hades was in a bad temper and sent more than the usual number of souls to the roasting pits. Nor did he arise from his throne after the last whimpering shade had been whisked away, but sat there waiting. Earlier that day he had sent for Ares and had been told that the god of war was on his way.

Ares strode into the throne room. He was the largest of the gods who are all huge. He wore a breastplate, shin greaves, and helmet, all of brass. Crossing the floor, he absorbed every bit of light in that gloomy chamber. He burned upon the shadows. His great arms were hard as marble; his face was a slab of raw beef. His eyes were pits of redness.

Hades descended from his throne and embraced Ares; it was like black sleeves of smoke winding about a fire.

“Lord of Battles, I greet you.”

“All reverence, my melancholy master,” said Ares. “How can I serve you?”

“Are you acquainted with Jason, prince of Iolcus?”

“No, sire, I am not.”

“I desire you to make his acquaintance,” said Hades.

“I take it he is someone you dislike?”

“Someone I loathe. Very young, but growing into a first-class troublemaker.”

“How can a puny mortal trouble *you*, Lord of Darkness?”

“It has been foretold that he shall father a child who shall possess an uncanny talent for healing, thus depriving me of my rightful quota of corpses.”

“You can’t always believe these things. Prophets are gloomy by nature; maybe it won’t happen.”

“The warning cannot be doubted. It is written on the Scroll.”

What he meant was this: every so often, those twisted sisters called the Fates, whom even the gods fear, would dip their claws into starlight and scrawl their decrees upon a great scroll. Night blue was the Scroll; it hung from a place in the heavens beyond man’s sight and was written upon in letters of fire. Once every several years the gods were summoned to read the Scroll and to consider how to use their divine powers within these laws.

“On the Scroll were the dreadful words written,” said Hades. “I must neither doubt them nor ignore them. And, indeed, this accursed young prince has himself displayed dangerous healing power, only on animals so far, but the tendency is there. Just this year he was able to stop a cattle plague, which has made him beloved among the herdsman of Cythera. So, my nephew, it falls upon us to overturn this prophecy.”

“How can you alter a decree of the Fates?” asked Ares. “As it is written, so must it be.”

“The way the sentence reads, I have room to maneuver,” said Hades. “It says, ‘If this youth becomes a man and fathers a child, that child shall be a great healer.’ It is my intention to cut his career short before he becomes a father.”

“Did he really cleanse cattle of the plague?” asked Ares, who owned vast herds.

“He did. And the people dubbed him ‘Jason’ which in their dialect means ‘healer.’ I’d like him killed. Will you do it?”

“Forgive me, good Uncle. But my game bag is overfull, and I hesitate to break the law.”

“You should know more about this young man. He is of the type of Adonis.”

“What do you mean?” whispered Ares.

“Slender, ivory-limbed, gray-eyed—the type that Aphrodite favors. In fact, knowing him in danger, she has set a Thessalian witch to hover over the island, keeping ceaseless vigil.”

At the very sound of the name Adonis, Ares had begun to swell with rage. His neck and face went dusky red, his teeth shone, his eyes bulged. He looked like a wild boar. And indeed it was in the shape of a wild boar that he had attacked young Adonis some years before and trampled him into bloody rags. Since that time, no one had dared approach Aphrodite.

“Favors him, does she?” he panted. “And does she visit the island?”

“Not yet,” said Hades. “I fancy she considers him too young. But she must have plans in that direction, or why would she employ a witch to watch over him?”

“Yes-ss, Aphrodite always has a reason for what she does, and it’s always the same. Too young, is he? Well, I’ll see that he doesn’t get any older.”

“Good ... good.”

“How about that witch? She can’t stop me, but she can raise an alarm.”

“She won’t see you. She’ll be busy.” Hades then put his lips to Ares’ ear, and whispered.

Ares bellowed with laughter. “That should hold the old bag!”

“Good hunting.”

“I’ll bring you his head.”

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FIVE

A COLD WIND BLEW OVER the slopes of Olympus. Aphrodite walked out of the garden and into the orchard. The pomegranate trees were being stripped by the wind, and the fig trees and the wild olives. But standing green among the fruit trees were fir and spruce and pine. Snow began to sift. Olympus stands in northern Thessaly; it is capped by snow from autumn till spring. It was autumn now. She was barefoot, clad in a blue tunic. Her throat was bare, and her shoulders and her long white arms.

A bright yell split the air—Hermes' herald call. He flashed like a blade, catching all the dull light. She watched as he fell toward her, his face drinking light.

He saw her among trees in the cold green dusk, growing taller and taller as he coasted down steeps of air into the clean smell of pine. He came to her. He saw snow melting about her feet and roses springing where she stood.

“You sent for me, O beautiful one?”

“I need your help.”

“Queen of the Night, whatever is in my power I shall perform.”

“I have chosen again among mortals.”

“Let me guess the rest. You want my assistance in defending him against the jealous gods.”

“He is startlingly like Adonis. Not surprising: he is also descended from Io.”

“Therefore, perhaps, one of my own descendants,” murmured Hermes.

“Quite possibly, dear friend. He is Jason, exiled prince of Iolcus, dwelling now upon the island of Cythera.”

“Does Ares know about him?”

“I don’t see how he could. I don’t visit the island. Not yet.”

“Well, if Ares doesn’t know ...”

“In that brawling bully, jealousy becomes insight. He has an uncanny way of sniffing out my favorites. But I shall not permit Jason to meet the doom of Adonis.”

“And what do you expect me to do—go to battle with the god of war? Do you really think that I, the most fragile and least bellicose of the Olympians, can stop that murderous brute in the full spate of his wrath?”

“I’m not asking you to fight him. I need your wits, not your sword. As I say, I don’t know that he’s even aware of Jason’s existence, but I would like you to fly over the island. Just look things over, make sure my sentinel witch is being vigilant or see if I shall have to take stronger measures.”

“I don’t relish this chore, but I can refuse you nothing.”

“You’ll find me grateful.”

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SIX

THE HAG HUNG IN the air over Cythera, gathering her cloak about her until she looked like a huge black crow. She carted a leather sack in which she had sewn up a patch of fog. When she saw anyone approaching, she would swoop down to the treetops, ripping open her sack as she dived, and swiftly crisscross the island, laying a ground fog. And no one flying above could see through the rolling mist. When the danger had passed, the witch would roll up her fog and stuff it back in the bag. She was eager to serve Aphrodite, for she was a ravenously greedy old crone, and the goddess had promised an endless supply of her favorite food if she kept the boy safe.

It was roast piglet she craved. And when her tour of duty was done, Aphrodite had told her, she would be furnished with a sow out of the Olympic sty itself. These sows were magical, littering daily and supplying the delicate suckling pork that graced the gods' own table.

Disguised as a gull, Hermes was flying over Cythera. He spotted a hunched black shape coasting along beneath him and slanted down.

Witches did not ride broomsticks then. They rode bats, rats—vultures sometimes, but these were unreliable, diving suddenly when they saw a corpse. In fact, an experienced witch could make

any creature fly like a bird by rubbing it with a certain magic ointment. This witch rode a snake. It was a Libyan anaconda, twelve feet long, and as thick as the anchor cable for a Phoenician warship. It was as loyal as a dog, was tireless in flight, and ate goats.

Hermes watched the witch riding her snake. She was flying low, just skimming the treetops. Effortlessly, on gull wings, he coasted the bright slopes of air, keeping near the witch as she crisscrossed the island. She seemed to examine every bush, every tree, every shadow. Having assured himself of her industry and vigilance, Hermes angled off and flew his own course, searching for Jason—whom he had never seen.

Finally he saw a boy running along the strip of beach that divided sea from forest. The runner was naked except for a quiver of arrows. Hermes couldn't see his face; all he saw were slender flashing legs and floating black hair. The boy moved like a blown leaf, plucking an arrow from his quiver as he ran, notching it, bending his bow, and launching the shaft—all in one swift, fluid motion, without ever breaking stride. His first arrow struck a cypress tree, the second arrow split the first one, and every arrow after that split the one that preceded it. Hermes, who had invented the bow and trained generations of demigod bowmen, had never seen archery to equal this.

It was low tide, and Hermes spotted dark shapes lurking in a tidal pool. The shapes broke water as the boy ran past, revealing

themselves as two bronzed nereids with green hair. Shrieking with laughter, the lithe sea nymphs flung themselves upon the lad. The three figures tumbled upon the sand and crawled over one another like a litter of puppies. The nereids clutched at Jason, tickling him and competing to see who could kiss more of him. He tried to fend them off, but he was weak with laughter.

The witch dived, screaming. She swooped down upon the tangle, sliding toward the snake's head and making it pivot in the air and crack its tail like a bullwhip. It flailed at the nereids, flogging them away from Jason, then following them. The witch rode astride, screaming, as the snake flew backward, lashing the nereids, who were weeping now as they fled toward the sea, their backs striping with great red weals under the live whip.

They dived into the waves. The witch rode back, cackling at Jason, who turned from her without speaking. Obviously he loathed his chaperone. The witch flew her snake along the sand, making sure the nereids would not reappear. She circled Jason a few times, who was now sitting moodily on the beach, drawing hideous witch faces on the sand with a stick. Then she flew off.

Hermes landed on the beach as gulls do and walked stiff-legged toward the boy. He stopped near and studied him. Jason lounged there, idly scratching a stick in the wet sand. One leg was curled, the other straight; his back was bent. And the angles and curves and straight planes of his body flowed into each other, harmonizing without artifice like a half-grown panther's, like the

visual equivalent of music. He raised his face and stared out to sea. His eyes were a color rarely seen, a pale pure gray, darkening now like pieces of sky as they grew stormy with thought.

“I have invented the bow, the fire stick, the pipes, and the lyre,” said Hermes to himself. “Also weights and measures, money, and astronomy. Of all my creations, though, I am proudest of this beautiful boy, my great-great-great-grandson through beloved Io. I understand Aphrodite’s madness and her fear. Such beauty is fatal to its possessor.”

Light splintered faintly in the far northern reaches of the sky. As Hermes watched, a ball of light grew there and rolled toward them, getting larger as it came. Hermes spread his gull wings and flew up to investigate. He coasted the currents of air over the island, watching. It was not a ball of fire but points of light bunching, trundling. He heard a golden bugling sound as of great stallions trumpeting.

And now he saw what was coming: Ares’ brass chariot pulled by great roan stallions across the blue meadow of the sky—wheel spokes flashing, hub-knives turning and casting sheaves of light. Ares stood tall at the reins, helmet and breastplate flashing.

“Can he be doing it so crudely?” thought Hermes. “Simply charging across the sky in full daylight to murder the boy?”

He flew higher, angling away from the island, placing himself above the path of the oncoming chariot. He saw a black smudge

shooting out from behind the treetops. It was the witch on her snake, climbing to intercept the chariot.

“I shall hover here and watch her in action,” he said to himself. “I’m eager to see her lay her ground fog and watch that brass bully groping through the magic mist.”

She had climbed now to a spot just below Hermes and floated there as the chariot grew larger and larger, thundering toward her. She reached into her pouch. Then Hermes saw her head snap about as if something below had caught her attention. He looked down and saw something floating in the sea. A plume of smoke arose. Gulls swooped toward the smoke. Hermes was another gull diving.

It was a raft floating there, but weirdly freighted. It bore a platform of stones; on that platform a fire burned. Tending the flame was one of Hades’ turnspit demons, and turning on the spit was a suckling pig, its skin crackling, sending rich savors into the air that maddened the gulls.

The witch stuffed the scroll of fog back into her pouch and put her snake into a dive. She plunged toward the water, shrieking gleefully, scattering the gulls. They rose, screaming back at her in the path of her dive.

“A decoy!” thought Hermes. “This is no brute assault but a coordinated attack. They have drawn off the sentinel. Now Ares can kill Jason at his leisure.”

The roan stallions were galloping under him now, pulling the great clattering brass chariot. Ares held the reins in one huge hand

and a battle-ax in the other. Master charioteer that he was, he did not dive the horses toward the island with the tremendous weight of metal behind them, but brought them down along a gentle slope of descent.

Hermes also dived, became a bolt of gray feathers, and landed on the beach before Ares arrived. Jason was gone.

“I hope he has sense enough to hide in the wood,” thought Hermes.

Ares’ chariot landed on the beach. The stallions raced along the edge of the sea, trumpeting, rejoicing to feel the earth under their hooves again. Hermes rose into the air and followed the chariot as it made a complete circuit of the island.

“Jason!” roared Ares. “Jason! Where are you, you little rat? Coward! Are you prince or slave? Do you skulk in the woods when an enemy comes? Jason ... Jason ... come out and fight!”

Ares dismounted. The stallions pawed the earth, tossing their manes, rolling their brilliant eyes. Ares entered the woods, shouting, “Hide yourself well! Dig your hole deep, you dog! I’ll dig you out wherever you are!”

“I’d better take a hand,” said Hermes to himself. “Jason will never withstand these taunts. He’s not hiding; I know he’s not. He is couched on a limb like a young leopard waiting to spring on Ares as he passes beneath. For I know him, know him after just one look at him, know him right down to the lining of his heart. He will not

wait in ambush like a seasoned warrior. No, he will seek to engage this killer hand to hand. I shall have to intervene.”

He changed back into his own form and followed Ares into the woods. He could hear the war god ahead of him, trampling through the brush, shouting. Hermes broke into a smooth run, picking his way among the trees. He came so close that he heard Ares, no longer shouting, but speaking in a conversational way.

“I know you’re near. I can smell you. I can always smell an enemy, especially a putrid cur like you. Stay there, lover boy. Stand and fight.”

Then Hermes heard another sound, the sibilant whisper of arrow flight ... heard Ares’ voice raised again in an anguished bellow ... heard the clanging of metal. He raced through a fringe of trees on the edge of a clearing and stopped short at the sight.

Ares stood in the clearing, brandishing his ax, bellowing, in the midst of an arrow swarm. It was as if the arrows were alive and were flying at him like giant wasps. The archer was invisible. Each arrow hit its mark—never touching Ares’ flesh, never even scratching him, but finding the buckle point of each piece of armor and shearing it off him as neatly as a groom unharnessing a horse.

His breastplate dropped off, then his shin greaves. An arrow knocked his helmet askew, denting it. He tore it off his head with a wild bellow. Now he stood there, hulking and hairy as a bear, but bigger than any bear. A last arrow sang out of the thicket and hit his crotch guard, making it ring like a bell. Ares doubled up in pain.

Hermes saw Jason step out into the clearing. He had been expecting this, but the actual appearance of the boy struck him like a fist under the heart. Jason was naked, unarmed except for a hunting knife. He was slender as a peeled wand, his eyes like pieces of ice under his dark brows.

Ares held his battle-ax. Its haft was a young tree, its head larger than Jason's body and honed to a razor edge. Others had tried to use this ax—gods, demigods, titans, giants—but Ares was the only one strong enough. He not only used it to strike with, but hurled it like a hatchet. Hermes had seen him behead a giant at fifty paces. If he missed a throw, the ax would circle back to his hand, and he would be ready to throw again.

All this flashed through Hermes' mind in the wink of an eye. The silvery messenger god stood, in a trance, watching the lad glide across the clearing, as if courage by some foul twist had been converted into fatal trust, making the beautiful boy offer his throat to the butcher's blade. Slowly Ares raised his ax.

Hermes changed himself into a woodpecker—but a giant one, bigger than an eagle, with an iron beak. He flew to a tree at the edge of the clearing, a towering pine, clutched himself to the trunk, and drove his iron beak into the bole. He pulled it out and struck again, and again and again, his head moving faster than a hummingbird's. He moved around the trunk, driving his beak in again and again, working so fast that, before Ares had finished

poising his ax, he was hit by the falling tree. He was smashed to earth and buried among the branches.

Jason stood there, bewildered. Hermes returned to his own form. He came up behind the boy and touched him with his herald staff, casting him into a deep sleep. He caught the boy in his arms and flew away, climbing swiftly past the treetops. He bore him to the other side of the island and laid him in the shade of a tree, still asleep.

He knelt there, staring at the sleeper, then he lightly kissed his face and flew back to where Ares lay, but did not linger. Already the pine branches were threshing as the fallen god strove to rise.

Hermes flew eastward. He saw something that made him swoop. The witch rode the raft. She was gurgling and jiggling and gnawing a pork bone. The fire was out. The turnspit demon was asleep. From time to time the hag wiped her hands on his curly pate. Hermes hovered, watching—but the witch, who noticed everything, was so busy eating that she did not see the god shining above her head. The sleeper snored. She screamed and frothed, epileptic with pleasure.

Hermes climbed again and flew away from the great burning ball of the setting sun.

SEVEN

EKION

I WAS WATCHING THE sky for my father. He had sent no word, but I knew he was coming. I saw a splinter of light, then a streak of fire. He landed among us, pot-shaped hat pulled over his eyes, twirling his staff until the twined snakes seemed alive. And I thought my heart would burst with pride when he unwound Daphnis' arm from around his neck and motioned to me.

“I need your help.”

I couldn't say anything. I just looked at him. He smiled.

“I'm sending you away.”

“Far?”

“You'll be seeing more of me than ever.”

“Oh, Father ...”

“You will go to the court of Iolcus and take employment with King Pelius.”

“As herald?”

“His herald, my spy.”

“What's he like?”

“A tyrant, a glutton, a murderer. Not too different from most kings, but a bit more so.”

I nodded, imitating composure.

“He may not sound like an ideal employer, but you’ll be all right. Heralds are protected by sacred law. You will attend his councils, learn his plans, and tell me what he intends.”

“I would know your own purpose, sire. Not from curiosity, but that I may serve you with more intelligence.”

“Hearken, then. Pelius is a usurper. Some years ago he killed his stepbrother, who was the rightful king, and since then has been hunting his brother’s son. That son, who is called Jason, is hidden on the island of Cythera. I have just visited this island. I went there at the request of Aphrodite, who has developed a passionate interest in the lad and fears for his safety.”

“Surely a goddess can protect her paramour?”

“To contend against Ares you need allies. He will permit no rival and has a way of erasing her lovers before she can enjoy them. Indeed, I happened to arrive at the island just as he landed there.”

“Did he kill the boy?” I asked, hoping he had.

“It was wonderful,” he said. “Jason defied the war god and fought so gallantly, so skillfully, I didn’t believe what I was seeing. He moves like light over water. He filled the air with arrows. Each found its mark and sheared off a piece of Ares’ armor until he stood naked as a flayed steer.”

“Vanquished Ares, did he?”

“Well, not quite. Ares is Ares, after all. But I was able to intervene, and it ended in a draw, more or less.”

Each of his words were like one of those arrows piercing me.
“So you left the brave young prince on his island?”

“I did.”

“You didn’t speak with him?”

“No.”

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

“You must understand, son, that Diomedes III, now called Jason, has incurred the wrath of two expert architects of doom, namely, Hades and Ares. You should also be aware that, under the law of Zeus, gods can no longer kill mortals with their old freedom. But the Lord of Tartarus and the Lord of Battles have many resources. They can employ mortals to do their killing for them. Or monsters. Their next move may well involve Pelius, who is Jason’s natural enemy and has an army and a battle fleet at his disposal. This is where I want your help. You shall keep me informed about what Pelius means to do—and, of course, hold yourself ready to help Jason in any way you can.”

“Yes,” I murmured, trying not to hiss. “I look forward to making Jason’s acquaintance.”

“To know him is to love him,” said Hermes. “And to serve him is to please me.”

“And to please you, Father, is my dearest wish.”

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EIGHT

EKION

PELIUS SPRAWLED ON HIS throne, sucking at his teeth. He did this when he was hungry, and he was always hungry. He'd grown so fat he couldn't see his feet; it made him wheeze and pant just to climb the three steps to his throne. For the past few days he had been in an ugly mood. An oracle had told him that an enemy was coming. I tried to explain to him that all kings always had an enemy somewhere preparing to attack, and that oracles made a living out of such foolproof prophecies. But he didn't believe me. He chose to believe that someone was preparing an assault, and that this someone was Jason.

So we at court were having a difficult time. When the king was unhappy, he liked to share his pain, and for the past days he had signed so many death warrants that he had sprained his wrist and had to shift to his left hand. Every time I turned around suddenly, I saw him glaring at me, thinking how much better I'd look without a head.

His baleful glare was becoming unbearable to me, and the muffled terror of the courtiers had become thick as a stench in the gloomy throne room. I melted into the deepest shadow and slid out the great brass door without anyone noticing.

I went looking for a lad I knew, an apprentice smith named Rufus because of his red hair and fiery eyebrows. There was a Hephaestus cult in the country. The metal workers of Iolcus worshipped the smith-god and were considered priests. So the apprentice, Rufus, was not a slave but a novice and worked harder than a slave. He was a blunt, simple-hearted lad, the closest thing to a friend I had.

I scouted around the courtyard of the sacred smithy, but he didn't come out and I couldn't linger. So I set off alone. I missed my brothers more than I'd ever thought I would. I missed my mother, whichever sister she was, and my beautiful aunts. And Hermes hadn't come to see me.

But it was so good getting off among the trees and gliding through the fretted sunlight that I forgot about being lonesome and being prudent. I raced through a glade, leaping logs. I shouted and sang. I found a hollow tree and searched it for honeycombs, half hoping a bear would come and try to catch me as I fled. It was the kind of day on which your life changes forever and you can feel the change coming.

I reached a clearing. It was cut by a little stream, swollen now because the rains had been heavy these past weeks. The damp pine needles were steaming faintly, casting a maddening fragrance. My staff twitched in my hand. The snake that entwined it raised its carved head and spoke. Its voice was a silky whisper.

“Take leaves from that laurel tree. Cast them upon flame and breathe the smoke.”

“Why?”

“It is your father’s wish. You must enter trance and await his instructions,”

I am not submissive by nature, but neither was I prepared to challenge anything a wooden snake said. A laurel tree stood at the edge of the clearing. I plucked a handful of its leaves, built a fire, and cast the leaves upon it. I knelt to the flame, inhaling its smoke. Darkness swarmed.

I stood at an oak stump, which was full of rainwater. A small wind blew, riffling the water. It was a miniature sea holding a ship as small as a walnut shell, its sail spread on a splinter of mast as it slid toward an oak-chip island.

Two huge rocks appeared. They stood apart from each other; the steersman put his bow exactly between them. But with an odd rushing, gurgling sound the boulders began to hurtle through the water toward each other. The ship slowed. I saw oars bend as the men tried to backwater—too slowly. The rocks were going with terrific speed now. They sluiced through the water and came together, crushing the tiny ship to splinters. I heard a frightful thin screaming, and the water grew red as I watched. The rocks sank, sucking the wreckage under. The stump sea was clear again.

It became a dish of molten silver in the hot sun. Pictures formed in its depths, floated up, and re-formed into something else:

a bloody discus flying; a pair of hands cut off at the wrists, crawling like crabs; a pair of brass bulls breathing flame; a giant serpent with a man in its jaws.

I had left the stump. I sat near the fire, gazing into its heart. It was the sky burning. Under it lay scorched fields. Men and women lay there with blackened faces. Cattle that were racks of bone stood shakily, trying to snuffle something out of a dry riverbed. They lowed piteously and sank to earth. The sky burned. But now there was a golden core to the flame. It became a golden throne standing in the scorched field. On the throne sat a youth. He wore a gold crown. About his shoulders hung a great fleece, as if the pelt of a golden ram had been cut into a king's robe.

The young king raised his arms to the sky, and it darkened. The red flame became black smoke; the smoke whorled into storm clouds, and it all turned to rain. Water fell on the king and on his throne and on the parched earth. The riverbeds filled, and the earth was green again. Then it all faded.

I spoke to the wooden snake. "What does my father wish?"

"Go fetch Jason. It's time."

"Time for what?"

"For him to learn what you have learned."

"Will he believe me?"

"Instruct him through vision. Harrow his sleep. Sow a dream."

The snake stiffened and twined woodenly about my staff. I was sitting over the ashes of the fire, and the day was hot and damp

and still. I wanted to go to sleep, but it was time to be about my father's business.

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NINE

EKION

THE AIM OF dream-tinkering is to frighten or flatter or otherwise persuade someone to do something by sowing certain visions in his sleeping head. There are two steps: first you cast the person into a swoon; then, when the eyes close and shallow breathing signifies deep trance, you begin to plant your dream.

Now I went about gathering the things I would need: a handful of laurel leaves; flower of poppy and mandragora and other slumberous herbs; some sprigs of withered barley; some shavings of ram's horn; and six boarlike bristles from the beard of Pelius.

I loaded my pouch with this potent rubbish and headed for the edge of the forest where it ran down to the sea.

Two days later, I was in Cythera. I stood at the foot of a cliff, looking up, up, trying to see who was standing on the edge. Whoever it was, he couldn't dive from that height; nobody could. Suddenly he dropped off.

I watched him fall. The sun caught him, body arched, arms spread. Did he realize he was plunging toward a sea full of rocks? They stood thickly in the tide, the water boiling among them. He flashed down, his arms forward now, hair whipping backward in

the wind of his going. He entered the water cleanly, splitting a tiny space between two rocks.

I watched for him to surface. Finally he did—closer to shore. He waded in. I knew he had to be Jason. My father had wrung my heart, describing his beauty.

“Greetings,” he said.

“Greetings, Jason. I am Ekion, a herald by trade. May I know why you choose such a dreadful patch of sea?”

“Best place for diving.”

“With those rocks?”

“You see, this is the highest cliff. The farther I fall, the more it is like flying.”

“Speaking of that, where’s your flying nursemaid? I heard tales of a hag on a snake?”

“She doesn’t actually fly herself, you see, but astride an anaconda. Well, he’s as greedy as she is and ate a goat without peeling it. So she’s off to Libya to get another.”

“Choked on a horn, did he?”

“Yes, poor thing. I couldn’t pull it out. But, you know, it’s ridiculous that we can’t fly. Don’t you agree? The stupidest birds can. And ugly old witches. All sorts of bugs. But not us.”

“My father can.”

He stared at me silently.

“Don’t you believe me?”

“Does he have wings?”

“Ankle wings. *Talaria*, they’re called.”

“Where did he get them?”

“Always had them. He’s a god. Hermes.”

“Does he wear a pot-shaped hat?”

“He does.”

“Carry a staff like yours?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I was in a fight and got knocked on the head. And as I lay there, it seemed that this silvery god lifted me into the air and flew me to the other side of the island. Does he take you flying?”

“All the time.” I had to hate him. My father never took me flying.

“Tell more lies,” he said.

“I won’t tell you anything if you call me a liar.”

“Prove it’s the truth. Make your father lend you his ankle wings, then lend them to me.” He put his hand on my shoulder. His touch burned down to the bone. He smiled into my face. His eyes were like molten silver. His whole face became a blur of brightness. The bronze shield of his chest was burnished with light. I moved away. “Well,” he said. “Shall we journey to Olympus and visit your lord father, and ask him to lend us his wings? Or will he come to us if you call?”

“He has taught me a few things,” I said. “I can cast you into a sleep and make you dream you’re flying. A vivid dream, almost

like the real thing.”

“I don’t like almosts. I like more thans.”

“Don’t belittle what you have not known. It is of the gods, this visionary flight. Perhaps it is their way of teaching.”

He stared at me. Oh, it was painful to meet the fierce purity of that gaze.

“Come, little herald,” he said softly. “Do your trick.”

I made a fire of twigs and sat him beside it. I dropped my handful of slumberous herbs into the flame and fanned the thin smoke toward him. His eyes closed.

I took the shavings of ram’s horn from my pouch and dropped them on the fire. The pale flames turned gold and twisted themselves into horns. Jason muttered, uttered a strangled laugh. He was smiling as he slept.

After a bit, I took the sprigs of withered barley and threw them on the fire. The horns of flame dwindled, turned red, and burned sullenly. Jason moaned and trembled. I let him stew in the bitter lees of the vision, then emptied my pouch on the fire, dropping in the six bristles from the beard of Pelius.

The sleeper was angry now. His brows were knotted, his fingers scrabbling at the earth. He shouted something. I saw his eyelids quivering. I dipped water from the stream and doused the fire.

He opened his eyes, blinked, rubbed his head, spat. Then he flowed to his feet and crossed the clearing to the stream. He knelt

and drank huge gulps. He plunged his head in, pulled it out, dripping. He glared at me.

“Who are you?”

“Still me. Ekion.”

“Why have you come?”

“To plant a dream.”

“It was a vision of horror. There was a drought on the land. Nothing green anywhere. People dying of thirst. And children and animals. Why did you make me dream that?”

“To show you what is to be. A drought is coming. The land shall sicken, its juices dry. Animals shall parch and die, wild animals and herds of cattle. And so people shall starve.”

“When is this to happen?”

“That depends on you.”

“On me?”

“You are a healer; you push back the hour of death.”

“I can’t cure a drought.”

“Your dream showed you to yourself as rainmaker also.”

“Who are you?”

“Perhaps I’m part of your dream?”

“No, I’m awake. You’re real.”

“The threat of drought is real, too. And it is your own kingdom that shall be worst stricken.”

“My kingdom?”

“You know, do you not, that you are the rightful king of Iolcus?”

“So I have been told.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“Kings rule. Do I?”

“Hearken, Prince, your life is about to change. I have been sent to you. You are to come back to the mainland. You shall save your land from drought and your people from starvation. You shall overcome your enemies and reclaim your throne.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea how to do any of these things.”

“All you have to do is the first thing; the rest will follow.”

“What is the first thing?”

“To make rain.”

“That’s all, eh?”

“Rainmaking on a royal scale, cousin. Not just whistling up a few showers, or clacking the thunder bones for a season’s moisture. I mean possessing yourself of a powerful magic that will bind the moon and swing the tides and roll up thirsty clouds to suck up the sea and spew it out as sweet abundant rain. I mean that you shall sit upon the throne of Iolcus wearing the pelt of the great golden ram—in whose fleece abides the strength to overturn the fountains of heaven and make the parched earth turn green, year after year after year.”

“You did manipulate my vision. I rode a great golden ram. He had no wings but galloped through the air. The sky was purple-

black, and there was lightning and thunder.”

“That vision is a message from the gods and a call to action.”

“Do you speak for the gods?”

“I have been sent to make their will known. You must come to Iolcus.”

“How did you get here?” asked Jason. “Waist-deep in squid. I hired a fishing smack.”

“Send it back for me in three days.”

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TEN

EKION

THE KING WADDLED into the council chamber, brimming with glee. He informed us that a young stranger had been captured on the northern shore and had calmly introduced himself to the spearmen as Diomedes III, otherwise known as Jason, their rightful king. Then Pelius told us what he meant to do with the prisoner.

Now, Pelius had simplified his penal system by abolishing trials. Accusation meant guilt; guilt meant death. Some few escaped beheading—those whom the king especially disliked and whom he wished to use for demonstrating the consequences of royal disfavor. These unlucky ones were locked in a wheeled cage that was dragged from village to village. Spectators were encouraged to prod the caged wretches with long poles, throw lighted torches through the bars, and otherwise torment them. But the ordeal didn't last long; no one survived more than a few days in a cage.

And it was into a cage that Jason was to go, the king informed us. If he happened to last more than a week, he was to be beheaded, his head stuck on a pole and paraded through the villages he had not visited.

The courtiers cheered and applauded. The king dismissed the council, bidding me stay. I stood before him as he overflowed the

massive wooden throne that was his council seat.

“You were silent while the others were cheering,” he said. “Do you dare to disapprove?”

“Zeal in your service, O King, outweighs any thought of risk.”

“Bah—just what do you disapprove of?”

“You mean to exhibit this prince to the populace, which may well excite the very ideas you seek to discourage.”

“How so?”

“This youth is some hundred pounds lighter than the ideal king should be, perhaps, and altogether lacks the majestic presence exhibited by Your Majesty. Nevertheless, we must never underestimate popular taste. There may be those who will be moved by the sight of him.”

“What are you saying—they’ll think he’s good-looking?”

“Possibly ... particularly women, who are more prone to frivolous judgment in such matters, and who are more passionate troublemakers when aroused.”

“Will you stop talking in that serpentine way, and tell me straight. You are saying it’s a bad idea to cart him around in a cage because he may stir up sympathy?”

“A masterful conclusion, my lord.”

“So what shall I do with him—just lop off his head?”

“If I may venture to suggest, I would do nothing until tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow? Why not today?”

“The gods who test a king with difficult choices also invest him with the wit to choose. Very often the gods reveal their will to the kings of earth by sending those night visions called dreams. As a son of Hermes, I have been given special insight into these matters and hereby predict that this very night you will be sent such a dream.”

“Till tomorrow, then, and it may be your last morrow if you’re as wrong as I think you are.”

“Sleep soft, Your Majesty.”

That night I slithered into the king’s chamber.

A torch burned in a sconce on the wall, for the king feared assassins. I merged with the shadows. I dusted dry herbs into the torch flame and fanned the aromatic smoke toward the bed. His huge bulk quivered. He flung out an arm, gritted his teeth, mumbled wetly.

I slipped out and went to my own bed.

In the morning, a page summoned me to the royal garden. The king sat on a bench looking unusually yellow; his eyes were pouched in sagging flesh.

He said, “I had a dream all right, but I don’t know its meaning.”

“Shall I try to find one?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That would make interpretation difficult.”

“It’s too disgusting.”

“In these readings, my lord, every detail is significant. And since royal dreams are sent by the high gods themselves, we cannot risk misinterpretation. I think that, once you begin, you will find the terror and disgust ebbing. And when we have unraveled this message from the gods, you will be able to take the bold, decisive action that has become the hallmark of your reign.”

“You’re an eloquent little viper, aren’t you?”

And he told me his dream exactly as I had planted it in his lardy skull.

I listened intently as he told me what I knew. I watched his face growing yellower. I was fascinated by the way the sweat was channeled in the creases between his chins.

“Well,” he growled, “stop staring at me like an idiot and answer me.”

I said, “This dream is undoubtedly a message from the gods and is one of warning.”

“That much I know. What am I being warned about?”

“The young prisoner, of course. It is the will of the gods that his life be spared. You are not to put him in a cage, nor cut his head off, nor harm him in any way.”

“What do these gods of yours suggest that I do—put my crown on his head with my own hands, then make him really comfortable by slitting my own throat?”

“They would have you contrive his death in a way that will show you as a savior rather than a tyrant.”

“How is that possible?”

“You dreamed of drought, did you not? You saw the sky burning, rivers dry, crops scorched, cattle dying.”

“Yes.”

“That drought is coming. It will strike all the lands of the Middle Sea; they will lie helpless under its burning whip. Only one king in this part of the world shall be given the power to make rain and turn the parched fields green again. That king will be you, if you obey the gods. You have heard of the Golden Fleece?”

“That relic the priests are always yapping about?”

“You speak of it slightingly, sire, but it was the King of Heaven’s own garment and enables its wearer to call rain out of a dry sky. It comes from here, from Iolcus, you know. It adorned the statue of thunder-wielding Zeus in the Temple on the Hill—until some three hundred years ago, when it was stolen by a raiding party from Colchis, where it has been kept ever since.”

“And we haven’t lacked rain in all those three hundred years.”

“The weather is about to change, Your Majesty. God-time is not our time; things ripen slowly in the heavens. Now the High Ones decree drought but have promised the power of the Ram to whoever wears its pelt, and that is the power to make rain.”

“You speak as if all this were something new. But for six generations now, one crew after another of ne’er-do-wells and criminals on the run have been tapping the treasuries of gullible kings—fitting out ships and sailing away to retake the Fleece. And

none of them ever did. They got themselves killed in various ways, or turned pirate or something, but the famous Fleece stayed where it was.”

“Yes, sire. And what you are being promised is that Jason also will perish on this quest.”

“I can arrange for him to perish right here today and spare myself the expense of ship and crew.”

“You ignore the meaning of your dream, O King. The gods want you to send Jason for the Fleece. They promise he will not return, but the Fleece will. And you shall wear it and end the drought—and be so idolized by your people that you will be able to mistreat them to your heart’s content and arouse no whisper of complaint.”

“I’ll give in on one point,” he said. “I won’t put him in a cage. His presumptuous head shall be quietly separated from his shoulders and flung on the dung heap. That will end the legend of the lost prince.”

I spoke silently to my father. “Oh, Hermes, the king is stubborn. Send him a sign, I pray.”

I heard the king clapping for a page boy. The lad came running. “Fetch wine,” said the king. Then he turned to me. “All this theology makes me thirsty.”

The page appeared with two crystal flagons of wine. The king seized his goblet and raised it to his mouth. I was amazed to see the

wine shrink away from his lips. He stared into his goblet in disbelief.

“Did you see that?” he muttered. “How’s yours, still full?”

I sipped a bit. “Seems all right,” I said.

“Give it to me!”

I handed him the great crystal cup. He lifted it to his mouth. Again the wine shrank from his lips. He dashed the cup to the ground; it shattered on the slate path.

“I thirst ... I thirst! Bring water!” he roared.

The page came running. He bore a pitcher full of water. The king snatched it from him but stopped and poured a little out first to see if it was really there. It splashed on the path. He lifted the pitcher and gulped ... raised it higher and higher as his mouth sucked frantically. He flung the pitcher from him.

“Misery!” he moaned. “I must drink. I’m dying.”

“Ah, King,” I said. “The gods have sent you a sign. This is a hint of what drought will be like—when even kings thirst.”

“Demon-craft! These are not gods but devils! You are a demon, serving demons! I’ll have you burned! Impaled!”

I listened to him, unafraid. He wasn’t used to suffering, this fat king, and I knew he was too maddened by thirst to be able to croak out any orders for my execution. I spoke gently. “The gods are being merciful, sire. With this little flick of their whip they are urging you back to the path of righteousness and preserving you from the greater torments of drought.”

“All right ... all right. I’ll spare him. I’ll send him for that damned Fleece. Do you swear he’ll die on the voyage?”

“The Fleece shall return; he shall not. Look, King, your pitcher overflows.”

Indeed, the pitcher had righted itself on the path, and water was welling out of it. I picked it up and gave it to him. Very hesitantly, he bent his head to it, touched his mouth to the rim, and sipped. His face sagged with relief as he finally drank.

“Behold, O King, the reward of obedience.”

“Here’s my ring,” he said, “my seal. With it you can speak in my name. Have Jason released and bid him prepare for his voyage. Draw upon the treasury for the necessary expenses. But be prudent, I urge you, be prudent.”

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ELEVEN

EKION

I FOUND JASON PROWLING the wild beach that lies along the northeast shore and is the first to get the wind. It was a deserted beach, a good place to hide someone.

We walked along the water's edge, and I told him what had happened at court: how I had sowed the king's sleep with visions of drought, of his wrath and his threats, and how Hermes had parched him into submission. "That's why he agreed to let us sail for Colchis," I said. "But he'll change his mind when he regains his courage. So we'd best make haste."

"I'm ready now. When do we start?"

"We must first provide ourselves with ship and crew."

"A ship? Do we build it, or buy it, or simply help ourselves to a vessel of the royal fleet?"

"Hermes will instruct us."

"Does he realize the need for haste? You're always telling me god-time is not our time."

"I shall consult him tonight."

We had paused. He was gazing out to sea. He turned and stared at me. "Do you consider yourself kind-hearted?" he said.

"Never occurred to me."

“I heal by touch. What passes through my hands is some sort of energy—nothing to do with kindness or pity.”

“To heal something is a kindness, no matter what you feel.”

“Perhaps ... and perhaps I am meant to be a killer. Obviously my skill at archery was not given me so that I could shoot at trees.”

“You’ll be finding other things to shoot at. Things that shoot back.”

“Consider this,” he said. “I’m fond of birds, you know. But I am also fascinated by that butcher among birds, the falcon, the female hawk, larger and stronger than the male. She drops out of the sky upon the pigeon, the lark, the gull ... drives her hooks into him, stabs him with her beak, and eats the flesh. And I, who have esteemed her victim, also admire the hawk.”

“You make too much of it. Falconry has always been the sport of kings. No reason you shouldn’t enjoy it without guilt.”

“You came to Cythera to trouble my sleep and plant visions. But I dream without your assistance now. She visits me every night.”

“Who?”

“A winged girl. She is sleek and powerful and has brass claws on hands and feet. And her eyes—the iris is utterly black and the pupil yellow; they are full of yellow light and cold as moon fire. They freeze my marrow. In the plan of this dream, it seems that I have trained her, for she brings me her prey uneaten. A goat, a lamb, and once—a child.”

“I don’t like the sound of this. It may be a harpy you’ve attracted.”

“Are there really such things?”

“One of my father’s duties is to conduct the newly dead to Tartarus. And he has told me about the Land Beyond Death. Many kinds of demons attend Hades, and the most feared are those hell hags called harpies. They have brass wings and brass claws and carry coiled whips at their girdles. They are used to recapture runaway shades. Indeed, Hades casts them like falcons, and they return to him with their prey.”

“Mine has brass claws, but her wings are white leather, delicate as membrane. And she’s young. Our age, you know. Not a hag.”

“Well, dreams are of unequal value. Not all of them are sent by the gods. Perhaps this creature is simply the feverish vapor of your own fancy.”

“No, she’s real. She exists outside my mind. Somewhere she stands near a source of light so strong that her shadow is cast across the sea, past the frontiers of mortal sense, into my sleep.”

“You know that she dwells beyond the sea?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps she visits you to encourage the quest. Perhaps you will meet her upon your voyage.”

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TWELVE

EKION

THE KING SUMMONED ME and asked for a report.

“I’m keeping Jason out of public view,” I said. “He is making no move to form a party or to claim the throne.”

“All right, as far as it goes. But remember, your chief responsibility is to ensure that the lost prince gets himself permanently lost. He is to recapture the Fleece, if possible, but it is to return without him. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“To facilitate this worthy aim,” he said, “I have arranged to provide you with a ship’s company of cutthroats, every man of them briefed on whose throat to cut.”

“We’ll also need some people to work the ship.”

“That part’s up to you.”

The staff twitched in my hand. The snake lifted its carved head to whisper dryly. It was a message from my father.

Hermes and I walked along the tide line under a moon so bright it branded our shadows on the white sand. There was a heavy surf. Greenish flames flickered on the mane of the breaking waves. A hot night, but his words were chilling.

“No quest for the Fleece has ever succeeded. All these past voyages, made in sound ships with sufficient crew, have met with disaster.”

“Are you recommending an unsound ship and an insufficient crew?”

“You jest, my son, but you speak more wisdom than you know. You don’t need a large crew. Three or four good hands can sail a small ship.”

“Perhaps, when the winds are favorable. But how about when they blow against us or don’t blow at all? Then the ship must be rowed—which takes at least fifty oars.”

“You shall sail the way the wind blows. Sooner or later you’ll get to Colchis. But with a small loyal band, deserving each other’s faith, tested in each other’s eyes, a band of brothers.”

“The king has slightly different ideas,” I said. “He is recruiting a ship’s company of trained assassins—who are promised a rich wage, a richer bonus, and a lifetime pension if Jason should meet with some fatal accident along the way. So what am I to do?”

“What I tell you, of course.”

“How do I keep my head on my shoulders?”

“Keep a brave heart, and I’ll take care of your head.”

“Be specific. How do I avoid hiring these murderous characters?”

“Diplomatically, of course. You’ll tell them they’re hired, give them a sailing date, and make sure to slip anchor before then. By

the time you return, they'll all be dead, probably.”

“Slip anchor in what?”

“You shall have a ship by then. A shipwright named Argos shall come to you. Do not be deceived by his appearance; he’s a master. Provide him with whatever he requires, and conceal his labors from Pelius.”

“Yes, sire. And my crew? That band of brothers?”

“You shall start with your own brothers. They’re on the way.”

“My own brothers!”

“Autolycus and Daphnis. You haven’t forgotten them, have you?”

“Autolycus, yes, he’d be valuable on any adventure. Except ...”

“Except what?”

“He’ll be spending all his time taking care of Daphnis—who can’t pass an ordinary day without mishap, let alone the kind of days we’ll be passing.”

“Daphnis will surprise you.”

“He’s no longer a nitwit?”

“Sweetest singer since Orpheus. And, unlike that doom-wailer, his nature is as sunny as his voice. His song works enchantment more potent than sword or arrow. You’ll be glad to have him along.”

THIRTEEN

EKION

WHEN MY BROTHERS joined us, we moved camp to a heavily wooded peninsula where the trees ran down to the beach.

Daphnis adored Jason on sight. If Autolycus was jealous, he didn't show it. As for Jason, he received my brothers with more warmth than he had ever shown me. The three of them frisked about, caressing and cuffing each other like half-grown panther cubs, but I stood outside their joyous circle. So, of course, I envied everyone.

In choosing the peninsula for our base camp, I had also selected the best site for shipbuilding. Oak and pine and cedar grew near the sea and would provide our lumber. The ship could be built on the beach and launched right there.

Argos came to us. He didn't look like a master shipwright. He looked like someone a witch had begun to transform into a seal but had left half-done. He was short and smoothly tubby, with very short arms and large hands. He was clad only in a black leather apron, which clung as closely as another skin. Hair and beard were dark brown and very dense. He looked astonishingly like a seal, in fact; but unlike any beast's, his black eyes smoldered with a furious impatience. He was incapable of understanding why everyone did

not share his image of a perfect ship or how anyone could think of anything else. He started to rave as soon as he came.

“You shall use no ax,” he told me. “Any touch of metal will blight the soul of the dryad that must invest the timbers and keep them alive.”

“Living timbers?”

“If an ordinary deadwood vessel is what you want, you don’t employ an Argos. Any ship I build lives upon the water. She sniffs out the best wind and runs before it. She senses the presence of reefs and avoids them. She threads her way among rocks, and beaches where there is no harbor.”

“With a ship of yours, one scarcely needs a crew.”

“My ship must be served, sir. Must be kept clean and sweet—unblemished in sail and mast, tackle, gear. She must never be left untended because someone will surely steal her.”

“First we have to get her built. And it may be difficult to fell trees without using an ax.”

The others were lounging about the grove. Jason held a kestrel perched on his leather wristband and was whispering to it. Daphnis sat propped against a fallen log, touching his lyre, not playing a tune but imitating the way the wind sighed among the boughs. Autolycus was catching wasps on the wing and letting them go. None of them seemed to be listening to our conversation, but Autolycus growled, “Daphnis can.” I didn’t realize he was speaking to me. He prowled closer and said, “Daphnis can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Uproot trees.” He said to Daphnis, “Do it.”

Daphnis arose slowly, holding his lyre in the crook of his left arm. The sun had just sunk, leaving a clear greenish dusk and a wound of light in the west. Standing, waiting, the fragile boy imposed a hush upon us. The birds fell silent. The wind ceased among the boughs. A piece of moon tangled itself in the branches of a cedar. Daphnis raised his right hand; it floated toward the lyre, bringing a single note. He sang of the Beginning:

“A startled light arose from the rubble of Chaos and became the Goddess Eurynome ... She danced across the edge of nothingness and the paths of her dancing became the margins of sea and sky ... The North Wind pursued her as she fled, dancing. The West Wind and the South Wind and the East Wind joined the chase; they surrounded her ... And became the Universal Serpent, Ophion.”

I heard a faint sob. Jason was weeping, trying to make no sound. Autolycus was iron-faced, but the iron was wet. The blackness of Argos' hair and beard and apron had made him vanish, all but his glimmering hands. Our circle had enlarged. Deer stood among us, and a pair of gray wolves, ears cocked toward the singer, ignoring the deer. A slouching shadow grew into a bear, shoulders bulking. The moon shook itself free of the cedar, and the animals' eyes became pits of fire.

Man and beast stood rapt as Daphnis sang:

“Eurynome was captive to the winds, and they closed about her. She turned herself into a white bird and flew away ... She nested in the sky and laid a clutch of silver eggs, which were the sun and the earth and the planets and all the stars that stud the sky. Upon the earth were trees, flowers, birds, beasts, and man ...”

A wrenching, pulling sound began. My brother’s voice floated above it and kept us noosed in golden cords even as we watched the trees heaving. Oak and pine and tall cedar, they swayed and jerked in a kind of gigantic dance. One by one they pulled themselves out of the earth and hobbled toward us on their roots and stood among us listening to my brother sing:

“... trees, flowers, birds, beasts, and man. Oh, my brothers, Eurynome means ‘far-wandering,’ the first name given the moon ... Ophion means ‘moon-serpent.’ And long before there were any gods, there was the All-Mother. The Moon Goddess.”

After the song, the deer slid back into the forest, and the wolves vanished. The bear grunted and slouched away. The trees did not return to their holes but hobbled to the beach on their roots and lay down as if to sleep.

FOURTEEN

EKION

WE NOW HAD OUR shipwright and timber to meet his crazed specifications. But we had no tools. Argos carried none; he expected them to appear. He never brought anything anywhere but his talent.

I put Autolycus in charge of procurement.

He left camp that evening and returned at dawn driving an oxcart loaded with axes, mallets, picks, and shovels.

“Brother,” I said, “I hope you’re not robbing poor farmers.”

“Not even rich ones. I’m buying these things.”

“What are you using for money?”

“Money.”

“And how do you come by it?”

“Same way the king does, from taxes. I happened to meet a tax collector on the road and persuaded him to let me carry his bag of gold.”

“Persuaded?”

“A little knock on the head,” Autolycus said. “He found it persuasive.”

“You robbed a royal tax collector—”

“Who had been robbing farmers. Actually, what I did, you might say, is give them back their money. The king is taxing them too heavily; it’s bad policy.”

“Knowing Pelius as I do, brother, I am certain he would not appreciate your method of reform.”

“Well, the king did agree to finance this voyage, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but he hates to keep such promises.”

So Autolycus slipped away every dusk and reappeared every dawn. We would be awakened by the clanking of tools and would arise to see the great sun lifting itself out of the sea and ox and boy and wagon crawling blackly across the redness.

Upon this dawn we heard the clanking, but everything else was different. The wagon floated strangely in the air; when it came closer, we saw that it was being borne like a litter by two giant figures. Upon it sprawled the limp shape of Autolycus.

It was always a wonder to me how swiftly Jason could move without seeming to. He was streaking now across the grass. He was confronting two huge men. They stood listening to him, then gently lowered the wagon to the ground. One of them stooped and lifted Autolycus as if he were a baby, then laid him at Jason’s feet. Jason was kneeling, touching my brother’s head.

Daphnis was there, too, now. I heard him whimper. Without looking at him, Jason raised his hand and the whimpering ceased. Argos had arisen by now and stood there confused, glaring at everyone. I strolled across the clearing to where the strangers

stood. I had to find out if they had been sent by Pelius, and, if so, to send them away again. I was getting quite good at this. They were magnificent specimens. Standing there in the pink new sunlight, they were carved of rosy marble. Twins obviously, but not identical. One was slightly bigger.

Autolycus was sitting up now, leaning against Jason, who was holding a cup to his mouth, as Daphnis hovered near.

“Greetings,” I said. “I am Ekion, son of Hermes, and herald to King Pelius. And my brother is the one you brought out of the forest. He is still in no condition to thank you, so I do it in his stead.”

The larger one spoke. “My name is Castor. And this is my brother, Pollux. We are princes of Sparta, sons of Leda, who is wife to King Tyndareus.”

I had to think quickly. They called themselves sons of Leda, but not of her husband. Adding that fact to their gigantic stature and their beauty, I deduced that their mother had told them she had entertained some god who had become their father. I wanted to acknowledge this, but to leave myself some opening in case I was misreading things. Luckily, I was trained in tact.

“Fair sirs,” I said, “had you not told me your parentage, I should have guessed you for the sons of a god. Zeus, most likely. Or Apollo, perhaps. Or Ares.”

“You are courteous,” said the smaller one. “Zeus it was who honored our mother, putting on the shape of a swan for the

purpose.”

“I welcome you, sons of Zeus. And so shall my brothers, when Autolycus is on his feet again and Daphnis has ceased fretting. We are your cousins, of course. Jason also, he there who is mending my brother’s head. But tell me what happened.”

“We were on our way here,” said Castor, “following the road where it runs between sea and forest, when we saw an oxcart coming. But we saw a bear spring out of the woods, and kill the ox with one blow of its paw. And were amazed to see the driver attack the bear with a knife. The beast caught him only a glancing blow, luckily, but it was enough to send him flying. The bear went after him, and I went after the bear.”

“You killed the bear by yourself?”

“It was in a rage, and I had to kill it. I was sorry to. I like bears. Often wrestle with them back home, for I have run out of men to contend with.”

“And what do you do for sport?” I said to the smaller one, who had eyes like chips of blue ice.

“It is more difficult for me,” Pollux said. “I am a boxer rather than a wrestler. And bears don’t box.”

“He has also run out of men to fight,” said Castor. “And for him there is no such thing as a friendly bout. Whom he hits he kills.”

“No, neither of us can find anyone to fight,” said Pollux. “That’s why we have come here. We have heard that you are about

to go after the Golden Fleece, a journey that offers an array of monsters and other worthy antagonists.”

And that is how the Twins enrolled themselves in the crew of the *Argo*. And we were glad to have them. Handling the tree trunks and the huge rocks, they seemed as strong as Titans—and there were two of them.

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FIFTEEN

EKION

ANOTHER STRANGER CAME INTO the clearing, of medium height and thin as sword blade, black-haired, black-browed, and of mushroom complexion. “Looks like trouble,” I thought. “Must be one of the king’s cutthroats.”

Suddenly he smiled at me, and I was amazed. I had never seen a smile like that, a glittering ghastly spasm, indescribably ferocious. Curiosity pulled me across the grass toward him, and I couldn’t help peering into his mouth. He opened it wide.

They weren’t teeth. He had none. Instead, he wore two brass blades curved to the shape of his gums; they were what gave him his dazzling death’s-head grin.

His jaws snapped shut. He grinned again. It took all my self-control not to shudder. He spoke in a hoarse voice, hardly more than a whisper.

“Are you Jason, prince of Iolcus?”

“No, sir. I am his cousin, Ekion, herald to the king.”

“I have come to see Jason.”

“May I know your business?”

“I wish to join his crew and journey after the Fleece.”

“Was it the king who sent you?”

“No one sent me. I am not to be sent. I go where fancy takes me.”

I didn't believe him. He looked too much like an assassin not to be one. The more I studied him, the uneasier I grew. He was in his mid-twenties, perhaps, but I saw now the cause of his pallor. His face was a web of faint scars. And when I dropped my eyes, I saw that his left hand was missing. A polished metal spike was attached to his wrist; it seemed to grow right out of the stump.

“You are staring at me,” he whispered.

“I'm sorry.”

“It's all right, lad; it's understandable. I'm not a boastful man, you know, but I wear my badges of honor in plain sight. I have no choice.”

“Battle wounds?”

“Ex-wounds. Scars and replacement parts. My teeth were knocked out one by one, but I waited until they were all gone before I got these beauties. Oh, they are beautiful if fighting is your business. See here.”

He scooped up a handful of pebbles and put them in his mouth, working his jaws. I could hear the brass blades grinding the pebbles. He spat dust, and said, “There are times when you're so hemmed in you can't use weapons—only kick and punch and bite. Think how useful these are then ... how much better than ordinary teeth. And as for this item”—he held up his spike—“very useful,

too. Where I'm concerned, there is no such thing as unarmed combat."

"I can appreciate that, sir."

"My problem is I always have to be first in a fight. When I hear war cries and the clash of arms, a fire burns in my gut that can only be cooled by blood. Unfortunately, the blood is usually my own. I'm always charging in too soon and getting sliced up before I can do enough. It's my one fault as a warrior. Injuries make me miss almost as much action as if I were a coward."

I couldn't decide whether he had been sent by Pelius or not. "You put me in an awkward position," I said. "I'm under orders from the king. It is I who am responsible for enrolling the crew. And the king has forbidden me to take anyone without his recommendation. But you say you do not know him?"

"That is correct."

"I'm more than eager to enlist a man of your valor and special attributes. Anyone would want you for a shipmate. But what can I do?"

He stepped closer and smiled. His brass toothwork glittered like the hinges of hell.

"You're lying," he said softly. "I'm going to bite off your nose."

I tried to spring away, but his spike had slid behind the waistband of my tunic and I could not move.

"Don't bite me! Don't bite me!" I cried. "I'm not lying!"

“Of course you are. My young friends Castor and Pollux sent me word they had joined your crew, and they do not come from your foolish king.”

“The Twins—will they vouch for you?”

“Certainly.”

“You’re hired, then. Let me go. And please stop looking at my nose that way. You see, I had to make sure you were *not* sent by the king.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wants to supply us with a crew of assassins, all pledged to murder Jason. That’s why I have to be careful. Believe me, sir, I want you on my side in any fighting that is to be done.”

“I thought heralds never fought. Aren’t you exempt from harm by both sides?”

“In ordinary warfare, yes. But the monsters that beset our route tend to eat you first and examine your credentials later.”

“I’ve come to the right place. My name is Idas, prince of Messene.”

“Welcome aboard.”

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SIXTEEN

EKION

ARGOS DECIDED HE NEEDED some metalwork done. He wouldn't touch it himself; he worked only in wood. "It is well we are in a land where expert smiths abound," he told me. "You shall choose one of them to do what we need."

"Impossible," I said.

"A concept I do not acknowledge," he said.

"The smiths here serve Hephaestus and are considered priests. The chief smith is a court dignitary. If I bring this work to any forge in the land, the king will hear about it immediately. He will understand that we are secretly building a vessel and recruiting our own crew—and the consequences thereof will be exceedingly painful, not to say fatal."

"All this is none of my concern," said Argos. "My task is to get the ship built, yours is to get me whatever I need. The metalwork must be done by an expert—but not necessarily at his own smithy. We'll dig a fire pit right here. He can do his work right on the spot."

"Bring someone here to spy out our whole operation? Brilliant!"

“We cannot and will not use anyone outside our own company.”

“I don’t care how you get him or what you do with him afterward. Have those Spartan bullies kidnap him, if you like. When the work is done, you can throw him in the fire. Then he can’t tattle.”

I saw there was no reasoning with this madman and walked away. Then I had an idea. I journeyed half a day to the great smithy, which was in a cave in a hill near the palace. I entered that huge, smoky, clanking place and found my friend Rufus at an anvil, hammering on a red-hot bar of iron. He looked like a young fire demon in the flickering shadows. His red hair seemed to shoot sparks.

I was very glad to see him. He appeared to have grown since we had last met—seemed to have widened; his arms and legs were ridged with muscle. He was bare-armed in a leather apron. His left hand held the tongs that clamped the bar; his right hand held a mallet.

He dropped the sledge, took the tongs in both hands, and lifted the red-hot bar off the anvil. He dropped it into a bucket of water, and steam hissed out. He still hadn’t seen me standing there. He poured the steaming water into a trough, poured in cold water from another bucket, and left the bar to cool.

He raised his head. His smile flashed. My heart danced. He liked me! Suddenly, to my enormous surprise, he embraced me. I

was unused to this. The clanging of many hammers became a music of rejoicing. I smelled burning charcoal, leather, steam, hot iron, sweat. My cold heart warmed enough to take in the strange idea of friendship. This made me shy. I pushed him away.

“I must talk to you,” I said. “It’s important.”

“Wait for me at the foot of the hill.”

This day gulls had flown inland. Their screeching sounded pure as song after the clanging of metal in the cave. And the fresh golden air was intoxicating. I saw Rufus bounding downhill like a goat.

We walked toward the woods. “Well, tell,” he said. “I haven’t heard anything important for a long time.”

“Wait till we get into the woods.”

“Is it very secret?”

“Dead secret.”

“Well, tell me something. Tell more lies about your relatives on Olympus.”

“Some of them are down here,” I said. “I just met two cousins. The Dioscuri.”

“Who?”

“The twin sons of Zeus. Also princes of Sparta.”

I described Castor and Pollux, and how they had saved Autolycus from the bear. Then I realized he didn’t know who Autolycus was, or Daphnis, and I told about them, too, and about Jason. Then about Argos and Idas. And before we had reached the

great oak, I had told him all about what we were doing and why. I had not meant to tell so much. But, seeing the wonder on his face, I couldn't help myself.

Then I realized I had done the right thing. He turned away from me and spoke in a strangled voice. "I'd like to join your company," he said.

"A novice in the high service of the smith-god. Are you permitted to resign?"

"Of course not. I'll simply vanish."

"They'll be after you hammer and tongs."

"Why should they find me? I'll be on that wild east shore with you. Then we'll be out to sea. And we shall either die gloriously or return as heroes."

I wanted to say yes. Argos would have someone to work his metal, and I would have a friend of my own for the voyage. But I was afraid to consent. A runaway novice would infuriate the entire guild and start a great manhunt. It was a terrible risk. What I had hoped was that he would be able to do our work secretly at his own forge.

"I can make myself useful," he said. "You must have a lot of ironwork to do: the beak for your ship, swords, daggers, spearheads, armor. I also work in copper and brass. And if you have gold and rubies and such, I'll whip up some baubles to win the hearts of maidens at every landfall. In fact, I'll bring gold and

diamonds with me. They keep them in a vault, but I can cast keys, too.”

“My brother the thief will have much employment for you.”

“Then I may join?”

“Yes.”

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SEVENTEEN

EKION

THE SHIP STOOD COMPLETE except for painting and tarring. It was a marvel—slender, swift, and with two brilliant new features: a pivoted rudder board instead of the great clumsy stern oar and a mast that tilted the sail for a quartering wind, permitting us to outrace and outmaneuver any other vessel on the sea. Or so our shipwright claimed.

He had also made a skiff to be carried on deck, using materials never before used: whalebone for ribs and struts; not planks for its hull but whale hide, scraped membrane-thin and tough as oiled silk. In making the oars, he had allowed for the enormous strength of the Twins. He used polished ash stiffened with rhinoceros horn. Under great stress, they bent like bows but did not break; when bent, they snapped back, adding to the titanic power of the Twins' stroke.

“It’s a pirate skiff, really,” Argos told us. “Fleeing or pursuing, it will outrun anything. I learned its design when I voyaged to the Land Beyond the Dawn, where dwell little men with tilted eyes and parasols growing out of their heads. They carry curved knives and live on fish heads and tangerines. This is their design, but they never made a skiff to match mine, and their oars are flimsy things.”

Finally the ship was caulked and painted. There was never any question about her name. Rufus melted gold and mixed it with pine-nut oil and painted *Argo* in letters of gold across her stern. *Argo* was her name, and we who sailed her became known as the Argonauts.

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EIGHTEEN

EKION

THREE DAYS OUT OF port, we were cutting through the water under bright skies. I was at the bow watching points of light dance on the ruffled sea. We were all on deck. Rufus and Idas stood at the weather rail, deep in their endless discussion of new fittings for the Messenean's wrist stump. My redheaded friend was spending entirely too much time on that lopped lout. I was jealous.

Daphnis sat on the iron block that was Rufus's deck anvil. He was touching his lyre. By the goofy rapt look on his face I knew he was composing a verse. Autolycus was curled at the foot of the anvil, asleep—but with a pantherine grace; he seemed poised for leaping even as he slept.

The Twins were sparring. Idas had told them how dueling was done in his savage land. Enemies tied their left arms together and fought with knives. Castor and Pollux stood on the deck, left arm bound to left arm with a length of anchor chain, striking at each other with imaginary daggers. A point would be scored when one would slice past the other's guard and touch his body with the edge of his fist. They were hitting as lightly as they could, but with enough force to cave in the ribs of anyone else.

Jason had climbed the mast and was perched on top, his legs wound around the spar. He was swaying in the wind. It was slackening now; he was waiting for it to blow gently enough for him to dive off the mast and be able to overtake the ship without our having to circle back.

Daphnis came to me and said, "I'm doing a sea song, using the cry of the wind, the creak of blocks, the rattle of tackle, the lisp of waters, all that we hear. At sea we tune ourselves to these sounds and are startled when one of them stops or a new sound comes."

He spoke softly; his sweet murmuring and the occasional plink of the lyre had begun to put me to sleep on my feet. And in that sun-dazed half-sleep I seemed to be entering an old dream again, to be standing at the stump-water ocean watching a tiny visionary ship sail into disaster. I heard again an odd gurgling, rushing sound. My eyes snapped open, and I saw that, sure enough, we were sailing toward two huge boulders that had suddenly appeared. They stood about a quarter of a mile apart. But I remembered what had happened in my vision, and I shouted to Argos to put about. But found that I was shouting into a violent gust.

The wind carried away my voice. We drove straight forward to the passage between the rocks. And I saw to my horror that the dream was coming true: the rocks were beginning to hurtle toward each other over the face of the water.

If my dream had been truly prophetic, then the rocks were driven by an evil intelligence and were intending to catch us between them. I remembered what I had seen: the hull cracking like a walnut, the men crushed, the bloody water. The wind was blowing harder and harder; the sail was taut. Sheets of spray curled at our bow, rising in a beautiful double arc and falling into a wake behind us.

I saw that we were going fast enough to pass between the rocks before they could meet. But even as I thought this, the rocks picked up speed and bowled terrifically over the water, coming straight at us, one on each side.

They were huge, towering high above the mast. They were massive chunks of mountain risen from the bottom of the sea to destroy us. They were very close now. I could see the mosses that grew upon them, purple and green, and their crust of barnacles.

Argos put over the helm. The ship answered, swinging away from the rocks, and we were darting off, as the rocks hurtled toward each other. Oh, how I hoped they would collide, shattering themselves.

But then—sickening sight—they swerved simultaneously and began to pursue us, plowing through the water, side by side. We had gained by our turn; they were farther behind. And the wind was still blowing hard, driving us on. But as I watched, the rocks grew larger and larger.

They were directly astern. I couldn't see whether they were sliding along the surface of the water or forging through it. Both seemed impossible. Yet these boulders were coming at us with terrific speed. Our only hope was for the wind to blow harder.

I prayer for it to blow harder. And my prayer was answered. The wind picked up. It howled through the rigging. Jason still rode atop the mast; he couldn't have climbed down if he had wanted to. He had to cling with arms and legs, or he would have been blown off like a leaf.

It was blowing a half-gale now. Our sail cupped the wind and the *Argo* flew over the water. I saw the rocks dwindle behind us. And I thanked whatever god had heard my prayer. Too soon. No sooner had I thanked him than the wind dropped. It was amazing. One moment it was blowing a half-gale, the next moment hardly a whisper of wind. The sail flapped. We wallowed. And the rocks rushed upon us.

I heard a shout. Whiteness fell from the sky like a swan plunging. It was Jason diving in a long arc from the top of the mast, arms and legs taut, hair sculptured in the speed of his fall. He entered the water cleanly and surfaced well beyond the ship, heading for the rocks.

He swam so fast he seemed to be skimming over the bright skin of the water. I saw that he wanted to meet the rocks as far from the ship as possible. But why? What could he do when he met

them? He would affect them no more than a bird sharpening its beak.

I saw the rocks flinging spray as they braked in the water. They were stopping! I saw them drift sideways, away from each other, as if parting to leave a safe passage for the swimmer. Less and less did I understand what I was seeing.

Jason swam straight on, brown arms flashing. Something white floated behind him. It was his tunic. Then I saw why the rocks had drifted apart, and realized that they were indeed directed by a living intelligence. For they were changing direction. They were again rushing toward each other. They had separated only to give themselves space to pick up speed, intending to catch Jason between them. They were closing like giant jaws; they wouldn't even leave a corpse if they met upon him. He would be a pinkish spot spreading on the waters.

Gulls seemed to know they were being offered a meal. They dived, screaming, plunging so close they risked being caught between the rocks, which were almost touching now. The diving gulls obscured the swimmer. The huge boulders struck each other with a horrid grinding crash.

I couldn't see Jason. I saw only gulls and flying spray and rock dust. Suddenly the gulls vanished. More slowly, the dust cleared. The boulders had disappeared. Had they shattered themselves upon each other? Or dissolved again into vision? No—they had been there. Fragments of rock littered the water. I was

holding my breath. I didn't even know I had stopped breathing until I heard the tortured air moaning as it forced itself out.

What was I hoping? Did I want to see the black head breaking water beyond the litter? Or did I want to detect blood on the water? I seemed to feel my eyes burn, hungry as a gull's for a glimpse of redness among the rock litter, or a bone, or a gobbet of flesh.

Whatever I hoped, I saw him surface, not merely showing head and shoulders, but broaching like a porpoise, rising straight out of the sea until his feet were clear, shedding diamonds of waterdrops, then turning in the air and arching back, shouting exultantly ... uttering a victory yell that was impossibly loud coming from that slender frame. His voice bowled across the still air like thunder, rattling our oxhide stays.

We were all laughing and shouting, embracing one another and dancing on deck as he swam slowly now toward us, pushing through rock fragments as he came. But one stone about the size of a fist followed him as he swam. And when he reached the stern and was scrambling up to us, that white stone leaped out of the sea and landed on deck. It rolled to his feet.

It was as if this single stone were the survivor of those boulders that had dashed themselves to death upon each other—as if it had inherited their weird energy and menacing intelligence and now offered itself to the victor.

NINETEEN

EKION

FOOD AND WATER WERE running low; we decided to stop at the first island we sighted. But the wind fell off, and for the next two days we crawled across a landless sea. On the morning of the third day the wind freshened, and by midday we had sighted a small, hilly island.

“It’s called Bebrycos,” said Argos. “But I don’t think we should put in. It has a bad reputation.”

“You’ve said that about every other island we’ve passed,” said Jason. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” said Argos. “Something about a king who doesn’t like visitors—or maybe likes them too well and never lets them go. We’d better pass it by.”

“And when we come to the next island, you’ll remember something bad about that one,” said Jason. “In the meantime, we’ll run out of food and water. We’re landing here.”

“You’ll take the skiff, then,” said Argos. “I’ll stand offshore.” I saw Jason’s jaw muscles throb and his gray eyes darken. But all he said was, “Find a bottom and drop anchor. We’ll take the skiff.” Actually, we knew this was safer, although we were all getting irritated at the way Argos would rather risk our lives than endanger

a plank of his precious ship. Still, we knew that most islanders did not welcome strangers, and that it was better to sneak ashore than sail boldly into an unknown harbor.

We spent the rest of the afternoon hunting a good place to anchor—which was hard to find because the bottom shelved sharply here and the water stayed deep almost all the way to the beach. We didn't dare anchor so close to shore. A war canoe could dart out swiftly as a dragonfly and put a party aboard us before we could get under way.

We sailed all around the island without finding a place. Then Jason had an idea. By this time his rock had grown to boulder size and rolled behind him wherever he went, sliding off the deck and surging after him when he swam. Jason instructed Rufus to make a harness for the rock.

The smith went to his deck anvil and wrought rods and chains into a strong openwork iron nest and attached it to a long cable. Jason spoke to the rock; it rolled into its harness, slid to the edge of the deck, then overboard and sank. The cable stretched taut, and the *Argo* swung at a bow mooring where there was no bottom.

We rowed to an empty beach and struck inland. We picked up animal tracks and followed them through a screen of trees to a stream. It was a lovely place, girded by trees and floored by pine needles, and the stream widened into a deep pond. We stripped and dived in, frolicking like children.

I climbed out and went to see what lay beyond the wood. I came to an open space. I was standing in a kind of natural arena, a large grassy meadow cupped by low blue hills. The place was empty, humming with silence. I saw movement up one slope and climbed a path, threading among boulders. On one of them sat a girl weeping.

“Why do you weep, beautiful maiden?”

“Oh, I’d rather be ugly!”

“That’s something only a beautiful girl can say.”

“I don’t care, I do, I do. I wish I was ugly as a toad. Then that innocent boy wouldn’t have to die.”

“You’d better tell me all about it.”

“But you’re a stranger.”

“Secrets should be told only to strangers.”

“You say ‘only’ a lot, don’t you? Who are you?”

“Only a stranger ... tell me of this love and this death.”

“You talk like singing.”

“Wait till you meet my brother.”

“We have this king here, you see, and he’s a terrible man. He knows that someone has asked my hand in marriage, and he means to kill him.”

“Are you the king’s daughter?”

“No, sir. I’m his wife’s sister.”

“Why does he wish to kill your suitor? Is the lad so unworthy?”

“He’ll kill anyone who wants to marry me. He’s saving me for himself.”

“But he’s married to your sister, you say.”

“After he kills her, he’ll marry me. Then, when he’s tired of me, my younger sister should be old enough.”

“The man’s a monster.”

“Yes, sir. That’s what he is. Everyone hates him. But they fear him even more. And he enjoys being feared. And kills anyone who displeases him. Now that poor boy has displeased him, only because he was unlucky enough to fall in love with me. And so he goes into the ring today.”

“Ring?”

“Boxing ring, where the king does his killing. He challenges someone to a fight and kills him in the ring.”

“Can’t anyone stand up to him?”

“Oh no. No one has a chance. You’ll see for yourself. He’ll be coming here soon to warm up.”

She sobbed again, gazing at me sideways through tears that seemed to magnify her green eyes.

“I may be able to help you,” I said.

“Help me?”

“To escape this island. I’ll go talk to the others.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, stay here. If they agree, I’ll come back for you. But you must promise not to say one word about your wicked brother-in-

law and the way he kills people in the ring. If you do, we'll never get off this island."

"Why not?"

"We have some hotheads who love to fight, no matter what the odds. One in particular considers himself quite a boxer. If he hears about this king, he'll challenge him immediately."

"Oh no! He mustn't! That would be terrible. I won't say a word. Go quickly, sir, and arrange my rescue."

"Too late," I groaned.

Coming toward us, picking their way among the rocks, were Jason and Pollux.

"There you are," called Jason. "We've been looking all over for you. The kegs are full. We're ready to go."

"Who's your friend?" said Pollux softly.

They stood there, their tunics white-hot in the sun. Pollux's hair was a nimbus of golden flame, and Jason's black hair held blue light in the cusp of its wave, like a blackbird's wing.

"This is a young lady of the court," I said. "The queen's sister. She needs rescuing."

Her eyes had never left Pollux's face. She began her tale, but dreamily, almost joyously, as if offering a gift to the young men who had come suddenly and gorgeously out of nowhere—like gods. They listened greedily.

"Do they fight down there?" asked Jason, pointing to the meadow.

“Yes,” she said. “The people sit up here when they’re invited. Look, here he comes! That’s the king! That’s Amycus!”

A troop of spearmen were trotting across the field. Following them was an enormous brute of a man who had placed himself between the shafts of an oxcart and was pulling it easily at a half-run. Two oxen trotted alongside. The huge man broke into a gallop as the soldiers divided into two ranks, allowing the oxcart to pass between. The king shouted with laughter and dropped the shafts.

He stood there clad in a leather clout, seeming about eight feet tall and wide as two men. He was hairy as a bear; we couldn’t see his muscles under the dense pelt, but knew they were there. He raised his hand. One of the spearmen, the largest, was carrying a club instead of a spear—a huge bludgeon carved out of hardwood. He raised his club and smashed it down on his master’s head.

The club broke cleanly in two. The soldier stood staring at the king, holding the handle. We heard the king laugh and saw him clap the man on the shoulder. The man staggered, straightened smartly, and marched back into the ranks. Amycus raised his arm again. An ox was led toward him. He grasped its horns, hunched his furry shoulders in a curious way, and seemed to be looking deeply into the animal’s eyes.

Suddenly he struck with his head, butting the ox terrifically between its horns. Now, any horned beast wears a bridge of heavy bone under its hide between the horns that is stronger than the horn itself. The king’s head struck full on this armored brow. For a

moment I thought he was trying to break his head on the ox in some sacrificial rite. But it was the ox that fell, blood streaming from its nostrils. The soldiers shouted and beat their shields with their spears.

“That’s how he finishes them off,” murmured the girl. “With his head. If he doesn’t kill them with his fists, he butts them to death.”

“Oh, glory, glory,” I heard Pollux whisper. “This is the match I’ve been looking for.”

“Don’t even think about it!” I cried. “You’ll kill us all!”

Horrified, I saw the helmets swivel toward us as Pollux’s exultant yell sounded in my ears. I tried to grasp his arm, but he tore away from me and was bounding down the hill, yelling all the way. We followed the madman down the hill. I kept telling myself I could not afford to show fear. So I raised my white staff and walked slowly to where Pollux stood confronting the king.

Observing Amycus from the hillside, I had seen how big and powerful he was, but wasn’t able to pick out detail. Now, standing close to that head that had hammered down an ox, I couldn’t believe it belonged to a human body. It was totally bald, burnished a rich brown, taut and hard as a bullhide shield. The forehead was a corrugated ridge of bone. His face was meager; the features were huddled beneath that mallet of a brow. The nose was flattened, the eyes deeply pocketed, his mouth a thin pucker. His neck, surprisingly, was long but very thick, as wide as his head; it was

one length of muscle, giving that murderous whiplike power to his butting.

“Amycus, king of Bebrycos,” I intoned loudly and clearly, “I come vested with the sacred office of herald to bear greetings from my lord, Pelius, king of Iolcus, whose herald I am, traveling on embassy extraordinary with this royal expedition to recover the Golden Fleece. The Middle Sea we ply in a ship called the *Argo*, and have put in here to ask your hospitality, also provisions of food and water, promising you the gratitude of Pelius the Impatient, monarch of Iolcus.”

“Shut up, runt,” grunted the king. “One more word out of you and I’ll shove that staff where it’ll do the most good. Your friend here says he wants to fight.”

We heralds, whose business is mostly with kings, are trained to ignore anger and seek to extract some profit from rudeness. I kept smiling, and said smoothly, “Yes, sire, that is the rest of what I have to tell you. Our champion, Pollux, son of Zeus, prince of Sparta, and the foremost pugilist on this earth, seeks the honor of engaging you, Amycus, in fisticuffs—and trusts that, according to the usages of such contests, you will extend a royal hospitality to his entire party.”

By this time the rest of the crew had joined us: Daphnis, bearing his lyre; Autolycus stalking beside him, wary as a cat; Idas, glaring about at the soldiers, itching, I knew, to fight them one by

one. And Castor, who had shouldered up close to the king, stood there with his brother, staring up at the huge, hairy man.

“What are you, twins?” he growled.

“Yes, sir,” said Castor. “I am Castor, the wrestler. Do you have a champion for me to fight? A brother, perhaps. Or someone else big enough to make a contest of it? Or perhaps you would prefer to wrestle instead of box?”

“Stop that,” said Pollux. “He’s mine.”

“Easy, lads, easy,” said the king. “There’s enough of me to go around. I’ll fight you one after the other. You have my promise, Castor. After I kill this one, it’ll be your turn.”

“Thank you,” said Castor. “But I’m afraid I’ll be missing my turn.”

“Ho, ho,” rumbled Amycus. “You’re fine lads. I’m going to enjoy this. We’ll make a real event of it. We’ll fight this afternoon. Until then, rest yourselves. Until the match you are my honored guests. And after the match, that is, after I kill both twins, I’ll fight the rest of you, either separately or together. All except the two little ones ...” He pointed at Daphnis. “You shall be my harp boy, blue eyes. And you, master herald, you’ll be less talkative after I cut out your tongue. Until then, enjoy yourselves.”

We went to the stream and rested in the shade of the trees. The Twins had stayed behind to choose the ground for the match. Idas and Autolycus and Rufus were deep in discussion. I knew they

were planning something. I could see that Jason wanted to join them, but I held him back for a moment.

“Why are you letting him fight?” I said. “We could make a break for it. They’re guarding the skiff, but we could get into the surf, perhaps, and swim to the *Argo*.”

“I can’t stop Pollux from fighting,” he said. “I wouldn’t if I could. You must allow a man to do what he does best.” He smiled at me. “You did well today. I was impressed by your eloquence. And we shall try to see that so clever a tongue does not fall under the knife.”

I watched the slaves dig a great pit to roast crayfish in. The sea here was colder than our home waters and the crayfish the most delicious we had ever tasted. A haunch of venison was turning on a spit; another spit held an entire lamb.

But the king’s generosity was wasted. Jason warned us to eat very sparingly. “Don’t stuff yourselves,” he whispered. “We may have to move fast after the fight.”

The spearmen who were guarding us happily ate most of the food, and the slaves devoured the rest. Castor and Pollux were still at the arena.

I was restless. I strolled back to the arena. The hillside was filling with people seating themselves on the boulders along the slopes; from there they could watch the fight comfortably. A vast throng was gathering. I saw the Twins in a corner of the field and went to them.

“Have you chosen your ground?” I said.

“Here,” said Castor.

It was a place where the field tapered toward a cliff face of sheer rock, which stretched up about ten feet before sloping.

“Why here?” I said. “Why not in the middle of the field where your speed would give you a chance? He’ll simply corner you here and pound you to pieces.”

“That’s exactly what I want him to think,” said Pollux.

“May the gods smile upon you, my brave Pollux. But I still wish you’d fight him out there.”

I stayed with them, waiting for the king to come. People were flocking in now, thronging the slopes. Some sat on boulders; others leaned against them or sat on the ground. Some stood. It looked as if the entire population of the island had come to see the fight. Vendors passed among them selling prawns, honeycombs, and melons.

The king came, surrounded by spearmen, trailed by slaves. He wore a blue tunic and a golden crown. I raised my staff to salute him, but he brushed past me and went to Pollux.

“Are you prepared to die?”

“I am prepared to fight.”

“Have you chosen your ground?”

“Here’s where we stand. This rock wall is one boundary. Then twelve paces out and across.”

The king turned to the soldiers. “Pace it off and stand your pickets.”

An officer marched off twelve paces from the rock wall, then another twelve paces parallel to the wall—and placed his men a pace apart along the boundaries, making a square with the wall at one end. The armored men formed a hedge of iron.

A trumpeter raised his horn and blew a clear call. He dropped his horn and addressed the vast crowd now blackening the slopes: “People of Bebrycos, you have been summoned here to watch your king, Amycus, Guardian of the Coast and Hammer of Justice, destroy another Middle Sea pirate who dares enter our land without invitation. Watch him perish. After destroying this man, who boasts of being a son of Zeus and prince of Sparta, our king will fight his twin. After that, he will fight the others of the crew, one at a time or all at once, as they choose.”

As this was being announced, the king’s slaves were stripping their master. He shed tunic and crown and loomed like a furry demon. The sunlight glinted on his naked head, making it glow like a brass helmet. The crier blasted his horn again. The fight began.

Pollux was a big man, but he looked pitifully small as he retreated before the hairy giant. As I had feared, the king owned every advantage in this tightly penned space. He could corner Pollux, maul him with his great fists until he worked in close enough for his death butt. Yet Pollux himself, with Castor advising, had chosen this place. Why? I couldn’t figure it out. Nor could I

read anything in the faces of the others who were watching the fight.

Castor stood impassive as a block of marble; his yellow mane, ruffled by the wind, was the only thing about him that moved. Idas stood there, metal fangs flashing as he drew his lips back in a mirthless grin. Every once in a while he glanced at the hedge of spearmen, and I knew how avid he was to be at their throats instead of watching others fight.

It was strange what was happening in the ring. It was more like a dance than a fight. Amycus shuffled after Pollux, trying to block him off, but the blond youth simply flowed away from those fists and from those massive furred arms, moving head and torso just enough to escape the flailing blows, stepping away from the bull-like charges. Eyes pale as frozen lakes, yellow crest gleaming, he was untouched, although Amycus had aimed a hundred blows at him. Untouched—and he had not yet struck back at the king.

Jason, I saw, was smiling. Rufus was blazing with excitement—fire-red, twitching his shoulders, shuffling, eager to fight himself. I realized, with a lost pang, that I was with those who simply did not know what fear was. The thing about cowardice is that you can usually comfort yourself because it is so common. Other people, you think, are just as frightened as you are. But in this group I felt very much alone.

I looked quickly at Daphnis. Surely this frail poet must be terrified. But I'll be cursed if he didn't wear that goofy simper of

his, gazing raptly at the fighters.

Pollux had changed tactics now. Where before he had been moving very thriftily, just evading the king's blows, now he began to leap. He sprang backward from one end of the ring to the other. As soon as he touched ground, he leaped to the other side. Amycus rushed after him. He was no longer cool; he was losing his temper. He charged again, more swiftly this time. But just as he reached him, Pollux rose straight into the air. He leaped higher than the king's head, leaned upon air, and launched a scything sidewise kick. Amycus ducked, and the foot whizzed past his head. I thought, "Why does he duck? Kicking that head is kicking a rock; any foot must break."

And Amycus must have thought the same thing at the same time. For Pollux landed with knees bent and immediately sprang into the air again, kicking again at the king's head—and this time the king did not duck. But the foot did not meet the head. It was exquisitely aimed. It swerved in the air, caught the ear of Amycus, and tore it half away. The side of the king's face was painted with blood.

This did not weaken him but seemed to give him new strength. He bellowed with rage and charged again. This time, as Pollux sprang away, he did not rush after him but dove through the air—dove halfway across the ring, catching Pollux with his shoulder and hurling him against the hedge of armored men, who pushed him back into the ring. The king was all over him now,

crowding him, mauling him with his fists. One roundhouse punch caught him between shoulder and elbow; his left arm went limp, as if broken. His mouth bled. The crowd on the slopes began to roar for the kill.

But it was as if the taste of his own blood refreshed the Spartan. He began to move swiftly again, stepping away from Amycus, dancing around him, leaping away, swaying out of reach—as if the wind of the giant’s fists were bending him away like a reed.

The king was breathing heavily now, almost panting. And Pollux began to strike back, using only his right arm. He was wise enough not to break his fist on the king’s face. He was hitting at the body. The great rib cage sounded like a drum as Pollux beat a lightning tattoo on the king’s torso. Nine blows he struck, and was away before Amycus could answer with one. It was hard to tell the effect of these blows. But from the sound of it, the king’s body must have been one big bruise.

And now you could see his decision forming: to plow forward no matter what the punishment, take all the Spartan’s punches for the sake of using his mallet head. It seemed to be working. Pollux retreated, but straight back, without springing away. Perhaps he was too tired to leap. Amycus came at him, shuffling, crouching like a huge hairy spider moving toward a white moth.

Pollux was back against the wall now. He was slumping against the rock. And Amycus was upon him. He did not punch but

grasped the boy's shoulders, drew back that boulder of a head, and speed itself combined with the thick presence of death to slow everything. We saw that fatal head smashing toward the beautiful face of the Spartan twin.

And then the golden head slid away more swiftly than the wink of an eye ... moved just enough so that the king's head barely grazed him and smashed into the rock wall.

The crowd had fallen silent. Now it emitted one vast unanimous sigh as it saw the rock wall split. A webbing of fracture radiated from the dent. And for a long moment his head was socketed there. He was motionless. But Pollux had slipped away and was behind him, raising his own fist. He pivoted on the soles of his feet and smashed his knuckles into the black pelt just above the waist—a kidney punch that would kill an ordinary man.

Amycus turned slowly. He seemed unhurt. His nose was flatter than before, and his forehead was scratched. But a slowness had fallen upon him, muffling him. He raised his arms again, but slowly. Pollux's left hand climbed painfully into the air; with two fingers he lifted the king's chin in a weirdly intimate way. Then he swung his right fist again, planting his feet, turning on his ankles, whipping his body around with all the tensile power of his spine, all the suave strength of his shoulders, all his hot love of battle and his cold loathing of the hairy brute who had been punishing him so.

His fist landed full on the king's throat. It was as if we were all attached now to that fist, could all feel the king's windpipe

breaking under our knuckles.

Amycus stood there, swaying. Blood welled from every hole in his face, from his nostrils, his ears, his mouth. He tried to say something but only blew a bubble of blood. He fell face down on the trampled grass, and everyone knew he would never rise again.

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TWENTY

EACH YEAR, UPON THE night of the first full moon after the spring sowing, the women of Colchis performed their rain dance. The moon would rise slowly, beckoning a mob of wives to follow it up the mountain. Among the leaping, shrieking women walked a young man. Wearing a pair of gilded horns, clad in the Golden Fleece, he strutted up the slope.

He had reason to be proud. Was he not the best athlete of the year, winner of the long race, high jump, spear-throwing? Had he not been chosen Rainmaker, Horned Man, Wearer of the Fleece? Was he not being taken to the mountaintop to be loved by the seven most beautiful wives?

Then, after the last embrace, would not the sacred knives cut the heart cleanly from his body before age could slacken his muscles or blotch his hide? Should he not die in the flame of youth, giving his blood to the furrows? And then, unhoused by the knives, would not his potent ghost spin up into the low sky and freshen the cow-goddess, whose milk is rain? No wonder he walked proudly among the women, who leaped about him waving their knives and trying to kiss his shoulders as he went.

On that night, also, the maidens of Colchis climbed the mountain by another path and scattered about the lake shore, crouching there between two moons. For to look upon the moon in

the water that night was to see the face of the man you would marry. If you had prayed ardently and otherwise pleased the goddess, you would see the drowning moon become the face of the young stranger who, from that night on, would inhabit your dreams.

The princess knelt on the shore, gazing up at the trees. She would see no moon mirrored in the lake, she knew, until it had untangled itself from the branches of tallest cedar and floated clear. As she watched the light trembling in the branches, she heard voices singing:

*“You Hags of Heaven
Number seven;
Harpies favor hell ...
But when the Horned Man
Mounts the Moon,
You all come here to dwell.”*

And that was where she wanted to be, among the wives, wild with summer, singing the moon out of the cedar and into the sky as they danced on the mountaintop.

But to do that, she had to be a wife herself.

Just then she saw light staining the water. The moon appeared very bright and solid, as if it had not dived into the lake but had swum up from the bottom. She stared at it. It paled under her gaze and began to wobble. Its edges melted into golden flame. Her

breath caught in her throat. The moon shook itself into pieces of golden light; they swam together and made a face.

She looked at it. It looked at her. The light blinded her eyes. Blackness swarmed. She didn't fall. She knelt there at the edge of the lake, unconscious but erect, hands digging into clay. When she opened her eyes, the moon was gone. She arose and turned from the lake.

“Stand where you are, Medea,” said a voice.

“Who's that?”

“Aphrodite.”

“Where are you?”

“Don't try to find me. If you were to look upon me now, you would burn to ashes.”

“Show yourself, please. I don't turn to ashes so easily. I'm not sure I believe in you.”

“Gently, child. Have I not just shown you your husband-to-be?”

“All I saw was a blob. Do you expect me to fall in love with that?”

“We are not speaking of love now but of marriage. You are a princess, the only daughter of a rich and powerful king. He wants a husband for you who will add to that wealth and power.”

“And you call yourself the goddess of love.”

“Get yourself married, girl. The work will prepare you for pleasure.”

“Who is he?”

“Diomedes III, exiled king of Iolcus, otherwise known as Jason.”

“Is he handsome?”

“Not bad. Rather small.”

“Shorter than me?”

“Medea, my child, it doesn’t matter if he’s an absolute dwarf if he has a big army and a fat treasury. Have you not heard that I myself, Aphrodite, whose domain is love and beauty, took the ugliest and most misshapen of the gods in marriage? Nor did I weep and moan on my wedding night; I made him happy. And he has proved very kind and indulgent—and very, very rich.”

“What you must understand, Goddess, is that I don’t want to be a wife at all. I want to be a witch. I’m just learning magic now, just feeling my powers. I don’t want to start thinking about a husband, rich or poor.”

“Choice has been taken from you. You are destined to marry Jason and bear his child. I advise you to make the best of it, because the worst can be very, very bad.”

“When do I meet him?”

“He’s sailing here with a band of warriors. He’s coming for the Fleece.”

“My father will kill him.”

“Then you won’t have to marry him, will you?”

“I really don’t understand you. You say one thing and seem to mean another. I don’t know what to believe.”

“Believe in me.”

Her voice ceased.

“Aphrodite!”

“Farewell ...”

“No! Don’t go! Please.” But the only thing Medea heard was an owl crying its hunger. “Aphrodite, Aphrodite, where are you? Come back!”

Silence. The women on the hilltop had stopped singing. She heard the lilt of water and the wind among the reeds. A rustle, a thump, a tiny scream; and she knew the owl had hit a field mouse. But she kept listening. There was something about the stillness that told her she was not alone.

Indeed she was not. Someone was very near, lying in the shadow of the embankment, half in the water, half out. It was a naiad who had come to the lake by underground streams to watch the rain dance. Climbing out, she had seen Medea kneeling so still there, watching for the drowned moon, so she had watched, too.

She saw the moon’s reflection becoming a face, immediately fell in love with it, and waited there hoping it would appear in the water again. And when Aphrodite slid down a moonbeam to speak to the princess, she was there. And was still there when Aphrodite left.

Who was this creature?

Her name was Lethe. She was a water nymph, one who dwelt in lake and river and fountain. She had yellow hair and huge velvety black eyes. She looked like the kind of golden pansy that resembles a cat and is one of earth's most charming flowers. She swam like an otter and could run over a meadow without bending a blade of grass. And she had a fault that made her popular: what she was told by day, she forgot when the sun set; what she was told at night, she forgot by dawn. So she was much in demand by gods and mortals for telling secrets to. The secret most dangerous to tell is exactly the one you must tell—and who better for telling it to than one who listens with such wonder, widening her black eyes until you feel you could drown in them, and promptly forgets whatever she hears?

Long-legged laughing Lethe, the mischievous nymph of the forgetful ways, was much pursued because of her beauty, but rarely caught, and never kept. She had not yet found anyone she could really love—until this night when she had seen the face in the water. Now she was boiling with hot golden light, brimming with an enormous joy. She climbed the bank to stand before Medea.

“Aphrodite!” cried the girl.

“No, I am not Aphrodite.”

“But she was just here ... and she goes bare, with yellow hair. You must be she.”

“Very flattering,” said Lethe. “But I’m someone else. My name is Lethe, and I came out of that lake.”

“Did you hear what she was telling me?”

“I did.”

“I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do,” said Medea.

“There is one key to everything Aphrodite does these days. She wants that boy for herself.”

“Jason?”

“Yes.”

“But she’s twice his size.”

“She likes them small sometimes.”

“How do you know about this?”

“How should I not? We nymphs gossip ceaselessly. What you think are leaves rustling are dryads whispering. What you think are gulls hunting are nereids shrieking the news. And what we gossip about, dear princess, is who wants whom and what they’re doing about it. And we all know that Aphrodite still mourns the loss of Adonis, gored to death by Ares when he took the shape of a wild boar. Now she has been making plans for this Jason, who looks very much like Adonis. She chose him while he was still a green sprout, hiding him away on Cythera, and chaperoning him with platoons of witches. Now that he has leaped into manhood and is out voyaging, she hovers near his ship and attends his landfalls.”

“Why, then, did she show me his face in the water? Why does she want me to marry him? She kept saying so. Why? Why?”

“I can think of one reason. He’s coming here to claim the Golden Fleece. Your father, naturally, will attempt to kill him and

his entire company. Perhaps Aphrodite thinks that, if you marry Jason, you will be able to protect him from your father's wrath."

"Did you see his face in the water?"

"Everyone sees someone different—the one she's destined to marry. But I don't go in for marriage much. I think it's selfish."

Lethe was babbling, lying when she remembered to, but getting mixed up and sometimes telling the truth. She was so happy she hardly knew what she was saying. A chorus of full-voiced shrieking drifted down from the mountaintop.

"They're hunting now," whispered Medea.

The chorus changed, narrowed to a single voice, screaming—a man's.

"They have him now. Time for the knives."

The shrieking fell to a moan, melted into the night wind, became an owl's cry. The moon was high and growing pale. It was striped by a red shadow.

"He's caught her," said Medea. "His shadow is upon her. We shall have rain."

"There's blood on the moon, Medea, and you cast a red shadow. Your eyes are a hawk's eyes full of cold yellow light. You are apt for sorcery and belong to the night."

"I know ... I know ... but Aphrodite says I must be wife, not witch."

"You can be both," said Lethe. "Many are. Farewell."

She dived into the lake and swam away underwater, murmuring, “I’ll save him from that witch. I don’t know how, but I will. Oh, Jason, Jason ... I must be in love. I remember his name.”

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TWENTY-ONE

LETHE WAS FOLLOWING THE *Argo*. She mingled with a school of dolphins and frisked about the ship so that she could gaze upon Jason without being seen. “How can I make him love me?” she asked herself. “How do I contend against Aphrodite, Queen of Love and Beauty, and a hundred princesses of the Middle Sea, and shoals of nereids and naiads and dryads? How can I make him choose me, just me, among all these frantic females? I must make my move, or he’ll get to Colchis and be gobbled up by that sullen witch.”

In the meantime, she felt so wonderful and strong and swift swimming in the sparkling sea, watching her gray-eyed boy, that she laughed with joy. Then she ducked under, because she saw Jason look about as if he had heard her laughter.

“Trouble with me,” she thought, “is I don’t know how to worry. I’d better learn. No, I don’t want to. People are always falling in love with me ... so maybe this one will.”

Indeed, even as she was thinking these things, this joyous nymph was being fallen in love with by someone she had never met. And a considerable someone. She couldn’t see him now because he wore a cape of clouds and flew too high. But he was a great, brawling, black-bearded fellow with enormous powers. With one whisk of his cape he could sweep whole cities into the sea and

capsize their fleets. He could fly to the top edge of the earth, fill his lungs, and come back and blow his breath over a warm place, turning rain into snow, freezing lakes and rivers, locking the earth in ice. He was the eldest son of Aeolus; he was Boreas, the North Wind.

He had been flying over the Middle Sea when he spotted the *Argo* and saw the beautiful naiad frisking about it and had fallen in love with her with all the desperate strength of his nature, which was fire under ice. He did not swoop down. He flew high, watching her. With a sure jealous instinct he guessed that she was following the ship for the sake of one of its crew, and he wanted to know which one. He vowed to himself that once he found out he would simply whisk his rival off the deck and hurl him to the bottom of the sea.

Boreas kept watching. He studied the big blond Twins especially. He studied redheaded Rufus swinging his sledge at his deck anvil; and Autolycus, who walked like a cat and might attract a cat-faced nymph; and iron-fanged Idas, fierce-looking enough to fascinate someone who liked to be frightened. But he took no special notice of Jason, who was one of the youngest aboard and among the smallest.

Then he saw Jason riding atop the mast, saw Lethe flash out of the water and float briefly on her back, hair floating. And he knew whom she wanted.

His gusty roar filled the sky. His black cape spread over the sky as he dived. He no longer wished to drown Jason. He wanted the pleasure of killing him with his hands. He meant to snap the mast in two, then impale him on the splintered end.

But even as he swooped, watching the crew scurry about to drop sail before the approaching squall, he realized that if he killed the boy before the nymph's eyes, she would never forgive him and never love him. That thought made him postpone the pleasures of murder—but not for long, he vowed. He slowed his dive, leveled off, and swooped away, leaving the sky clear. But he kept following the ship, trying to think of a way to kill Jason without appearing to.

He was still hovering invisibly as the ship moored off a small island and the crew rowed ashore. They filled their water kegs quickly, but couldn't bear to go aboard so soon. They enjoyed the feeling of land beneath their feet.

They began to play. The Twins sparred. Autolycus tussled with Rufus. Idas stuck a chock of wood on his spike to blunt it, and fenced with Jason, who used a short sword. Ekion walked along the beach with Daphnis. Argos, who never left the ship, was still aboard.

They raced. Autolycus won easily, Jason was second. They unslung their bows and shot at a mark. Jason won, shooting left-handed. They threw spears. Castor and Pollux each won twice. Rufus delighted himself by winning once. Then he produced a discus he had forged. The discus then was a weapon, a solid

polished disk of metal with an edge so sharp it could shear through a medium-sized tree. It could slice through the breast armor of a chariot horse and kill the animal in full stride. Because of its sharp circular edge, you had to wear a glove made of oxhide, sewn with linked metal.

As the young men sported in the sunlight, they had an audience of two, though they didn't know it. Lethe had swum ashore and was hiding in the pure-water stream, watching Jason. But she was aware of the others. It was richly satisfying to see this lithe youth moving among his magnificent shipmates. She could barely stop herself from rushing out of the water to embrace him.

But, Boreas, also, was watching—and growing angrier and more jealous as he watched, feeling himself fill with such gusty spite that he had to clutch the tops of the towering cedars to stop himself from diving upon the island and blowing them all into the sea. When they began throwing the discus, his eyes kindled and an evil smile twisted his lips.

He watched Castor crouching and spinning and uncoiling—his torso gleaming as the heavy discus whirled away from his hand and flew and sheared through a pine tree. Pollux put on the glove, retrieved the discus, crouched and spun, and hurled it exactly as far as his twin had, slicing through a tree exactly as thick.

Rufus put on the glove. All the contestants stood behind the thrower. But Boreas was watching only Jason. An idea had flared suddenly in the cavern of his mind. He studied the forest below

until he found a hollow tree and blew softly into its bole, making a moaning sound.

Daphnis looked up, startled. Jason turned completely and searched the forest, trying to see where the sound had come from. Boreas blew again, softly. Again that moaning call. And Boreas didn't breathe again until he saw Jason, obeying the impulse of leadership, move off from the others and walk across the clearing toward the woods just as Rufus whirled and sent the discus flying through the air.

Boreas, who had been holding his breath, spat it out in a great spiteful gust, catching the discus as it sailed, holding it in a grip of air, and hurling it back straight at Jason's head.

Lethe screamed, unheard. Everyone stood frozen, watching the glittering death whirl toward the boy—all except Pollux. He leaped into the air, arms outstretched, hands cupped—and fell to earth, spouting blood as the spinning blade passed through flesh and bone and sinew, cutting off both hands at the wrist. For a moment, all froze.

Then it was Jason who became a blur of action, plastering mud on Pollux's stumps, and tying them off to stop the bleeding. Lethe, watching from the stream, saw how war and war games had honed these young men to move in a cool ballet of efficiency though their hearts were breaking. They brought Pollux gently and swiftly into the skiff, slid it into the surf, and made it fly over the water toward the *Argo*.

Lethe floated near, watching. She saw Rufus light the forge fire and heat a sword blade red hot. Jason led Pollux to the anvil. The Spartan, pale and tottering now, but trying to hold himself erect, and clenching his jaws so that he wouldn't moan, placed his stumps on the anvil. Rufus laid the flat of the red-hot blade on the torn flesh. Boreas, hovering invisibly, snuffed up the smoke as if it were the savor of dinner cooking. For he hated all the crew now, especially this one who had thwarted his attempt to kill Jason. "I'll get him next time," he muttered.

Jason was watching Pollux very closely. The stumps had been sealed by fire. But now, the hours after, was the critical time when he might die from shock and blood loss. Castor sat on the deck, pillowing his twin's head on his lap, stroking his brow. Pollux's face was white as bone.

Suddenly he spoke—not in his usual rumble but in a small voice, very clear, as if the thoughts were drifting in their purity out of his mouth.

"Lucky day," he said.

His friends looked at one another swiftly. They thought he was raving. He spoke again: "Idas, Idas, ugly Idas, now I know, meat must go. Spike hands, brass choppers, you've shown me something, man. Amputation is opportunity. I'm ready, ready, for retooling. Rufus, my friend, make me a pair of iron hands I can close into iron fists—and do a few other things with."

Lethe wept as she listened, feeling very odd. Naiads, whose faces are always wet, rarely weep because they can't taste the tears.

Jason spoke one word: "Rufus."

Rufus leaped to the top of the anvil. He was naked to the waist and streaked with soot. He had grown since coming to sea. Shoulders and chest bulged massively now under a pelt of red hair. He raised his arms to the sky, and cried, "Great Hephaestus, I call to you! Lend me a spark of your divine fire. Rich you are among the gods, snatching fat marrow from the very bones of earth—copper and tin and good brown iron. Lavish are the gifts you make: magic mirror for your mother, Hera; bracelets and necklaces for beautiful Thetis; a flying ax for Ares. Here today we have seen one mortal more generous than god has ever dared: a man who lives by his hands giving both of them to save his friend—rewarded with agonizing pain, helplessness, perhaps death. You heard what he asks, my lord. Now guide my tools. Teach me to make metal hands, hard for combat, gentle for love."

Thunder rumbled from a cloudless sky—like sledges pounding a far anvil. Lightning forked, stabbing into the deck hearth, kindling the piled charcoal.

Rufus shouted with joy. He sprang at his heap of metal, plucked out an iron bar, and plunged it into the flame. For the next twelve days and nights he worked ceaselessly at his anvil, needing no sleep, scarcely stopping to eat. A spark of the smith-god's vital fire had indeed lighted the tinder of his loyal heart, and he was

laboring to save his friend. He produced a pair of metal hands. So cunningly did he fashion them, with nerve and ligature and sinew spun from the finest of platinum wire, that they would be able to perform the most delicate of manual tasks as well as the most brutal. When Pollux balled his iron hands into iron fists, there could be no man or demigod to stand against him—for Hercules was dead.

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TWENTY-TWO

LETHE, WHO WAS TOLD so many secrets because she would immediately forget them, was a favorite at Aphrodite's court. Most secrets are love secrets and Aphrodite was always bursting with the latest one. So she was glad to greet Lethe.

"How nice to see you, my darling. But you're not your usual smiling self."

"I have a question, Queen of the Night."

"Yes, dear."

"It's about Jason the Argonaut. You used to fancy him."

"Still do."

"But you want him to marry Medea, it is said."

"Not to love her, though."

"Why must they marry, then?"

"To save his life. Unless he comes as Medea's husband, the king of Colchis will kill him. That's why I thought of this match. Anyway, it won't happen."

"Why not?"

"My son Eros, the Archer of Love, refuses to go to Colchis and shoot his arrow as I direct. And Medea simply won't feel a thing for Jason unless Eros pierces her untried heart with one of his darts."

"And why won't he?"

“He’s getting very bratty. Everyone spoils him. He won’t do anything for me unless I bribe him. And I’ve run out of bribes.”

“Shall I try to persuade him? In my own way.”

“But why? What’s your interest in the matter?”

“I’ve glimpsed the *Argo* as I’ve swum the sea. Some of those boys are gorgeous.”

“What! You’ve fallen for Jason, too?”

“Oh no!” cried Lethe, knowing it was better to lie. “Not Jason. But if he’s killed in Colchis, the rest of the crew are doomed. And there’s a pair of twins aboard—”

“Ah yes, the Twins! Which one do you fancy?”

“I don’t know. I’d never be able to remember which is which, anyway. So I’d like to save them both to make sure. Which means saving Jason first. Which means Eros will have to go shoot Medea.”

“Is this my giddy, forgetful Lethe? You’re being so logical.”

“Well, in an emergency. Actually, I like to think now and then. But it’s hard to start. May I go work on your son?”

“Any way you like. And if you get him to do this, I shall be eternally grateful.”

“I may have occasion to remind you of that one day. Farewell.”

She ran off. Aphrodite watched her admiringly. Lethe had long legs and ran very swiftly, yellow hair floating. She was running

because she had seen Eros playing in the meadow as she came, and she wanted to catch him.

She found him in the meadow, playing with the latest toy his mother had bribed him with—a round polished sapphire, large as a tennis ball. When tossed in the air, it left a trail of fire, as if it were a piece of broken star. He tossed the sapphire and watched in delight as it branded the air with blue fire, then fell.

It never reached his hand. Another hand, at the end of a long arm, had snatched the gem from the air. Eros looked up and saw a nymph towering above him, pinning his sapphire into her yellow hair.

“Give me that!”

“Hello, Eros.”

“Oh, Lethe, give me my sapphire. I don’t like anyone else playing with it.”

“But it looks so nice in my hair.” She plucked an arrow from his quiver, held it by its point, and swished it through the air.

“What are you doing? Give that back.”

“Oh, you’ll be getting it, never fear.”

Lethe reached her long arm and lifted him like an infant, tucking him under her arm back to front. She struck him a whistling blow with the arrow. He shrieked.

“Stop! Stop! Put me down.”

She sat on a log and stood him on the ground between her knees. “Do you know what I’m probably going to do now?”

“Don’t! Please.”

“Oh, but I probably will. What’s going to happen, most likely, is that I’m going to turn you over my knee and give you the spanking of your life with your own arrow. What you got before was just a taste.”

“No ... no ...”

“But you deserve it. You’ve been very naughty—disobeying your mother, neglecting your chores. You’re sadly in need of correction.”

“Please let me go, Lethe.”

“Why should I?”

“I’m not to be made to suffer pain, not ever. It’s cosmically incorrect.”

“It is, now?”

“Please ... somebody may see us.”

“Everyone will. I’ll call the dryads from the trees and whistle the naiads out of the fountain, and they’ll all come to watch. They’ll enjoy it.”

“Won’t you let me go? What do you want me to do?”

“Obey your mother. Go to Colchis and shoot Medea with one of your arrows, making her fall in love with Jason the Argonaut.”

“All right, I will. Now let me go.”

“Not quite yet. Hold still. I want you to explain something to me. There seem to be two kinds of arrows in your quiver, one kind with golden points, the other with silver.”

“Not silver, that’s lead. They’re the arrows of indifference. Let me go. You’re squeezing the breath out of me.”

“Tell me about the arrows. Slowly and clearly. I’m getting impatient.”

“Well, you know about the golden ones: whoever I shoot with one of those falls in love with someone standing near. But another venom spreads when I pierce someone with the leaden arrow. What fills the heart then is not love, but icy indifference.”

“But you do have different kinds of love arrows for different kinds of love? There is a love that lasts a lifetime, and beyond. There is love that lasts only till dawn. And there is love that changes to hate.”

“All done with the same arrows. But I have different ways of shooting.”

“Aha, I thought so. What I want you to do is this: shoot Medea with a golden arrow and make her love Jason, but with a love that will not last.”

She had stretched her legs while speaking, and he slid away. She was on him in three strides. He felt himself being plucked off the grass and folded across her long thighs. One hand clamped him there.

“No ... no ...” he yelped. “Please.”

She dug her fingers into his flesh and twisted in a slow pinch.

“Owww ...”

“If you scream like that now, what will you sound like when I’ve been smacking your divine little bottom for an hour or two?”

“I give up. Completely. I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Are you sure you know what I want?”

“I’m to go to Colchis and shoot my arrow into Medea, making her fall in love with Jason with a love that will change to hate.”

“Can I trust you?”

“You have to. I’m the only one who can do it.”

“Tell me exactly how you’ll go about it.”

“I’ll shoot Medea with a golden arrow as she’s looking at Jason. Immediately afterward, I’ll shoot Jason with a leaden arrow of indifference. She’ll love him till they’re married, and for a time thereafter. But when her love meets his indifference, it will turn to hate.”

“Hearken, Eros: if you betray me, if you fail to do what you’ve promised, or do something else, I’ll search the world for you. I’ll find you wherever you are and after I finish with you, you won’t even be able to sit down on a cloud.”

“May I go now?”

She lifted him off her lap. They looked at each other. She was very beautiful. She suddenly bent and kissed him on the lips. He smiled. He was the godling of love, after all; his flesh was magical. To touch him was to risk enslavement, which was really why Aphrodite had never dared punish him. And he knew he had awakened something in Lethe that would never sleep again.

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TWENTY-THREE

THE ARGONAUTS LANDED BY night on the wild coast of Colchis. The black ship slipped silently into a little cove; the men disembarked and pulled it ashore. They held council on the beach under the moon.

“We are too few to do it by force,” said Jason. “So we must hide our intention under a cloak of diplomacy. Four of us will visit the castle: Ekion, myself, and two volunteers. The rest of you will remain here, in hiding, until such time as we reappear with or without the Fleece. We shall then hold counsel again and make final plans.”

“You’ll have no chance to practice diplomacy,” said Argos. “King Aetes will lop off your heads as soon as he lays eyes on you. He will kill you and then send troops to search inlet and cove. We shall be found, we shall be slaughtered. And the ship, my beautiful ship, will burn.”

“Less talk and more action,” growled Castor. “This quest is turning into a debating society. I’ve had no chance at all to break any necks. If you’re going to the castle, I’m going with you. I suppose that’s what you mean by volunteering. My brother volunteers, too.”

“Yes,” said Pollux. “I haven’t had any chance to test my new fists.”

“*Our* new fists,” said Rufus. “I should be going with you, too, Jason.”

“Sorry,” said Jason. “Three is all I can take this time. But I think I can promise every one of you all the action you’ll want.”

Some hours later, it appeared as though the shipwright’s gloomy hunch were to come true. Before Aetes’ throne stood Jason, Ekion, Castor, and Pollux, manacled with thick chains and hemmed about with heavily armed warriors of the royal guard. Aetes sat on a high throne made of ivory and jade. He was a squat, vicious-looking man. His robe was a pelt taken from the rare white polar wolf. His crown was of red gold inlaid with the teeth of the same wolf. But it was his daughter who occupied Jason.

Medea sat at the foot of the throne. Jason, studying her, saw a very tall woman, sleek and muscular in her short linen tunic, with huge yellow eyes and a mane of black hair. He was fascinated by her hands. They were beautifully shaped with very long fingers, but instead of fingernails they were tipped with ripping talons like a hawk’s.

“You have come to take my Fleece,” said Aetes. “So I shall take your heads—which seems eminently fair.”

“Indeed, O King,” said Ekion. “All the civilized world marvels at your instinct for equity. So you should recognize that we do not come here to steal the Fleece, but in honorable embassy, seeking to arrange a transfer. It was stolen from our ancestors, after

all, by your ancestors. Naturally, we would be prepared to make a contribution to the upkeep of its shrine.”

“Honorable embassy, eh?” said Aetes. “Is that why you steal ashore like thieves in the night and leave your crew hiding on the beach while you come here to spy out our position? No, my friends, you are not ambassadors but thieves, thieves and spies. Now you, Jason, your snake-tongued herald, and your two Spartan thugs must pay for your folly with your heads.”

It was now that Eros came to them. He flew into the throne room just as the king was pronouncing sentence, notched an arrow, and shot it into the heart of Medea. The whole performance was invisible.

Medea felt a strange sweet pain stabbing into her chest. Now, she dabbled in witchcraft, was acquainted with spells, enchantments, and other magical effects—but for all her experience she could not believe what was happening to her. It was as if a membrane had been peeled from her vision. She saw the world all new. And the main fact of this new world was a condemned prisoner, a boyish pirate with black hair and gray eyes who bore his chains with such dignity. Suddenly she saw him as a pillar of rosy fire casting a fragrance that almost made her swoon. The sparks of this fire entered all her tender places and made her burn with agonizing sweetness. She wanted to dig her claws into him softly, lick his blood like honey, feast on his mouth. She wanted to be all

the women he had ever known—mother, nurse, sister, wife, slave—daughter if he had one.

The soldiers of the guard laid hands on the chains, preparing to lead the prisoners away. Medea uncoiled her full length and raised her voice in a blood-chilling falcon shriek. It stopped all sound, all movement in the huge throne room. All eyes swung to her.

“O great Aetes, Father and King, I am weary of executions.”

The king frowned. “What is your meaning, princess? Would you pardon these thieves?”

“Not at all. But beheadings grow monotonous. Let us gain some entertainment from their punishment.”

“Entertainment? What do you suggest?”

“The Marriage Task.”

The king’s scowl deepened. The courtiers gasped. For the Marriage Task was an outmoded rite. In times past, it had been the sacred ordeal to be undergone by anyone who aspired to wed a princess of Colchis. It was centuries old, but in Medea’s time it was used not as a courtship rite but to rid the king of any suitor he considered undesirable. And Aetes was surprised now that Medea had thought of this robber as a suitor, even if she meant him to die in the arena.

“Do you consider this Jason a candidate for your hand, O daughter?”

“I consider him a candidate for Hades, O Father. I am proposing that he be dispatched to those dark precincts by the Brass Bulls.”

“Very well,” said Aetes. “We shall forgo the chopping block for these young men, although I think it would be much simpler. Take them to the dungeon. They face the Brass Bulls tomorrow.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

JASON LAY UNCOMFORTABLY ASLEEP in his tiny stone dungeon. He dreamed that he was bound like Prometheus to a crag, and that a huge sleek black bird with a woman's face was diving at him, claws extended. He awoke to find Medea bending over him.

"You will be more comfortable without the chains," she said. She pointed to the manacles, muttering. They dropped from him like strands of seaweed.

"Thank you, Princess."

"Yes, you have much to be grateful for. Had it not been for me, your headless body would now be ripening on the midden."

"I know how much I owe you," said Jason. "Perhaps my performance tomorrow may provide you with sufficient entertainment to pay some small part of my debt."

"Your performance tomorrow, and that of your companions, will last precisely as long as the wink of an eye, my dear pirate, unless special arrangements are made on your behalf. The monsters you will face come out of the smithy of Daedalus. They are giant bulls cast in brass, made by the arch-mechanic as instruments of war for his master, Minos, and purchased by my father after Minos died. Their horns can shear through any substance. They can charge through a stone wall ten feet thick and come out the other side without a dent. But they will not have to touch you with their horns

or their razor hooves. For their breath is of fire. They spit flame. At the distance of a mile they can ignite a whole forest, or, with exquisite marksmanship, burn the bark off a sapling and leave the trunk unmarked. All those who have entered the arena with them have been incinerated.”

“Now, truly,” said Jason, “my companions and I would seem to need these special arrangements you mention.”

“You must anoint yourself with this unguent,” she said, giving him a small crystal flask. “It is made of the tears that Io wept after she was changed into a cow and tormented by Hera’s gadfly. And these tears are mixed with fat rendered from the salamander that lives in flame and from certain essences of the phoenix, that marvelous bird that dies in flame but is resurrected therein. Spread this salve upon you from head to foot, and have your companions do likewise. Then the fiery breath of the bulls will play about you as harmlessly as the evening breeze.”

“I shall spread the salve,” said Jason. “What else must I do?”

“Nothing. The bulls will become confused when they see you unscathed by the flame. They will panic, and turn upon each other, breathing fire, and be turned thereby into pools of molten brass.”

“Indeed, dear lady, how shall I ever be able to thank you?”

“Oh, you will have a lifetime to think of ways,” said Medea. “This ordeal is a Marriage Task. You will be the first to have passed it. Why do you furrow your brow, O successful suitor? Do you find the prospect of marriage with me so displeasing?”

Jason looked at her. She was formidably tall in the glare of moonlight that lanced through the slot in the dungeon wall. She seemed to grow taller as he watched. Medea had the weirdly limitless quality of those who work in magic. He did not know how to estimate her; she was without frontiers. The idea of “too much” was at the marrow of her manner. She stood there before him, alert and powerful as a predatory bird. She lifted her long arm and softly raked his cheek with her claws. He concealed his shudder behind a smile. She was the hawk girl who had visited his sleep; she had no wings now but was otherwise the same. Had she known she was waiting for him? He took her hand and examined it, turned it over, and kissed its palm. “Sharp claws,” he murmured. “I shall have to file them down.” She took the flask from him. “Let me anoint you, fiancé.”

At first it all went as Medea had promised. The Brass Bulls, each larger than an elephant, stood pawing the ground, glittering in the sunlight, as the dense swarm of onlookers began a low, seething murmur like the wind in grass. The bulls spotted the three young men standing in the arena; they shook their horns and leveled their heads. Twin jets of fire spurted from their brass nostrils.

Jason believed in Medea’s magic, but it was all he could do to stand there pretending no fear as the brazen beasts spat flame. He stood between Castor and Pollux, a hand on the arm of each. He felt their massive arms quivering and clasped them more tightly, whispering, “Show them.” The ancients believed in appearances.

They believed that outward manner revealed inner quality, that the weakness that was not indulged could be transformed into a strength.

So the young Hellenes stood awaiting fire.

The amazed crowd saw them continue to stand there, arm in arm, smiling, unconsumed in the very heart of flame. Jason left the others and vaulted over the railing into the royal box, where sat Aetes and Medea. He bowed to the king and knelt before Medea—who raised a wand and touched him on each eye, the mouth, and the knees.

The willow wand turned into a snake in her hands, a mottled yellow and black serpent that cast itself into loops, swiftly and more swiftly twining, coiling, uncoiling, weaving itself into hypnotic patterns as Medea crooned a wordless song. Then the snake was a rope braiding and unbraiding itself in Medea's hands. The rope became a garland of red and purple flowers that Medea twisted into a wreath and placed on Jason's head. All Jason's attention and the focus of the crowd had been turned from what was happening in the arena and were caught up in the sleepy maze of snake and rope and garland.

But there is always a level of a hero's awareness that cannot be lured from the business at hand, especially when the business is fighting. Something broke into Jason's trance and pulled his eyes away from Medea's magic. He abruptly looked up and saw what was happening in the arena.

When his gaze pierced the dust, he realized that his bride-to-be was acting treacherously. The Brass Bulls had not turned upon each other as she had promised—but, seeing Castor and Pollux unconsumed by flame, were charging in to finish them off with horn and hoof. When Jason saw them they were in mid-charge, galloping with such terrific speed that he had no chance of intervening, but had to stand by helplessly and watch the Twins being destroyed.

A hideous clanging shattered the air as metal crashed on metal—and Jason, amazed, overjoyed, saw Pollux punching great dents into the Brass Bull with his iron fists. Iron is harder than brass, and the Spartan was fired by a gleeful battle rage. His shoulders bunched with muscle; he swung his arms like sledges. The huge iron mauls that were his fists crashed again and again into the beast, knocking off its horns, flattening its face, pounding it into a shapeless mass of metal.

Castor had seized the horns of the other bull and, straining his thews until he thought they must burst his skin, was slowly twisting the monster’s brass head around. Finally he wrenched it off with a bell-like sound, turned, and tossed the head to Jason in the Royal Box. Jason caught it and offered it to Medea, saying, “A souvenir of your treachery, Princess.”

“I meant no treachery, husband.”

“Liar! Witch! You are no wife of mine!”

“I saved you from the bulls.”

“And sought to betray my friends.”

“All for love of you. They are your friends, and I am jealous. I am jealous of everyone you ever spoke to, smiled upon. I am jealous of the ground you walk on, the clothes you wear. I am nothing now but my ravenous love for you, and that love has turned into a pestilence in my veins.”

“This marriage of ours promises to be dangerous for my friends,” said Jason.

“You are a king. You need no friends.”

“I am a battle chief. I lead men. I love those I go into battle with. If I keep you as my wife, you must exempt my companions from your malice.”

“You are the master. I am your slave.”

She was unused to begging for anything; the strangeness of it made her look younger, vulnerable, very beautiful in her gown of black and gold with diamonds twined in her black mane. And Jason, gazing at her, felt a strange power rising within him. Again he had that sense of Medea’s excess, knew that she would be as extreme in surrender as she could be potent in conflict, and that she would lead him through corridors of feeling that few had walked before.

“Forgive me,” she whispered.

“Lead me to the Golden Fleece and help me bear it away.”

“Your quest is my quest, husband. My father’s goods are my dowry.”

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TWENTY-FIVE

ON THE FIFTH DAY after their wedding, he asked her to keep her promise and lead him to the Fleece.

“Lord husband,” she said, “I am mindful of my vow, but the time is not yet.”

“In matters perilous,” he said, “the time is always now. Hesitation breeds doubt, doubt breeds fear. Fear breeds failure.”

“Ah, my prince, I have seen you in action and know what you can do. No one is so ready for daring deed as you; no one more apt to pluck glory from the very jaws of terror. But the perils that surround the Golden Fleece lie beyond your experience. They belong to a different order of event. This relic is tainted by an ancient curse.”

“I don’t understand.”

“But I do. This matter belongs to the realm of dire enchantment—to which I, as priestess of Hecate, have learned certain clues. In an attempt to find the luckiest date for taking the Fleece, I have considered the flight of cranes and the entrails of doves. I have cast numbers, deciphered the path of certain falling stars, sifted salamander ash, and done other readings I am not permitted to divulge, even to you. And they all say the same thing: the months ahead are swollen with evil omen. Your voyage here and your adventures on the way, your successful combat with the

Brass Bulls have used up your credit with the gods. You must abide here quietly with me and attempt no adventure until your luck ripens again.”

“How long will that be?”

“More than a year, say the portents. At least a year and a day. For another kind of fortune has begun to ripen. You have planted a child in me. It is written that you must see that child, and that child must learn to know you, before you risk your life again.”

He smiled and took her in his arms. “We shall prepare a mighty welcome for the little prince or princess,” he said. “But after a year and a day, you must lead me to the Fleece.”

“I will. I swear.”

For some months Jason and Medea lived peaceably as husband and wife, and he tried to love her. But Eros had pierced his heart with the leaden arrow of indifference, and he could not respond to her passion. He kept pretending but grew very restless. He hated living in the palace. He felt his sword rusting and his youth growing stale. He ached to be at sea again, being blown toward adventure.

Then, one night, Lethe came.

She swam, unseen, into an arm of the river that cut through the palace grounds. This was the night she meant to meet him. She couldn’t wait any longer. She climbed the bank and began to sing.

Jason was in his chamber, sleeping. He awoke suddenly. He heard a voice singing, very faint and far away. Faint as it was, it

threaded its way through other sounds, and he knew he had to arise and follow it into the night. Medea was not there. This did not surprise him. She arose often to prowl the castle grounds.

So he thought he might meet her when he entered the park, but none of the shadows hardened into his wife. The voice was singing. He followed it through the garden and through an orchard, to the riverbank. He could hear the words now:

*“Come to the river
Where love runs deep.
Do not give her
Your heart to keep.”*

“Who’s there?” he called. The voice kept singing.

*“Down, down,
Out of sight.
Drown, drown,
In green-gold light.”*

“Who’s there?”

He heard laughter.

“Answer me!”

“My name is Lethe.”

Naked and dripping, she arose before him. Her hair was moon-brown, but he knew it would be yellow by day. He couldn’t tell the color of her eyes because they were full of moonlight.

“Lethe ... is that your name?”

“Yes. And you are Janus.”

“Jason.”

“Oh yes, Jason. I’m quite forgetful. Especially about names.”

“I suppose everybody tells you you’re beautiful.”

“Not quite everybody. But I don’t mind hearing it again. Not at all.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Want to go swimming?”

She grasped his hand and dived in, pulling him after her. He swam superbly for a mortal, but she was a dolphin in the water. He tried to harmonize his strokes with hers; she slowed for him, and they swam in a dreamy kind of ballet under the moon.

“You’re a pretty good swimmer,” she said.

“Not like you.”

“Oh well ... I’m a naiad. Shall we go under?”

“Underwater?”

“You’ll like it down there.”

“I’ll drown.”

“I won’t let you. I can breathe underwater. It’s water that goes in but air that comes out; that’s why fish blow bubbles. When I have mortal guests, I breathe for them.”

“How?”

She flung her arms about him, put her lips to his, and blew into his mouth. “Like that.”

“Are you sure it works underwater?”

“Always has.”

“Let’s go, then.”

She held him around the waist as they sank. It was warmer than he had expected and not quite dark. Greenish moonlight sifted in. He was holding his breath as they slowly sank. His chest burned. She pressed his belly, and he felt the dead air leave his lungs. She immediately clasped him to her, put her mouth to his, and blew air into him.

It was better than air; it bubbled deep in his lungs. He felt his blood fizzing. The cares of the quest suddenly melted away. Weightless underwater, clasped in her smooth strong arms, drinking her breath, he felt this hour the flushing out of the foul memories of a marriage made for the wrong reasons.

He pulled his mouth from hers so he could kiss her shoulder, inhaled water, and began to choke. She pulled him to the surface half-drowned. He coughed and floundered. She dived and came up under him. He was riding her astride. She swam toward shore.

“Let me off.”

“Oh, why?”

“We’ll sink.”

“Nonsense. You feel light as a feather. I could carry you across the sea this way. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Slide back a bit. Swing your legs up and rest your feet on my shoulders.”

He did. He felt her sleek and warm beneath him, and marveled at her strength. He was resting comfortably; he felt her shoulder muscles sliding under his feet. By the time they reached shore he knew that the world had changed for him. He was dismayed to see torchlight—to hear shouting and laughter—and to find the ship’s company on the bank, stripping to swim.

“Well met by moonlight!” called Daphnis. “Who’s this enchanting creature? How can I be mad for her so soon? Introduce us immediately.”

“I’m Lethe,” she said.

“I’m Daphnis. Never mind the others.”

“She’s too big for you,” said Castor. “She needs men of stature.”

“Lethe ...” said Daphnis. “Did he find you in the river?”

“I found him, little one. I came looking.”

Jason introduced the crew to her, one by one. She kept laughing. “Never, never will I remember these names.” She slid between Castor and Pollux and took an arm of each.

“Twins,” she murmured. “Big beautiful ones. But we’d better not start anything. How would I ever remember which was which?”

Pollux held up his iron fists. “Only one of us has these. Me. My brother just has the old-fashioned kind.”

“You don’t want to get mixed up with those two,” said Daphnis. “Double trouble all the way through. But consider this carefully: there’s only one of me.”

“Yes, consider him,” said Ekion. “He’s not as childish as he seems. A bit befuddled, perhaps, but he can handle it. He’s a poet.”

Idas and Autolycus were silent. They stood there in the spangled light, lean as wolves, staring at her. This amused the nymph. Mirth gripped her entire body. Her hair shook, her eyes shone, her teeth flashed, her long legs quivered.

“I love you all,” she said. “Every one of you, large and small. But I’ve made my choice for now. So dive in, boys, and swim away.”

“Would you, perchance, have any sisters in this river?” said Ekion.

“Half a shoal, which is seven, one for each. They’re floating around in there, waiting for the party to start.”

Shouting joyously, the crew dove in and swam away. Jason and Lethe stared at each other. They stood close; he was wrapped in her fragrance; they did not touch. She laughed softly.

“You mind that I’m so tall? Your wife is, too, isn’t she?”

“That’s the only resemblance.”

“Good.”

“Every way you are is the way I want you to be. I’ve never loved anyone before.”

“Neither have I. And I’ve searched and searched. Tried this and that.”

“I don’t want to dance here. This is the royal garden. A blighted place. Let’s go underwater.”

“Shall you be able to stay under so long?”

“You’ll teach me to breathe there. And perhaps I’ll teach you to remember.”

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TWENTY-SIX

NOW, MEDEA HAD FOLLOWED him to the river, and stood there wrapped in shadow, watching him dance with Lethe. She watched them for hours, then returned slowly to her empty bed.

She did not sleep. Her eyes smoldered and her talons twitched; she felt that she must tear his heart from his chest and roast it for her dinner. But no, it was too soaked in treachery; it might poison her. She would toss it to the carp who swarmed in the castle pond and would eat anything.

By morning her rage had frozen into hatred. “Murder is too swift,” she said to herself. “I need a slower, more painful vengeance.” So she smiled when he came to her, and imitated tenderness, saying, “I have good news for you, husband. The omens have changed. The gods have allowed your luck to ripen, and it is suitable now for you to take the Fleece, if that is what you want.”

“You know it is,” he said. “And I rejoice that the time has come.”

“I have not forgotten my promise,” she said. “We were granted some months to love each other without fret, but now I am ready to guide you to the Fleece. Remember, though, that it is guarded by an enormous serpent that feeds on anything that moves, and can swallow an ox as a cat does a grasshopper.”

“We’ll go there alone,” he said. “I want to take a good look at this monster before making plans.”

She led him up the slope of the same wild mountain where the women did their rain dance ... led him past the lake where she had first seen his face, up, up, past the timberline to where a stone temple stood. He heard a horrid mixture of sounds—rustling, grunting, slurping, thin screams—and saw a fawn being swallowed by a giant serpent. The fawn was going down head last; its eyes seemed to be begging Jason to help.

He couldn’t bear the sight; he looked away. And saw that Medea was watching with glittering yellow eyes and a little smile. He knew then that he must leave her—but not until he had stolen the Fleece. He also knew he couldn’t afford to be squeamish. He had come here to study something he would have to fight. He forced himself to keep watching as the serpent swallowed the fawn.

Now it saw them, began to slither toward them, opening its mouth. It was huge, Jason saw: twice the length of the *Argo* and as thick as the bole of a cedar.

“No weapon can pierce its hide,” whispered Medea. “Not arrow, not spear.” Indeed, Jason saw that its hide was of hard mottled leather, thick as armor. “When it flails its tail, it knocks down trees,” said Medea.

“Isn’t it getting rather close?” said Jason.

Medea whistled a two-noted birdcall. The serpent stopped slithering and began to rise, uncoiling, climbing the air, higher and

higher, stretching its jaws until Jason thought it must be hinged at the tail. It was a hundred feet of living gullet, lined with teeth.

“Does it obey you?” he said.

“Only me,” she said. “And only sometimes.”

“Can you make it leave this place?”

“Some nights, I take it hunting. Down the slope, through the trees, to a place where the fawns dance. But it doesn’t stay long. Brings its kill back.”

“How long can I count on?”

“Two hours or so.”

“Time enough. Will you take it hunting tomorrow night so that we can get into the temple?”

“What then? Will you sail away with the Fleece and leave me here?”

“Of course not. You’ll meet me at the cove where the *Argo* lies hidden and sail with me to my kingdom.”

The serpent stood on its tail now, undulating slightly, weaving its head. It was taller than the temple. Medea whistled again, three bars this time. The serpent lowered itself into coils and lay there motionless. Its eyes were lidless and could not close, but Jason knew it was not asleep.

“What did you tell it?” he said.

“That I’ll come back in three nights and take it hunting.”

“Why wait? Why not tomorrow night?”

“In three days, my father and his war chiefs will leave the city. They go to inspect the troops that guard our northern frontier. It will be better for you if the king and his captains are on the other side of the country when you steal the Fleece.”

“Yes. You’re a better tactician than I am, my dear.”

“Kings’ daughters are trained in deception, even before they become wives.”

The lidless eyes watched them depart.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

EKION

JASON SUMMONED US TO a final meeting before the raid, all of us except Argos, of course, who never left the ship. Upon the night appointed, we were to climb the mountain to the shrine of the Fleece. Medea would have gone before to lead the serpent away, leaving the place unguarded. Jason and Autolycus were to enter the temple and take the Fleece. The Twins, Idas, and Rufus were to patrol the clearing and kill anyone who approached, while Daphnis and I, the noncombatants, were to station ourselves in trees to give warning if anyone came near.

We rehearsed the march by day so that we could go torchless by night. We climbed the slope, but stopped short of the temple clearing.

“I don’t want to disturb the serpent,” said Jason. “And you’re as well off not seeing it.”

“How long will your wife keep it occupied?” I asked. “Two hours, she says. Choose your tree now, so you won’t have to search for it in the dark. You, too, Daphnis.”

It was windy on the mountain that night; my tree swayed under me like a mast. I had to clench the bough with my knees as if

I were riding a horse. The moon flared briefly, then flared again, as if the wind were trying to blow it out. The sky must have been full of broken clouds. I was there to keep watch, but it was hard to read the shadows.

I heard something: sliding, rustling, then wetter sounds. And a mellow bleating sound, almost like a sob. I was staring my eyes out, but the wind had blown the moon away, and I saw nothing. The sounds grew closer. The moon flared. Then I saw ...

I didn't want to believe it. It was something out of the very earliest legends—of chaos clotting into a giant life-blob that shaped itself into a giant snail. Here it was, returned, crawling out of the rubble of chaos, enormously long and thick, wearing horns. The moon rode a clear patch of sky. The thing was passing beneath, and I saw it plain. It was no snail. It was a gigantic serpent; in its jaws, half-engulfed, was a full-grown stag.

Then I did the bravest thing I had ever done: I screamed. My every impulse was to shrink so profoundly into the tree that I would become part of the bark. But I didn't. I screamed as loudly as I could to warn the others, even though I knew the thing below would be the first to hear.

It ignored my screaming. It passed my tree and moved into the clearing.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE YOUNG MEN STOOD before the stone temple that was the shrine of the Fleece. Jason pushed at its heavy brass door; it didn't budge. Pollux closed his iron hand into an iron fist and pulled his arm back.

"No," said Jason. "Don't hit it. They'll hear the clanging in the palace."

"Maybe we can push it down," said Castor. "Let's put our shoulders to it."

But as they spoke, Autolycus had been tinkering with the bolt. The door swung open.

"Enter," said Autolycus.

Jason followed him in. The Twins stayed outside to patrol the clearing. Inside, Jason and Autolycus knelt to the ground when they saw the Fleece. It was larger than the *Argo's* mainsail and seemed woven of the shifting lights of dawn, casting a dim radiance through the dark chamber.

"Truly a garment of the gods," said Jason. "Worthy of a hero's quest."

"We'd better roll it up," said Autolycus. "It shines in the dark."

Then they heard Ekion screaming.

They rushed out of the shrine and saw the serpent. It had coiled itself in a single loop around the temple and its garden. The six young men stood inside a rampart of living leather.

The monster was in no hurry. It was swallowing a stag. It had all the time there was to attend to those within its loop. The sky was clear now, and the moon was a torch. The Argonauts stood there enclosed by the monster. They heard sounds of swallowing.

“Perhaps he’ll choke on the horns,” said Jason. “I saw an anaconda do that once—on a goat’s horns. But that was only an earthworm compared to this one.”

He spoke calmly but he was scorching inside, suffocating with rage because he knew Medea had betrayed them and furious at himself for trusting her. The others felt a familiar icy calm that resembled joy. Peril had become their pastime now.

“I suppose we’d better decide what to do,” said Jason.

“We’ll kill it,” said Pollux. “What is there to decide?”

“I think you’ll have to attack it with your fists, Pollux, try to crush its head,” said Jason.

“Just what I think,” said Pollux.

“The problem is it won’t lie still and let you do it. I think that you, Castor, should try to hold its head still, and give your brother a chance to do some punching.”

“Right,” said Castor.

“Another thing to consider,” said Jason. “Its loop forms a circle, its head near its tail. And that tail is a weapon, too—a flail

that can knock down trees.”

“I’ll work on that,” said Idas. “I’ll drive my spike through its tail and nail it to the ground.”

“How about me?” said Rufus. “What do I do?”

“Swing your sledge, O smith. Beat on its back. Try to crack a spool of its spine. It’s encased in triple leather, but you might make yourself felt. You, Autolycus, wield your sword, striking wherever you think best. As for me, I shall try my bow. No arrow can pierce that hide, but its palate would be vulnerable if I can shoot upward into its open mouth.

“I’m looking for work,” said a clear voice.

“Daphnis!” cried Jason. “You’re supposed to be safe among the trees.”

“Our friend is lying so that there’s a space between head and tail just big enough for me to slip through. Ekion is still out there trying to recover from his first sight of the beast.”

“Why have you come?” asked Autolycus. “You can do nothing here.”

“I feel invincible. That naiad frolic left me ready for anything. And I have an idea. If it works, we’ll be able to depart unharmed and leave the monster guarding an empty shrine.”

“Tell me your idea first.”

“I’ll sing to him. My father, Hermes, did that once. He tells a tale of loving another naiad long ago, one named Io. But she was guarded by a monster with a hundred eyes, who closed only fifty of

them when it slept. So Hermes unslung his lyre and sang a sleepy song, closing those eyes one by one. The monster didn't even wake up when Hermes cut off its head. Well, I have a sleepy song, too."

"Start singing," said Jason.

Daphnis touched his lyre and began to sing: a song that floated strangely on the air; it did not belong to a windy night and dark deeds. It was an afternoon song, a summer song. The drowse of cicadas was in his song, the lilt of waters, and all the multitudinous tiny sounds that linger in the hush of such an hour.

Serpents' eyes have no lids and so cannot close. You can tell they are asleep only by a milky haze that covers the eyes like ashes sifting over a banked fire. Lightly, lightly, Jason stepped toward the serpent's head to see if its eyes were growing hazy. He did see its jaws gaping in a great yawn. They closed. Its tail twitched gently. Jason was hoping it would uncoil.

It did. Its tail moved away from its head. The Argonauts rushed through the open space and into the grove. They hid behind trees, watching. They were waiting for the serpent to clear the entrance to the temple so that they might return for the Fleece.

It moved away from the temple and slowly coiled itself in the center of the clearing, but in a tight bundle of loops, until it was a tall cylinder of loops, with its head on top. It lay motionless. Jason darted out; the others followed. Silently they ran past the sleeping serpent, through the brass door, into the shrine. They knelt before the glowing Fleece. It did have a power, they knew, a power that

bent the strong joints of their knees. They knelt there and thanked the gods for having brought them this far.

Autolycus was the first up. He sprang to the altar, snatched the Fleece from the wall, and rolled it up. They rushed out of the temple, laughing, and ran across the clearing toward the woods. But they had laughed too soon.

Medea was in those woods. She had come back with the serpent so that she might watch it do her work of vengeance. She had rejoiced when she saw the beast encircling her enemies. She had listened in disbelief as Daphnis sang his sleepy song. Oh, how she wished she had wings to match her talons and could swoop down to seize the minstrel in her claws, silencing his song forever. But she could only listen and watch, boiling with thwarted rage, as the serpent fell asleep. Now they had the Fleece, they would race to wherever their ship was hidden and sail away, leaving her to drink her own bile forever.

It could not be; it must not be. She raised her voice in one desperate falcon shriek. That wild call stabbed the night air, freezing Jason's blood as he ran and piercing through the fog of sleep to the brain of the serpent. The beast awoke. The young men saw the moon blotted as the serpent reared above them, jaws agape.

They scattered. They were nimble. They kept dodging as the head struck at them. They merged with the shadows and flashed out, striking at the beast. But suddenly it flipped itself into the air, reshuffling its coils, feinting with its head at Jason. As he ducked

away, it struck with its tail and landed a glancing blow, breaking three ribs.

Daphnis was near. He stooped to help Jason, felt a gale of foul breath, and saw the open jaws plunging down at him. They didn't touch him. Rufus was there, swinging his sledge with all the strength of his blacksmith muscles. The heavy iron peen struck the serpent's face and shattered. And those jaws swerved toward Rufus. Now Pollux did something that amazed even these brave men.

He hurled Rufus aside with a sweep of his arm and leaped into the jaws of the beast. He stood inside the lower jaw, left arm upraised, pressing the palm of his metal hand against the roof of the serpent's mouth. He stood there rigid, holding those jaws propped open and swinging his right arm with enormous force, smashing the iron maul of his fist against the serpent's teeth, knocking them out in a shower of blood and ivory.

Castor had hurled himself on the beast and had actually succeeded in looping its tail about a tree and tying a great knot. But the agonized threshing of the beast uprooted the tree, and now its flailing tail held a giant club. The tree fell on the roof of the temple, which collapsed.

Then Idas sprang in, stabbing with his spike just above the knot, stabbing so deeply that he was burying the spike up to his wrist.

Pollux, having knocked out all the teeth, began striking upward. His iron fist crashed against the roof of the serpent's

mouth—the weakest spot in its body, as Jason had said. The fist broke through the thin plate of bone, sending splinters of bone into the tiny brain. It died in a final spasm that sent Idas flying. He crashed heavily, breaking his shoulder. The same death throe had lifted Castor and smashed him to the ground, shattering his knee. Pollux staggered out of the jaws, covered with blood; particles of bone were in his hair. He swooned. Jason, pinned to the ground by the pain of broken ribs, was muttering, “Medea ... Medea ... let slip the beast and hunts us still.”

He pulled himself to a sitting position and looked at his friends, who lay on the grass. Every breath hurt. He couldn't even pull himself up to see if anyone was alive. He tried to rise and swooned again.

Medea came out of the woods, flanked by spearmen, like a huntress with a pack of hounds. She shrieked again as she saw the fallen Argonauts. “Take them alive,” she said. “But guard them well.”

TWENTY-NINE

EKION

I HAD BEEN WATCHING all this from my perch in the tree. I waited until the last clink of the patrol had died before I came down.

The serpent's corpse made a bulky shadow. I investigated splinters of moonlight and found that they were a pile of teeth, glimmering like little ivory daggers. I stumbled on something. It was the Fleece, rolled up—dropped by Autolycus and overlooked by Medea and the soldiers.

My shipmates were gone. Jason's wife had taken them to torture and death. Would they be hunting me also? I didn't want to think about that. I didn't know what to think about. Too much had happened too fast; now everything had come to a stop. "Father, help me," I whispered. My staff twitched in my hand. The wooden head spoke:

"Set blade to earth and dig beneath Planting there the serpent's teeth."

Why would he want me to do that? A disagreeable prospect. I picked up a sword and poked its point into the earth to make a hole. I walked across the field making a neat row of holes, then began another row, until I had a hundred and fifty holes. I went to the pile

of ivory and took a handful. Slowly I went from hole to hole, planting a tooth in each, covering it, and lightly tamping the earth. By dawn I had sowed a hundred teeth.

I had no time to plant the rest. Before my astounded eyes, metal spikes pushed out of the earth. As I watched, a hundred armed men grew swiftly from the holes and stepped out on the field. Each man wore a helmet, breastplate, and shin greaves, wore a shield on his arm and a dagger at his belt, and carried a double-headed battle-ax. Huge, ferocious-looking men. They glared about suspiciously, not knowing where they were. I crouched behind a tree, watching.

They were blank-faced, boiling with energy. They prowled about, shouldering one another. They paired off and began to fence with their axes, dealing blows that would have smashed an ordinary warrior to the ground; easily parried such blows; and broke off to fight with someone else. Ax clanged on shield. Men grunted, snarled, bellowed, made every sound except speech. They used their axes and daggers, not as men use weapons, not as specialized tools, but as a bull uses its horns, a tiger its claws—with utter naturalness and complete ferocity.

Should I show myself? Would I last a second? Why wasn't I melting into the underbrush and slithering away? I couldn't. I wanted to, but I could not.

These men had a claim on me. Serpent seed and self-harvested they were, but it was I who had planted them and had been

instructed to do so by my oracular staff. Once again I should have to imitate courage.

I stepped out from behind the tree and leaped upon a rock. “Silence!” I shouted.

All sound stopped. The men stood stock still. Every head swung toward me. The attention was total; it bristled with ferocious expectation. I understood that they had instantly, instinctively, accepted me as their leader and were awaiting orders. Their expectation robbed me of speech. No man spoke. No man moved.

“Perfect soldiers,” I thought. “Sprung from monster teeth, the ultimate weapon; planted in a battlefield, never knowing the shelter of a womb, nor the nurture of breasts, but born full-grown, untouched by tenderness. How they regard me, their eyes so fixed and blank. They are like the members of a single monstrous body and I—I—have been elected brain. They’re waiting for me, and I have nothing to say.”

They stood in shining rows, waiting. The only movement was the plumes of their helmets bending to the small wind.

“How long will they wait? I shall have to begin. Perhaps, as I hear myself speak, I’ll learn what I want to say.” I raised my voice. “Hear this. We march immediately. We go to seek the enemy wherever he may be found. We do not halt night or day but march until we find him.”

They shouted and beat their shields with their ax hafts. I raised my hand and they fell silent.

“Four of you fell saplings. Make a frame, weave it with boughs to make a litter for me. Cover it with that sheepskin. Two of you shall be litter bearers; detail to change every four hours. Move!”

The ranks broke. The men busied themselves. A group of six broke off and formed a circle about me, facing outward. I walked away. The circle moved with me.

“My bodyguards,” I thought. “They will accompany me everywhere, allow no one to approach with hostile intent—or, perhaps, any intent. Makes one feel cared for, though it might become irksome. Perhaps not.”

I mounted my litter and immediately went to sleep. I don’t know how long I slept, but, awaking, knew we had come to a coastal plain.

A strong wind blew against the line of march, freighted with the smell of the sea. And the men had changed. Their regular swinging tread had become a lope. Their faces had lost their blankness, were blazing now with wild eagerness. They reminded me of a pack of hunting dogs scenting their prey.

I stood on my litter. We were moving across a great meadow. The sea glimmered in the distance. There was a brightness. I saw points of fire and heard a far sound of voices carried on the wind and a music of distant metal. Then I saw what had excited my men. An army faced them. Those were spearpoints catching the sun, armor chiming. Suddenly, with one giant voice, the men began to

shout, a great clamorous yell, savage, exultant. For the first time I perceived them as human beings. For this cry was hot-blooded, spontaneous, throbbing with the terrible joy of men doing for the first time what they had been born to do.

They were killers, incredibly skilled. They fanned out, moving so swiftly that they were a blur of brass. Vastly outnumbered, they proceeded to reduce the odds. They swung out, pivoted upon themselves, cut off a forward group of the enemy, drove them into a pocket of meadow formed by an angle of bay, and hemmed them in with a hedge of iron. My men looked nothing like those they faced. Their faces were meat-red, set with eyes pale as stones; their hair was the color of brass, seeming an extension of their helmets. And they were much larger—their forearms were thicker than the Colchians' legs.

The axes rose and fell, the heavy blades shearing through shield, helmet, skull. The Colchians screamed like cattle under the butcher's sledge. Metal rang on metal. As soon as one group was slaughtered, the serpent-men swung out and corralled another group, and systematically slaughtered them. I was watching from my litter, unable to endure the massacre, uncertain about stopping it, and had slipped into a protective coma. Finally I roused myself.

“Stop!” I shouted.

Too late. The Colchians were a pile of corpses. My men were simply rooting among the pile, trying to find someone alive, using

their knives to cut throats. They ceased at my shout and stood to attention.

I walked upon the field to see if I could find anyone alive. A figure scurried out from under a pile of bodies and began to run. He was immediately caught.

“Don’t hurt him,” I called.

He fell to his knees. “Spare my life. I was but following my leader.”

“Aye, such guiltless obedience has caused more deaths than the worst intentions. I may spare your life, but I need some information.”

“Gladly—anything I know.”

“What happened to Prince Jason and the other Argonauts?”

“I know! Yes, I do, thank the gods! They are alive, but awaiting death.”

“Do you know where they are imprisoned?”

“I can lead you right to them, merciful one.”

The men were leaning on their axes, casting tall shadows. Their hands were bloody. Blood spattered their bulging forearms. Their faces were in shadow. I raised my voice.

“Men, I thank you, and seek volunteers for a special mission: twenty of you to deliver my friends from a dungeon somewhere.”

Every man stepped forward.

“Again, my thanks. You make me proud to have been your leader. But I need only twenty and shall pick at random. This rank

—number yourselves off, every second man, until you count to twenty. These shall come with me. The rest of you must go back whence you came and build a city there. Its site shall be the ring of trampled grass where the body of the serpent lies. I don't know the source of this mandate, but a city must rise. After that, all Colchis shall be yours. And since to hold this land is to invite invasion, you shall enjoy constant warfare.”

One man shouted, “Come back and be our king!” Others took up the cry. “Come back and be our king!”

“Once more I thank you,” I said. “But I don't think I'm meant for a throne. However, I have some regal friends—savage brawlers, too; you'd like them.”

The men beat their ax hafts against their shields and shouted, “Ekion! Ekion! Ekion!” I hadn't realized that the syllables of my name could ring like brass.

“One by one I'm getting things I didn't know I wanted,” I thought. And felt my heart swell with puzzled pride.

THIRTY

MEDEA STOOD ON THE beach gazing out to sea, and her eyes were pits of yellow fire. The sea—it was a barrier to her, but to her husband it was an avenue to freedom and glory. Here it was, out of an inlet on this wild shore, that his ship had slipped its mooring and sped southward bearing the Fleece. Off they had sailed, that thievish crew, taking the sacred relic that was her father’s pride and her own dowry, that fabulous booty which seven generations of pirate kings had failed to take.

But now it was she who had failed. Despite all her cunning plots, her brilliant treachery, her brutal tactics, Jason had broken out of prison with his men, fought his way to where the *Argo* was hidden, and sailed away—leaving her behind to bear his child.

She struck her swollen belly. “Child ...” she muttered. “You shall be the instrument of my vengeance. If you are a boy, I shall raise you to be an assassin and aim you at your father, whom you will have been taught to hate. If you are a girl, I shall train you in witchcraft. And you shall help me brew poisons and cast spells, and together we shall torture your father, even at a distance.

“But no!” she cried, tearing at her hair. “No ... no! I don’t want distance. I must close with him. Rend his face with my claws. Sink my teeth into his throat.”

She began to step in a circle, chanting:

*“Wind, icy wind,
I’m as cold as you.
Wind, wind ...
I am violent, too.
Wind, wind, rise for me,
Blow me over the Middle Sea.”*

A sharp breeze started, making the sand fly, stinging her face. Her black robe fluttered, her hair whipped. She laughed with joy and raised her long arms, flexing her talons as if to claw the sky.

*“Wind, wind, I need to know;
Will you take me where I want to go?”*

Something loomed upon the edge of the sea, black-caped, astounding. She had always been taller than men; now she had to look up, up. She heard a voice like the low howl of a hurricane just before it pounces.

“I am Boreas.”

They stood on the icy beach confronting each other. Both were clad in black. Their capes blew and billowed. His beard blew. He was cavern-eyed, a giant. Flourishing in his bleak airs, she seemed to be growing to meet him.

“Lord of tempests, mighty one, destroyer of fleets, I greet you.”

“You spoke a magic verse, calling me. There I was off another coast, preparing a fine punishment for a string of villages that had offended me—stirring up a tidal wave I was, when your song summoned me. What do you want?”

“I must cross the sea swiftly to kill my husband.”

“What have I to do with your domestic arrangements?”

“I have read certain signs that tell me you also hate the man that I hate. He is Jason the Argonaut.”

“When do you wish to leave?”

“You’ll take me?”

“Climb on my back and hold on tight.”

“Thank you, O stormy one, but I’m not quite ready yet. I need a few days to kill someone here, then I’ll be ready to go.”

“Is it Lethe, the naiad, you wish to kill?”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she it is who stole Jason from you. I know ... I know. I watched her doing it. I wanted her, too, but she preferred that puny thief. So my love has turned to hate also.”

“Then you will rejoice when she is dead, will you not? And that will be my fee to you for taking me across the sea.”

“I can do my own killing,” he growled. “How do you intend to catch her?”

“I have vast resources. I am a king’s daughter and Hecate’s priestess.”

“Ridiculous! You don’t have a chance of capturing her. No one takes a naiad who doesn’t want to be taken. Gods, enamored, have cast wide nets and caught only fish. A certain king of Lydia, driven mad by desire, seined all the rivers, drained the lakes, blocked up the fountains—and all he caught was a chuckle she had bequeathed the waters.”

“If you hate her, too, kill her for me.”

“I’ll kill her for myself.”

“How?”

“I haven’t decided. I can blow her lake out of its bed and roll rocks over her as she flees. Or perhaps I’ll sport with her a bit, for she is playful and bold. Offer to take her riding, invite her to step off a hill onto my shoulders as I fly past. Fly high, high, over sharp-pointed rocks, then simply shake her off. Naiads are very hard to kill, but that should do it.”

“When will this happen?”

“Soon ... soon.”

“Then, when that is done, you shall take me to Iolcus so that I may dispatch my husband to his paramour in Tartarus.”

“Farewell until I return.”

The wind of his going bent the waves backward and shook the treetops.

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THIRTY-ONE

IT IS SAID THAT Pelius turned purple when he heard that Jason had fought his way through chapters of monsters, had defeated the Colchian army, and was sailing home with the Fleece. His eyes bulged like grapes, his neck ballooned, all of him darkened and swelled until he simply burst. It took seven slaves working seven days and seven nights to scrub gobbets of king off the palace walls.

But there were no welcoming crowds when Jason returned to Iolcus. For the land now was stricken with drought. No rain had fallen that year, the rivers had dried, crops had withered in the field. The animals that did not die of thirst died of hunger, and people began to starve. The sea shrank back from its shore, leaving shoals of gasping fish on a sea bottom that had become loathsome beach.

Those people who did see Jason could take no hope from the sight of him. He looked as thin as any starving farmer. He walked as though in pain. His eyes glimmered like marsh water in his sunken face. But he was king now, everyone knew. He spoke very softly but with utter authority.

He did not go to the palace. He climbed to the old temple of Thundering Zeus, which was on a hill overlooking the sea. There was a stone ledge there, a kind of natural throne. Jason donned the

Golden Fleece. He wore no crown, only a chaplet of roses that Lethe had woven for him and that had never died.

People were flocking to the plain now. He raised his arms and spoke to the sky.

“O great Zeus, king of the gods, whose rod is lightning, whose footfall is thunder, you who bestow and deny at your pleasure—you, O lord, turn generous again, I beseech. Send us rain to feed our crops that we may feed our children. By this pelt that was stolen from your image and that I journeyed halfway across the world to reclaim, in the sign of this Golden Fleece, I pray, lend me the power of the Ram, the power to call rain out of the dry sky.”

The people on the plain searched the sky but saw no clouds. They despaired. Strangely then, a clef of pale fire stood upon the sky, hooked down, and touched one of the temple trees with flame.

“Yes ... yes ... you have heard,” cried Jason. “By this burning tree, answer, answer, answer with rain!”

A faint thunder growled. The sky darkened so swiftly it was as if night had been hurled upon the earth. What fell then was not rain as they had known it, but was as if Zeus, enraged by prayer, had simply lifted a lake in each hand and hurled them down upon the earth. The very fountains of heaven were broken and spilled upon the earth.

It drank thirstily, steamed, spouted, put out green banners of joy. The rivers filled. The sea returned. Jason limped down from the hill like a drowned rat. Mobs of soaked, happy people were in

the roads and the streets now, frantic to adore him. But he avoided them all and shut himself up in his chamber, giving orders that no one should be admitted.

Now that he had done what he'd had to do, he felt that he had lost everything in the doing of it. His heart was sick within him, and he didn't know how to continue living. For Lethe was gone. The one creature he had loved on earth, the forgetful nymph, had again forgotten. She alone had been able to heal the ugly wound left by Medea. She had drained him of that foulness, taught him to breathe again, taught him to love. And then, at the moment of his greatest triumph, had vanished.

“It is unkingly to grieve,” he said to himself. “I owe my people a brave face, a cheerful face, no matter what my loss. And perhaps, perhaps I shall see her again. No matter how forgetful she is, she may remember me. At least, I must try to believe so.”

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THIRTY-TWO

BOREAS CAME AGAIN TO Medea. He would not answer her questions, but she knew he had killed Lethe, and she rejoiced. She stepped off a hill onto his back and was whisked across the Middle Sea. They landed on the northeast shore of Iolcus, near where the *Argo* had been launched three years before.

“Before we part,” said Boreas, “may I offer you some advice?”

“There is no one, dear Boreas, whom I venerate as I do you, not on earth, or in heaven, or in hell. I love and admire everything about you. Your opinion is sacred to me.”

“Then hearken: if you wish to avenge yourself on Jason, drop the idea of murder. Death is too easy. His shade, released, will bound happily down to Tartarus and embrace the shade of Lethe.”

“How, then, shall I punish him?”

“Let him live and live with him. You shall be a wife rejoining her husband, ready to forgive all—but forgetting nothing. And you will know how to torment him in a thousand ways.”

“Will he take me back? He left me once.”

“He was a pirate then. He is a king now and bound by sacred law. You are his rightful wife—a king’s daughter, who will inherit a rich realm. Moreover, you are about to bear his child. He will not cast you off.”

“I shall enjoy tormenting him, of course. But I hoped to marry you, you know.”

“I know. And perhaps you will, but not yet. He won’t last too long under your tender care.”

“Will you marry me when I’m a widow?”

“We’ll discuss it then.”

So Medea joined Jason in Iolcus and prepared to bear her child. But then she had an idea that made her smile for the first time since leaving Boreas.

“I know how to do it,” she whispered to herself. “A man like Jason, fearless, hardened by battle, made proud by victory, can only be hurt by something he loves. Witness his grief at the loss of Lethe. So I’ll give him the same grief twice over and grind his soul between two millstones. By witchcraft shall I give this child, who is to be born tonight, the face and form of Lethe—her voice, her laughter, and her accursed joyousness. I can do it. That face is printed on my mind in lines of fire; they burn down to my womb and will brand that likeness on the child within. This girl who is to come tonight shall be another Lethe for him, a child he shall adore. Yes, the hooks of love will anchor themselves in that stony heart, and when the child is taken from him, the heart will be torn from his bosom. That will be my vengeance. Yes ... yes.”

That night she bore a child. A girl. Sleek and fair, with huge velvety black eyes and a nimbus of daffodil hair. When Jason bent to her in wonder, she did not cry but made a sound like the

chuckling of water as it curls over rocks, and he felt an airy spear of joy piercing his chest.

For the next five years, Medea forced herself to wait patiently, but her eyes smoldered as she watched her husband and her daughter. For the girl became his shadow; she followed him everywhere, and her laughter filled the castle. She went sailing with him, riding, rock-climbing. And she went with him on sadder errands. For, as king, he cultivated his healing powers and visited the sick and the dying. He let her come with him, for he knew that the sight of her joyous face and the sound of her voice were health itself. In time to come, he thought, she would grow up to be a healer, magically endowed; already the snowdrop touch of her fingers seemed to banish pain.

But she was not to grow up. One night of wind, she vanished from her bed, and Jason led a frantic search for her. She was found by fishermen as they spread their nets the next morning. Her crushed body lay among the rocks at the foot of a cliff.

Medea vanished also. Some said that grief over her lost child had driven her to drown herself. But Jason thought otherwise. He climbed the cliff so that he could jump off and land among the same rocks that had killed his daughter. A voice spoke out of the sky. "No!"

"Why not?"

"You are king."

“Shall I be denied that which the lowliest of my subjects may have for the asking?”

“You are king—with every privilege except making yourself less.”

“I don’t want to live.”

“You have done many things you didn’t want to do and shall do more. You are a leader, god-gifted. You must serve your people, accept your loss, endure your suffering, and serve them still. You must rule them, lead them against their enemies, make laws, make rain.”

Jason climbed down the cliff and went to the castle.

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THIRTY-THREE

THE MYSTERY OF MEDEA made rumor sprout like weeds and grow to legend. In one story that spread throughout the lands of the Middle Sea, she prayed to Hecate to give her wings to match her claws and work to match her talents. And the arch-hag, who had long been pleased with Medea, made her an honorary harpy, conferring wings and immortality upon her. And she proved so good at her work that she became a favorite of Hades and perches on his great wrist, wings folded, waiting for him to cast her like a falcon at runaway shades. She soars high, then plunges, shrieking, freezing the shade in place, and seizes him in her talons. But she does not rend him, for he is bloodless; but bears her victim back to Hades, who decrees new torments.

What happened to Jason's crew? During their quest for the Fleece, the Argonauts had become addicted to peril and could not bear to leave each other. So they voyaged together, searching the world for promising wars, thrusting themselves always into the hottest part of the battle. Idas and the Twins managed to get themselves killed on the same afternoon. They took on an entire regiment and killed half of them before being destroyed themselves. The three shades slipped out of their ruined carcasses and swaggered down to Tartarus, vowing to fight harpies, turnspit demons, and all the legions of hell.

Rufus followed them shortly, but did not stay in Tartarus. The fires there were not for making things; they were the unproductive ovens of torment, and he refused to fuel them. He prayed to Hephaestus, asking for a transfer. Now he works in the smith-god's own smithy, which is a crater in an old Sicilian volcano named Aetna.

As for Autolycus, he did not seek death. He sought vengeance and tracks the North Wind ceaselessly. You can see him sometimes in his gray cloak, riding high, following the storm.

What happened to Daphnis? He lasted longer than most. He had formed a quenchless taste for naiads and, after writing a song, would search the waterways of the world for someone to sing it to. Finally, sun-dazed on a strange river, he tried to serenade a crocodile.

As for Ekion—he disappeared into the mists of legend. Some say he still tinkers with dreams, visiting the sleep of storytellers, planting lies that flower into truth.

When Lethe came to Tartarus she lit up the dark vaults. A fountain burst out of the ground near her garden gate. And this fountain became a blessing to the newly dead. Lethe bathed in its waters and lent them forgetfulness, so that when the newly arrived shades, exhausted by their journey, bewildered by the loss of their bodies, came to this fountain and drank its waters, they drank oblivion. They forgot who they had been when alive, forgot those they had left behind, forgot everything that would cause them pain

in this place, and so were able to accept death without rancor or rebellion.

Jason's beloved child, who looked enough like Lethe to be her daughter, helps the nymph tend the fountain. And they both wait for Jason, who, they know, will join them after death and abide with them at the fountain of healing waters.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

STORYTELLERS WERE TELLING THEIR stories long before they knew how to write them down. Those antique wonder-tales we call myths were spoken or chanted by warrior minstrels who wandered the dangerous roads from castle to castle and campfire to campfire, singing for their supper. Full of murder and marvels and mystery was the crude verse chanted by these bards—songs of heroes, gods, and monsters; of cattle raids, piracy, elopements; of battles fought for the love of a woman and won or lost by the whim of a god.

Some stories grew to be favorites and were told over and over again, and each bard telling the same tale told it differently. But all this time a written language was slowly growing, permitting some learned minstrels to commit their story-songs to those marks which could magically transform themselves into living words. And each time the same story was written down by someone else, something changed.

A blind bard named Homer, for example, gathered hundreds of tales about a war that had been fought five hundred years before and about the voyage home of a war-chief called Ulysses and wove them into two mighty epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And his stories differed from all that had gone before. The old, old tales had passed through the fire of his genius and had been changed forever.

A word now about this book, which differs so from other accounts of Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts.

The cycle of tales that make up the Argosy are among the earliest in Greek mythology. As has been seen, there is no “authorized text” of any myth, and particularly none of this cycle, which varies wildly in all its versions. Fragments lodge in the work of Pindar, Hesiod, Appolodorus, Apollonius Rhodius, Homer, and Herodotus, and of a later Roman author named Valerius Flaccus—much of it untranslated and accessible only to those who read Greek and Latin. Having undergone the privileged ordeal of a classical education, I have been able to pick and choose among those bits and pieces and half-told tales, and use those people and events which best suit my own way of telling a story.

But why is the source material of the Argosy more confused and formless than other myth-cycles? Well, there is considerable evidence that the reports of this voyage were engendered by not one but *several* quests for a Golden Fleece, or other sacred relic, stolen by Black Sea raiders from some coastal temple on the Peloponnese. Seven generations of pirate kings from the lands of Hellas recruited warrior crews and sailed across the Middle Sea to recapture the magic loot. Seven voyages—at least—spanned some two hundred years, all happening about four thousand years ago. The stories intermingle, the routes intertwine; islands pop up and sink away, place names and people names jostle and obscure one

another. And each mythographer must find his own way through the fabulous rubble and recast the tale according to his own vision.

About Medea: like many names this was a word first, then a title, finally a given name. Originally, “Medea” simply meant “clever,” but as time passed it gathered darkness and came to mean “weirdly clever,” being especially used to describe women who did magic—very much like our word “witch,” whose first meaning was “sharp-witted,” or wise. So by the time the *Argo* sailed, “Medea” meant “witch” in that language, and was considered too unlucky a word to use unless you had to. For magic bubbled closer to the surface then, and witches were much feared. Among other charming habits they were known to eat babies.

Actually, the legend of a woman named Medea began long before the first Argosy began and lingered long after the last one ended, and sprouted into many forms. In later tales she is also depicted as being the wife of Aegeus, making her the stepmother of Theseus. In another account she comes to Attica simply to kill Aegeus, seeks to kill Theseus, and vanishes. She appears in still another group of linked stories as a cruel sorceress queen of Corinth, slain finally by her subjects when her crimes became too much to stomach.

The Athenian playwright Euripides, writing some fifteen hundred years after Medea did or did not do the things she was accused of, adapted one tale to his own purpose, and it became the play *Medea*. This drama shows her being driven mad by jealousy

because Jason has decided to cast her aside and marry a richer younger princess. Her madness culminates in murder when she butchers their two children.

This is what she became best known for, but is not what I would choose to emphasize.

A tale well told is a kind of Argosy, launching you on uncharted seas and taking you among perils and pleasures that are very strange but half-familiar as if fledged out of your own dreams. Is it a coincidence that the oldest words for ship and book are the same—the word “bark”?

Among my happiest memories are those when I felt myself embarking on such a voyage of joyous piracy, knowing the vaults of my imagination were filling with a treasure that would out-glitter gold.

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BERNARD EVSLIN

**MONSTERS OF
GREEK MYTHOLOGY**

VOLUME ONE



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Monsters of Greek Mythology

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AMYCUS

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This tale of the brass-headed giant
is dedicated to my son TOM,
whose head is of purest gold

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Characters

Monsters

Amycus
(AHM ih kuhs) Giant brass-headed maniac

The Cyclopes
(SY klahps) *sing.* Huge one-eyed smiths, powerful servants of the
(SY kloh peez) gods
plur.

Brontes
(BRAHN teez) Amycus's father, the cleverest of the Cyclopes

Ludo
(LOO doh) Another Cyclops

**Wingless
Dragons** Giant flame-spitting lizards

Gods

Zeus
(ZOOS) King of the Gods

Athena
(uh THEE nuh) Goddess of Wisdom

Poseidon
(poh SY duhn) God of the Sea

Hades
(HAY deez) Ruler of the Dead

Hermes
(HUR meez) The messenger god

Mortals

Castor
(KASS tuhr) Prince of Sparta, a champion wrestler

Pollux
(POL uhks) Castor's twin brother, a master boxer

Jason
(JAY suhn)

Exiled young king of Iolcus

Peleus
(PEE lee uhs)

Wicked usurper of Jason's throne

Deucalion
(doo KAY lee
on)

A worthy man, survivor of the Great Flood

Pyrrha
(PIHR ah)

Deucalion's wife

Girl on Bebrycos

Animals

Owl

Athena's spying bird

Swordfish

Agent of the owl

**White goat, blue fox
black bear, brown bear**

Others

Proteus Poseidon's aide, a minor sea deity who changes
(PRO tee uhs) shape at will

Liana Amycus's mother, Brontus' wife, a sea nymph
(LEE ah nuh)

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The Feud

The brass-headed monster, Amycus, who enslaved so many women and battered so many men to death, was born out of a quarrel between Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, and Poseidon, God of the Sea.

They both wielded tremendous power. *Poseidon* means “earth shaker,” and he deserved the name; his wrath was catastrophe. And the tall, free-striding Athena who bore spear and shield and whose gray eyes could freeze the marrow of any human and many Olympians was the most feared of all the goddesses.

Their feud had simmered for centuries. It began when Athena, trying to read the future, guessed that a certain small fishing village would grow into a great and brilliant city whose name would be as a song amid the horrid shrieks of history. And she decided that this village of high destiny must call itself after her so that the sound of her name would fall sweetly upon the ear after the other gods were forgotten.

But Poseidon believed that he alone ruled the destinies of all who dwelt along his shores and drew their bounty from his seas. All coastal cities were his, all fishing villages. When pleased, he would send rich harvests of fish; when angered he would crush ships like walnuts, or send storms that swept all who displeased him into the sea. When he discovered that Athena was paying unusual attention to one fishing village he became very angry.

Green robed, green bearded, he loomed over the little huts like a tidal wave about to break. The people gaped in horror. His voice, pounding like the surf, forced them to their knees. He demanded that the village be given his name. Otherwise, he declared, he would starve them by withdrawing fish from their waters, send storms to wreck their ships, sea serpents to devour whoever jumped overboard, and pirates to slaughter anyone left on shore.

Before he departed, the terrified villagers vowed to do whatever he asked.

The clouds split. An arch of sunlight bridged sky and earth, and something strode down the span of light: a maiden goddess, bearing spear and shield. She towered above the village, but her voice was a mighty music and uttered no threats.

“Villagers,” she said. “This is the first day of your glorious destiny. I am Athena, daughter of Zeus. I come to offer you my favor forever and to honor you with the gift of my name. Under my blessing shall this cluster of huts grow into a marble city, famed for wit, wisdom, and skill in warfare—which of course brings wealth. So arise, lucky ones, get up off your knees. Stand proud. Under my protection shall you survive and prosper despite all the threats of blowhard Poseidon.”

Hearing the musical voice utter these words, gazing upon the stern, radiant goddess, the villagers felt their spirits soar, and decided to ignore the threats of Poseidon.

“Yes!” they cried. “All honor, Great Goddess, all worship! We shall call our village by your name.”

And from that time on, both gods sought to fulfill threat and promise. Poseidon never stopped tormenting the Athenians, and Athena sought always to protect them. And the feud between powerful niece and stormy uncle grew more and more vicious, and was to entangle many lives, to cause a horde of deaths, and to spawn a multitude of monsters—the worst of whom, perhaps, was the Horrible Head, also known as Amycus.

The Crater

Now, everything about Poseidon irritated Athena, but she was particularly annoyed by his arrogance. All the gods had tremendous opinions of themselves. They all strode proudly and seemed to glow with a sense of being exactly who they were and no one else. But to the eye of his brooding niece, Poseidon seemed to swagger more and be puffed up with the idea of his own importance more than any other god. Worst of all though, Athena thought bitterly, her obnoxious uncle had cause to exult.

For of all the prayers that thronged the air and mounted to heaven, the most frequent and most passionate were those addressed to Poseidon. There was good reason for this. Those who worshiped the Olympians were largely seagoing people—sailors, fisherfolk, pirates. Before every voyage they visited Poseidon’s driftwood altars and sacrificed to him, and prayed for fair weather and following winds and safe landfalls. And when, very frequently, the god turned contrary and sent storms and killer tides and savage sea raiders, then, instead of losing faith, the voyagers were terrified into deeper belief, and their prayers grew more fervent than ever.

Athena, studying this, felt her hatred growing so fast she thought she must burst. But she was intelligent enough to learn from what displeased her, and she told herself that the way to injure Poseidon was to make his worshipers lose faith in his powers. And the way to do this was to intensify the peril, to plant special monstrous dangers upon the sea—creatures and events that would destroy ships and crews, and finally teach humankind that the richest sacrifices and most heartfelt prayers to the sea god would not keep them from harm.

This would not be an easy process, she knew; it would take a long time and much skillful plotting ... flotillas of ships sent to the bottom and hordes

of sailors to be drowned, or to meet even worse death. With so much to do then, she set to work immediately.

Athena was known as the wise one not only because she reasoned brilliantly and inspired men like Daedalus to invent the wheel and the plow and the rudder, but because she seemed to know everything about everyone. Indeed, she went to a great deal of trouble to gather this information, training her pet owl to spy upon all the gods and certain humans.

The owl with its silent, gliding wings, its night-piercing eyes, and ears that could pick up the fall of a distant leaf, was perfectly framed for spying—particularly at night, when most secret things are done. And by day a flock of crows, instructed by the owl herself, flew here and there, spying, prying, noticing, and reporting back to the owl, who sifted the information and brought the interesting bits back to Athena. For among its many tricks the clever bird could also speak Greek.

Upon a certain day the owl flew up to Olympus, found Athena, perched on her shoulder and spoke into her ear.

“Oh Goddess, a crow has flown all the way from Sicily to tell me that Mount Aetna is erupting.”

“Nonsense,” said Athena. “It’s forbidden to erupt. Zeus himself quenched the fires of that raging mountain, hollowed it out and presented it to his son, Hephaestus, to use as a smithy. Therein labor the Cyclopes who forge thunderbolts for Zeus, and weapons and armor and ornaments for the rest of us.”

“Nevertheless,” said the owl, “the mountain is belching red smoke, and trembling so hard that huge boulders are rolling down its flanks toward the villages below. And all who dwell there are fleeing that part of Sicily.”

“It will not erupt, it cannot erupt,” said Athena. “What’s happening, no doubt, is that the Cyclopes are fighting again. They do that now and then. They’re so incredibly strong and their tempers so savage that they sometimes stop working and use their mallets on each other. The fallen ones are flung into the forge fires; therefore does the mountain belch red smoke. And Aetna shakes when the Cyclopes do battle, and rocks roll down its slopes. When Hephaestus arrives and decrees a truce, the Cyclopes will stop fighting and the mountain will stop trembling.”

“That may be so, Goddess. But the villagers are still fleeing, and there is great grief and confusion upon the land.”

“I shall go there myself and calm them,” said Athena.

Whereupon she flew to Sicily and laid a sweet swoon upon the fleeing villagers, and appeared to each of them in the form of a dream, promising them that Aetna would not erupt and that they might return to their homes and dwell in safety.

The villagers awoke, rejoicing. Right there in the field where the strange sleep had overtaken them, they built altars to Athena and Hephaestus and loaded them with fruit and flowers. Singing songs of praise, they returned to their homes.

Athena lingered in Sicily, enjoying the prayers of thanksgiving and the hymns of praise. “Since we’re here,” she said to her owl, “we’ll go and visit that famous smithy. I’ve never seen the Cyclopes at work and I’m curious about them.”

The smoke from the mountain mingled with the morning mists as Athena approached. Making herself invisible, she flew up to the crater, then floated gently down into it, down through darkening air into the great smithy that was the workshop of Hephaestus.

It was an enormous chamber, taking up the whole inside of the mountain. For Aetna was just a shell. Ages before, when it was an active volcano, earth’s primal fire had eaten up through its roots, melting its rocky guts—which had then spewed out as red-hot lava. After Zeus quenched the flames with a sudden torrent of rain that had flooded the entire countryside, he had ordered the Cyclopes to hollow out the rest of the mountain, informing them that this was to be their home and their workplace forevermore.

Athena knew all this, of course; it was family history, but she had never actually visited the smithy before. Now she stared about in amazement. The Cyclopes, male and female, were tall as trees and their half-naked bodies writhed with muscle as they moved about their gigantic labor of forging thunderbolts for Zeus, and weapons and armor for the other gods. The hafts of their sledges were oak trunks, peeled of bark and trimmed of branches. The sledge heads were thousand-pound lumps of fire-tempered iron. And they swung these stupendous mallets like tack hammers.

Not all of them were working at the anvils. Some were making charcoal, tossing whole uprooted trees into the flames. Others were using shovels as big as skiffs, scooping up the charcoal and using it to feed the forge fires, which had to be coal fed to melt metal.

The noise would have shattered the eardrums of anyone who was not a god or goddess. The clanging of sledge against anvil, the crackle of the flames and the wild yelling of the Cyclopes made the loudest clamor Athena had ever heard. But she did not mind it at all. The scene was too fascinating, as interesting as a battle, or an earthquake or tidal wave. For Athena doted on violence, and moved among dire events as easily as a gull riding storm winds.

Unseen by anyone, she slid through the smoke toward one young Cyclops and studied him as he worked. Even his maimed head set upon those magnificent shoulders seemed splendid to her. The single eye embedded in the middle of his forehead was as large as two eyes—big and lustrous, full of innocent savagery like a tiger’s eye—but glowing with a kind of proud pain known only to those who feel themselves different from everyone else.

She watched him as he swung his sledge, shaping a red-hot bar of metal. He laid down his sledge, picked up a pair of tongs, nipped the bar, and dipped it into a bucket of water. Steam hissed up, veiling his body. When the steam cleared, he was oiled with sweat and shone like a newly gilded statue. He dropped his tongs and with one hand swung up an enormous keg of water—put it to his lips and drank it all down in one long swallow. He cast the keg aside, picked up a full one and emptied it over his head, drenching himself. Laughing, he wrung out his hair, then picked up his sledge again.

Athena was known for her icy calm in all situations. Now, however, she felt herself being torn by strange feelings. Suddenly, she knew she had to stop breathing this smoky air; it was choking her. With her, as with all gods, wish was action. She wafted herself up, up through sooty shadows, up through the crater and out onto a slope of Aetna.

Athena kept thinking of the Cyclopes after she left the smithy. “They must be the strongest creatures in all the world,” she said to herself. “More powerful than the Titans, who are their closest kin. Oh, how I’d like to have an island full of them, right in the middle of Poseidon’s sea. I’d be able to do so much with them. I’d inflame their appetites, implant them with so gluttonous a craving for meat that they would devour all the cattle on their island and turn to cannibalism—swimming out to capsize ships, plucking the sailors out of the water and eating them raw. Oh, what a menace to

shipping they'd be. More so even than the Sirens perching on jagged rocks, calling sailors to drown. More destructive than my witch, Circe, who lures entire ships' companies into her castle and turns them into swine.... Yes, they work well, Circe and the Sirens, and have done me good service. But these Cyclopes, if I can only get them somehow, would destroy more ships and crews than all the rest of my monsters put together ... But how can I persuade them to leave their smithy? They are creatures of habit and have labored there for thousands of years. I must think very hard about this ...”

The goddess stood near the top of the mountain, gazing across a sunstruck plain toward a silver glimmer of sea. The sound of mallets striking anvils drifted from the crater; filtered by rock, they chimed like bells. Thinking very hard, she spun one plan after another. One after another, she discarded them. As she pondered, one picture kept flashing in her head: the huge, sweaty young smith hoisting a heavy keg of water and gulping it down, tossing that keg aside, lifting another and pouring it over his head, the grimed one-eyed face grinning under the cascade.

“They work amid flame,” she murmured. “They breathe smoke and charcoal dust. Coolness must they crave. Every pore of their parched hides must lust for moisture. Yes-s-s, that giant lad with his buckets gives me a clue.”

She knew what she wanted to do now, but she had to wait until nightfall. When the moon had climbed and waned and the chiming of hammers had ceased, she knew that the Cyclopes slept. She stretched her arms and turned slowly, weaving a spell. The owl rose from her shoulder and hovered over her head, pivoting in the air as the goddess turned on the grass.

Athena sent the Cyclopes cool dreams. She slid seascape visions through the crater into their sleep: swirling tides, foam-laced waves, and the changing colors of the deep as the sun sifted through water—jade green on top, turning blue, becoming purple, then blue-black, all of it cold, cold, colder. She shuffled dreams all night long, one seascape after another. The older Cyclopes awoke refreshed and went to work immediately. But the younger ones were tangled in their dreams and couldn't cast them off. Nor did they wish to. Overnight their smithy had become loathsome to them. They felt they could not breathe one more breath of the hot smoky air. The blue core of the forge fire became flickers of the blue sea. They felt their

salt blood dance in their veins, pulling them out of the crater toward the shore.

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Owl and Seal

Indeed, twelve young Cyclopes did find themselves entangled in their cool dreams when they awoke the next morning. They looked about the great sooty chamber and couldn't believe that they had consented to spend so much of their life there, and were expected to labor there through eternity. They studied the waiting anvils, the smouldering forge fires, the sullen heaps of charcoal; they gazed upon the other Cyclopes still sunk in slumber. It all made no sense to them; only their sea dream seemed real.

"Let's do it," muttered one named Brontes. He was the giant youth who had doused himself with water as Athena watched. He picked up his mallet and strode out of the smithy and the others followed. They filed through a chain of linked caves; the final one opened out upon a slope of Aetna, near its base.

Athena, still perched near the top of the mountain, heard them shouting as they burst out of the cave. She looked down and saw them running off the slope, into the forest. She watched them as they disappeared into the woods, and listened to their wild yelling as if it were music. For the goddess knew that her magic was working, that she had cast her dream as skillfully as a fisherman casting his net—that she had caught the Cyclopes in her vision, and that they were being pulled toward the sea.

In that part of Sicily, then, the woods ran right down to a strip of beach. Brontes stopped at the fringe of the forest, laid down his mallet, wrapped his arms about the trunk of a tree and began to pull. Straining every muscle, he tried to wrench it out of the ground. This tree was well grown and had a deep root system. But Brontes, in the early prime of his enormous strength made even stronger by joy, pulled the roots right out of the clinging earth, and cast the tree on the beach. Each of his comrades was also uprooting a

tree. When twelve trees lay on the beach, Cyclopes lashed them together with vines and made a huge, heavy raft.

They lifted the raft, ran into the surf, and jumped aboard, rowing with their mallets. Now, a raft is the clumsiest of all vessels and extremely hard to move the way you want it to go. And this raft was probably the largest ever made. But with six Cyclopes rowing on each side, the ponderous wooden platform skimmed across the chop like a canoe.

Athena, who had followed them through the forest and watched them launch the raft, now set off for Olympus, chuckling. She knew that they would find an island and drive cut whoever dwelt there. “Once they devour all the game on the island,” she said to her owl, “I’ll send them cannibal dreams and implant in them a ravening appetite for human flesh. I’ll slide scenes of shipwreck into their slumber and show them pictures of themselves fishing sailors out and barbecuing them over a driftwood fire. Once they get the yen, they’ll not wait for storms, but swim out and capsize their own ships, and swim home with pockets full of sailors ... Fly after them,” she said to the owl, “and see where they land, so that I’ll know what island to visit when the time comes. I’d like to follow them myself, but I have to go to Athens now and inspire young Daedalus with the idea for a hinged steering board to be called a rudder and which will take the place of the awkward sweep oars used now. This device will allow ships to be managed more easily and give seamen more confidence in’ themselves so that they will depend less on the favor of that puffed-up windbag, Poseidon. So off with you, Owl, and follow my Cyclopes until they make landfall.”

As it happened, though, Athena would have done better not sending the owl. For the Cyclopes’ raft had been sighted by a creature called Proteus, who served Poseidon, and served him well. He made an admirable spy because he could change shape at will and was very sharp-witted and observant in whatever body he chose to use. Now, in his favorite form of white seal, he was circling the raft, studying the Cyclopes, and wondering what had brought them out of the crater and into the sea. Then he spotted the owl hovering over the raft.

“Athena’s bird!” he exclaimed to himself. “Which means that her spiteful mistress is mixed up somehow with this mysterious raft. Which, in turn, means that it’s part of some plot against my master. For the owl goddess

loathes Poseidon, and seeks every opportunity to damage his reputation and rob him of worshipers ... I'll tell him immediately."

But seals can swim only a certain distance underwater. So Proteus changed himself into a barracuda, and streaked into the ocean depths. Through darkening fathoms he flashed, to the deepest part of the Middle Sea where Poseidon had built his castle. It was a magnificent pile of coral and pearl.

He found Poseidon sitting on his walrus-ivory throne and clove the water toward him, scattering Nereids as he swam. For sea nymphs swarmed about their green-bearded king like minnows about a crust of bread.

"Oh Master," he cried. "I have seen a strangeness afloat! A crew of Cyclopes rowing a great raft somewhere with their mallets—and following them, Athena's own owl."

"Athena!" shouted the sea god, twirling his trident. "Is that armored bitch up to her foul tricks again? Has she sent forth these one-eyed giants to disrupt shipping in some way and strip seamen of faith in their great protector—namely, me? I have no idea how she intends to use them, but whatever she intends, I'll see that she's thwarted. I'll guide their raft into a riptide and drown them all ... No ... I've always admired the Cyclopes and the work they do. I've always wished I could have a few of them working for me. I have vaults full of silver and gold, and heaps of jewels from the holds of sunken treasure ships—and I have no one to work this precious stuff. Yes, I'd very much like to have a band of titanic smiths working for me, beating out gorgeous trinkets that I could pass out as favors to these sweet Nereids that cluster about my throne. Yes, and larger and more gorgeous necklaces and rings and brooches and bracelets for my wife, Amphitrite, so that she might overlook my gifts to the sea nymphs. Yes, yes ... I'll send my riptide, but not to drown them. I'll draw them down here. I'll give them an underwater cave for their smithy. What a splendid idea! How brilliant I am today! And how furious that stupid Goddess of Wisdom will be when she learns that I've turned her plot against her and that the one-eyed giants are working for me. Thank you, Proteus, you have brought me valuable information today, oh Changeable One."

"All my changes," said Proteus, "have but one theme: to serve my master."

He became an eel, a dangerous kind, and touched his electric tail to a few sea nymphs, of whom he was jealous, shocking them, making them quiver and yelp. Then he sped away before they could catch him.

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The Crystal Smithy

It all happened as Poseidon had decreed. He sent a riptide that spun the huge raft like a twig. The Cyclopes went flying off into the water, were gripped by the riptide and sucked down to the bottom of the sea.

They lost consciousness as they sank, and awoke in a great underwater chamber full of filtered green light. The walls of the chamber were pure crystal. Beyond the walls glided silent fish, big ones and little ones, shark and octopi, balloon fish, rainbow fish, sea turtles as large as the lost raft, and tiny flickering red sparks of fish—and a school of green-haired Nereids. The lovely lithe young sea nymphs shouldered the fish away from the crystal walls and smiled in at the Cyclopes—who were convinced that they were still caught in a dream.

For those who wield strange powers and are familiar with enchantments, there is only a thin membrane between dream and reality, because the most potent dreams are wishes told in code. And for the Cyclopes, for Titans, Olympians, petty gods and demons, and all who are god kin, wish immediately becomes deed—or tries to. So to the Cyclopes, who had been enmeshed in the sea dream sent by Athena and had deserted their crater in Aetna, what happened afterward became part of the same dream. The raft, the riptide, the swooning plunge, and now the crystal chamber with its filtered green light, the wonderful healing coolness, the goggling fishes and the smiling sea nymphs—were all part of a shared dream into which they were sinking deeper and deeper.

It was perfectly natural then for them to see anvils sprouting like mushrooms from the floor of their chamber. An anvil for each ... and beside each anvil a chest full of gold and silver. And beside each chest a tall coral branch hung with rubies and diamonds and sapphires. No forge fires here in this magic cool smithy. For they were not required to work crude slags of

iron here, heating the bars red hot, then hammering them out. No, silver and gold were softer metals, ingots that the Cyclopes could take into their enormously strong hands and twist into any shape they desired. For they understood immediately that they were to make ornaments now, not spears or swords or thunderbolts—that with beautiful work they would pay for coolness and fathoms of space and sea nymph smiles.

Natural ... it all seemed natural and fitting. Are not sprouting anvils and sudden treasure chests the ordinary furniture of dreams?

Now in the Aetna workshop Brontes had been able to swing his heavy mallet all day while allowing his mind to drift, but here in the crystal smithy he had to concentrate as he twisted gold and silver into delicate ornaments. Upon this certain day he was stringing diamonds and pearls onto a gold wire and didn't see the Nereid until she was standing near his bench.

He gaped at her in wonder. Before this he had only seen the nymphs as they swam or floated beyond the crystal walls—seen them lying in the water, or darting through, bodies tilted. Now here was one standing before him, and she was very close. Nor was she smiling; she was regarding him gravely, and was so beautiful that Brontes found himself unable to breathe. The great bellows of his chest rose and fell, but he felt that he was suffocating. He reached for her; she glided away.

“Are you a monster?” she murmured.

“I am a Cyclops, cousin to the gods.”

“You look like a monster, though. Big and strong—which is nice. But monstrously ugly.”

“Our great-grandparents were born of Uranus and Gaia, who were grandparents to the Olympians, including your own Poseidon ... But I'm sorry you think I'm ugly, because I think you're beautiful.”

“Well, you have a terrific build. But that huge single eye in the middle of your forehead rather mars your appearance, don't you think?”

“Wait a second,” said Brontes.

“What for?”

“I mean to please you more than I do now.”

As she watched, he snatched up a gold ingot and squashed it in his mighty hands, pressing it into a sphere, slightly larger than his head. He put the shining sphere on his anvil and smashed his fist into it, driving a hole into it, making it bowl shaped.

“Ludo!” he called.

Another Cyclops came to him. “We’re the same head size,” said Brontes. “Help me out, will you?”

He balanced the bowl on Ludo’s head. The opening wasn’t large enough; the bowl sat on top of his head. “This may give you a slight headache,” said Brontes. “But I’ll do the same for you, if need be.”

He lifted his mallet and smashed the great sledge down on the bowl, driving it down over Ludo’s face. The Cyclops’s legs, thick as tree trunks, trembled a bit, but the muscled column of his neck stayed rigid, holding his head still.

“Work it off now,” said Brontes. “Gently ... gently; it’s tight, you’ll scratch yourself.”

Ludo tried to say something, but his voice was muffled inside the bowl. He worked it up past his mouth and said, “It’s coming off easily; it’s slippery with blood.”

The sea nymph gasped as he pulled the bowl off. Blood gushed from his nose; his lips were cut.

“Thank you,” said Brontes.

Ludo nodded and walked away. Brontes dipped the bowl into a bucket of water, washing out the blood. Then he took an awl and punched out two eyeholes. With his powerful fingers he pinched a nose shape under the eyes, and poked two nostril holes. With his thumbnail, stronger and sharper than any knife blade, he cut out a mouth. He studied a large sapphire, and sliced it into a pair of lenses, which he stuck into the eyeholes.

Now a golden head stood on the anvil. He picked it up and pulled it over his own head. It fit exactly. And the nymph gazed in admiration at the giant upon whose shoulders sat a magnificent golden head. Brontes laughed with pleasure as he saw her expression. He took her by the waist and lifted her until her eyes were level with his glittering sapphire ones.

“Be careful how you kiss me,” she whispered. “I bruise easily.”

A Monster Is Born

Athena, of course, was furious when she learned that the sea god had sent a riptide to capsize the raft and had taken the Cyclopes deep into his own realm—where they were now doing his work. She couldn't endure the thought that these one-eyed giants, whom she had tempted out of Aetna to disrupt shipping and damage Poseidon's reputation, were now actually serving her enemy. For all her hot temper, though, Athena never allowed anger to scatter her wits, and she immediately began to plan some kind of counterattack.

But she didn't quite know what to do because she lacked exact information about what was happening below. Nor could she send her owl. But the canny bird was very good at reading Athena's wishes.

"Oh Mistress," she said. "Forgive me, but I have acted without orders."

"What do you mean?" asked Athena.

"Well, I knew that you would want to know just what was happening down there in that crystal smithy where the Cyclopes now dwell, and I also knew that I was useless to you underwater, for I drown easily. So I made bold to act in your name. I found a spiteful swordfish, a fine, big, sleek fellow but very resentful of things because, in a fury of greed, he had mistaken a mossy rock for a manta ray, had tried to stab it to death and broken his sword. Now he's unable to duel the other fish or do much hunting, and he's mean and hungry. I asked him to do his swimming about the crystal chamber, to observe what was happening, to surface and to report everything to me. In return for his spying, I said you would fit him out with a brand-new sword."

"I am very pleased with you," said Athena. "How often will he report to you?"

“I’ll give him a week to learn what he can, then I’ll fly out to meet him. After that, it will be every few days.”

“Good, good,” said Athena. “Let me know immediately if you learn anything.”

Some days later, the owl flew back to Olympus, sat on Athena’s shoulder and whispered, “Important news, oh Goddess.”

“Speak, speak ...”

“It seems that a Nereid named Liana has caused Brontes to fall violently in love with her.”

“Those Cyclopes do everything violently,” said Athena. “Does she love him in return?”

“Seems to.”

“How is it possible? He’s so ugly. They all are.”

“He has improved himself,” said the owl. “He has made himself a golden head with sapphire eyes. It slips over his own head and makes him look quite splendid.”

“Where do they meet? Inside the crystal smithy, among all the forges?”

“That’s where they first met,” said the owl. “But now, needing privacy, he slips out of the smithy and swims with her. He’s a very powerful swimmer, of course, and she has taught him to breathe underwater. This my swordfish has told me. At first I thought he might be making it up just to have something interesting to tell; then I realized that he doesn’t have the imagination for so gorgeous a lie, and that it must all be true. By the way, he’d like his new blade as soon as possible. When can he have it?”

“Not quite yet,” said Athena. “But tell him he has made a fine start, that I am pleased, and that if he keeps up the good work he should have his sword soon. One that will not break, incidentally, no matter how many rocks he wants to stab.”

Every few days, the owl left Olympus and flew over the changing waters until she reached the appointed spot and hovered there until the glittering fish lanced out of the sea. She dropped down to meet him, and he told her all that he had seen. Then she flew back to the sacred mountain. After the third such meeting she came to Athena, bursting with news.

“Oh Goddess,” she cried, “they’re all doing it now!”

“Who’s doing what?”

“The Cyclopes down there. They’ve all made golden heads for themselves and are courting sea nymphs.”

“Indeed? Aren’t they shirking their labors? Doesn’t Poseidon object?”

“Oh no,” said the owl. “Love seems to make them work harder than ever. They’re making wonderful jewelry for him, and then they work for themselves making pieces for the sea nymphs. And do you know, to check the fish’s tale, I flew over the place on a moonless night and saw faery lights dancing in the dark waters as if the whole sea bottom were ablaze. It must be all those golden heads moving down there and the garlands of jewels being flung to joyous nymphs.”

“Ah, they’re fiery creatures, those Cyclopes,” murmured Athena. “Baked first in the earth’s buried flames, now working the sea’s sunken treasures. Tell me, do they quarrel among themselves at all? I mean, do two of them ever court the same nymph and fight for her favors?”

“So far, no,” said the owl. “Only Brontes seems to have some anger smouldering in him. He was not pleased at all when the others began making their own gold heads. I think he thought they might be wanting to impress Liana, you know. And he would growl if any of them even looked at her. But now that every Cyclops has claimed his own Nereid, I suppose Brontes has cooled off.”

“Has he?” said Athena. “Well, perhaps. But this gives me the beginning of an idea. And you shall have a reward. The gardener dug up a litter of field mice today, and I made him save them for you.”

Now, the owl did not like tame food. She much preferred to catch her dinner for herself—where the intense listening and the silent dive and the pounce and the devouring of whatever she caught in her claws were all part of the same wild savor. Nevertheless, she thanked Athena and flew off to eat the captured mice. For she was much too wise to refuse any gift of the gods—whose generosity so swiftly became rage when they sensed any lack of gratitude.

Athena thought hard about what the owl had told her, and finally decided what to do. She visited Brontes’ sleep and hung pictures of him and Ludo standing at an anvil with Liana between them. But it was Ludo she was smiling at; it was Ludo who wore the newly made golden head. Brontes raised a hand to seize the nymph, but she drifted away and twined herself about Ludo. Brontes flung himself upon them, ready to kill. Ludo swung his

mallet. Brontes heard his skull cracking and felt an awful pain. Darkness swarmed.

He awoke into blackness; he didn't know where he was, whether he was dead or alive, awake or asleep. Liana was kneeling to him, stroking his face, murmuring, "Wake up ... wake up ... You're having a terrible dream..." And he had to clench one hand in the other to keep from strangling her. It had all been a nightmare, he realized. She had not smiled at Ludo, and Ludo had not struck him with a mallet. Nevertheless, he couldn't shake off his wrath.

He tried to go back to sleep, hoping to cleanse himself of bewilderment and savage pain. As he slept, however, Athena sent another vision. A technical one, this time. She inspired him with invention. She taught him to read certain secrets of metal. In his vision he was standing over a vat of melting copper. Into it he was casting slags of tin. A bright bubble grew from the vat. It was a head, but not of gold, nor of silver, nor of copper or tin. This was some new metal, very bright; when he tapped it with his hammer, he knew that it was hard, hard as iron, but would not rust.

"I name you *Brass*," he said.

He awoke and swam away from Liana, entered his smithy, took copper and tin, and began to smelt them as his dream had taught. He made himself a brass head, and set it with diamond eyes instead of sapphire, for diamonds are harder. Then he strode forth, looking for trouble.

The vision sent by Athena had warped his senses, and made him see what was not there. He became convinced that not only Ludo but every other Cyclops was planning to steal Liana from him, and was trying to mislead him by pretending interest in other Nereids. So he decided to get rid of his rivals once and for all.

He moved in a strangeness. Everything had changed. He didn't fight in his usual way, didn't try to smash the others with his enormous fists, or to break bones with his mallet. His dream had laid a magic mandate upon him; the brass head was to be his weapon.

The water heaved as great bodies writhed below. The swordfish made his rounds and sped toward the surface. The owl dipped to meet him. She heard what he had to say, then flew off to Olympus. She perched on Athena's shoulder and poured out her news.

"He butts them, he butts them!" she cried.

“Who’s butting whom? What are you talking about?”

“Brontes I’m talking about. He’s become a terror among his fellows. He’s butting them to pieces. The Cyclopes fight now as stags do, knocking their heads together. And, oh wise Goddess, what you planned is working beautifully. No gold head can take a knock from the brass one. One blow of Brontes’ head crushes a golden helm, and no one dares risk a second blow that would pulp any skull. One butt from Brontes and his enemy flees. This has touched off a great migration. The Cyclopes are quitting the underwater smithy as fast as they can. Only Brontes remains.”

“Oh glory!” cried Athena. “Just what I wanted! Now I shall guide them to an island I know, right in the path of busy shipping lanes. Once they reach the island I shall starve them into cannibalism. They’ll wreck ships and devour the crews. Yes, just as I originally planned. Won’t Poseidon be furious? Oh, I shall gloat, gloat, gloat!”

Things did happen that way for a while, and Athena was very happy. So was the swordfish, for he now had a new sword, longer and sharper than the one he had before. He immediately stabbed some of his enemies, plus a few friends, and set out to hunt manta rays.

And this successful plan of Athena’s had another consequence, which she hadn’t planned, but which also pleased her mightily. Brontes stayed underwater, working for Poseidon and making ornaments for Liana, whom he had forgiven for what she had done in his dream. He wore his brass head so much that it became a natural part of him, and Liana gave birth to a son who had a brass head.

They named him *Amycus*, which means “bellower,” for no sooner had the brass-headed babe entered the world than he began to utter hideous loud braying sounds. He grew with monstrous speed; by the time he was three weeks old he was almost as big as his father, and had learned to use his brass head with deadly effect, pounding sharks into jellyfish. Then, much to his parents’ relief, he swam away, declaring that the sea was too salty and much too wet, and that he intended to live on dry land.

Athena was delighted to hear about this. “That gruesome babe has possibilities,” she told her owl. “Only three weeks old and already a regular monster. How useful he’ll be when he reaches his full growth.”

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Wingless Dragons

Guided by Athena, the brass-headed young monster landed on an island called Bebrycos—which had a curious history. Before the Great Flood it had been a mountain standing some twenty miles inland. This was shortly after the human race had been planted on earth, and Zeus was becoming sorry he had done so.

“They’re impossible,” he declared to the High Council. “They lie as fast as they can talk, help themselves to their neighbors’ property, and murder each other wholesale.”

“But Sire,” said Hermes, who had always been a friend to man, “they only do what we do.”

“Perhaps ...” said Zeus. “But we are gods and know how to forgive ourselves. Our habits, when practiced by mortals, become abominations. I’m going to send a flood of water and wash that foul breed right off the earth.”

Whereupon, angry Zeus scooped the oceans out of their beds, and the rivers and the lakes—lifted the mass of water up to heaven and dropped it upon earth in a mighty flood. Cities, towns, and villages were swept away—and farms and sheepfolds, and all the dwellings of man. The Middle Sea doubled its size, swallowing up great chunks of land whose mountaintops became islands.

Everyone on earth was drowned except a man named Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha—who were either more virtuous than others, or better swimmers. For the ancient tale tells how the boat built by Deucalion was sucked under, how he and his wife struggled to stay afloat in the raging waters, and were finally deposited, half dead, on the island that had once been the top of Mt. Bebrycos.

The island was lush. The castaways found fruit to eat, springwater to drink. But there were no other people on the island, and, looking out upon the waste of waters, they could see no sail.

“We must build another boat and go to a place where there are other people,” said Pyrrha.

“How do you know that there are any people anywhere?” asked Deucalion. “Perhaps we’re the only ones left alive.”

“No, it can’t be! I can’t bear the thought!” cried Pyrrha. “It would be too lonesome that way.”

Deucalion could not bear to see his wife suffer. He turned his face to the blank sky and said: “If there be something up there, speak to me, I pray. Tell me if there are any other people on earth. Or are we the last?”

A voice spoke out of the sky. “You are the last. Praise our mercy.”

“I thank you for holding our heads above the water,” said Deucalion. “Now I ask a further act of mercy. If we are the last people left alive on earth, then take us also. For we cannot bear the loneliness.”

There was silence. A great hush filled the world. Even the gulls had stopped calling. Man and wife looked at each other. The voice spoke again.

“Deucalion and Pyrrha, gather the bones of your mother, and as you walk cast them over your shoulders.”

“What’s that mean?” whispered Pyrrha. “The bones of our mother? We had different mothers. And their bones aren’t here anyway.”

“The gods speak in riddles sometimes,” said Deucalion, “and measure our faith by our ability to unriddle what they say.”

“You’re speaking in that funny way too,” said Pyrrha. “I can’t stand it. Tell me plainly—what does he mean by the bones of our mother?”

“Since we do have different mothers, perhaps the voice means a common mother—Mother Earth. But what would be her bones?”

“How about rocks?” said Pyrrha.

“Rocks?... Well, we can try.”

But rocks were big, and socketed deep in the earth; they couldn’t be budged. So they each gathered an armful of stones and walked along the beach casting them over their shoulders.

They heard footsteps behind them, and whirled about. The stones were turning into people. Those Deucalion had cast became men, and women grew from the stones cast by Pyrrha. Twelve men and twelve women, full

of wonder and hope and ignorance. And from these twelve men and women were born a new generation.

Bebrycos grew too small for them. The young ones built boats and sailed away, found other islands, and settled there. Found a mainland and settled there.

Generation followed generation, and Zeus sent no more floods. For without people to worship him, he decided, it was hard for him to know that he was a god.

Now, hundreds of years later, as Amycus was plowing the Middle Sea toward Bebrycos, Athena took a journey. She traveled down to Tartarus, to the ebony and fire-ruby castle of her uncle, Hades.

“Welcome, Niece,” he said. “It is centuries since you have honored our gloomy precincts with your presence.”

“I have come to ask a favor, great Hades.”

“Of course,” he said. “Why else would anyone come down here who didn’t have to? Speak. What is it I can do for you?”

“You will remember, Uncle, that the Great Flood swallowed fifty miles of the Trinacrian coast, including a mountain called Bebrycos, whose highest peaks now form an island. But since it was once a mountain, the roots of this island are still anchored here in Tartarus. And these roots are hollow shafts of rock leading straight up into the caves of the island.”

“I hear ancient history and some bits of geology,” said Hades. “What do they have to do with the favor you are asking?”

“Patience, my lord. I was describing a natural passageway from your realm to Bebrycos. What I want is to borrow some of your creatures for a hundred years or so. They can climb up through the shafts of rock onto this island, and serve my purpose there. I mean *our* purpose.”

“*Our?*” asked Hades. “What possible interest of mine can be served by my creatures above ground?”

“If what you lend me are fearful enough, they will create a horde of fresh corpses, and send new shades thronging down to enlarge your kingdom.”

“Interesting ...” murmured Hades. “Let’s see what I can spare. The choices are limited. No Harpies; I need them here. No roasting-pit demons, nor those who wield the fire-flick or the marrow-log; they’re all fully employed. I can let you have some general-torment fiends.”

“What are they?”

Hades clapped his hands and whistled thrice. Into the throne room shuffled a thing that looked like a wingless dragon. It walked on two legs and stood about eight feet tall. Had green mottled skin as hard as armor, a ridged tail, and crocodile jaws.

“Fire!” barked Hades.

The creature opened its jaws and spat flame.

“Excellent!” cried Athena. “Even better than I imagined. Oh, thank you, Uncle, thank you. How many can I have?”

“Twenty,” said Hades. “That’s the very best I can do.”

“Oh, marvelous!”

“I must warn you,” said Hades. “They are witless. They can take no initiative. They must be fully instructed as to whom to kill and how many.”

“Suits my purpose exactly,” said Athena. “I mean to supply them with a leader, even more murderous, and very intelligent.”

“Very well,” said Hades. “And when can I be expecting a batch of corpses from Bebrycos?”

“Soon ... soon ...” said Athena, and departed, very pleased.

Thus it was that when Amycus swam to shore, he found twenty wingless dragons waiting on the beach. He lowered his head, preparing to fight, but a huge owl dived out of the sky, crying, “No, Amycus, do not attack! These creatures are as useful as they are ugly. They are sent here to serve you and help you to become king of this island.”

“Who are you?”

“I serve Athena, the goddess who guides your destiny.”

“And I am to be king of this place?”

“And much more. A terror to visitors and castaways, of whom you will be sent multitudes. And a superb menace to shipping. Your name will be spoken with fear as long as tales are told.”

“Are these things as fearsome as they look?”

“Even more so. Their claws can rip out an elephant’s entrails; their jaws crush the largest bone; their tails can scythe down a thick tree. And ... they spit fire.”

“They do seem well qualified for any fiendish task,” said Amycus. “Convey my thanks to the goddess, and tell her that when I am king I shall raise her an altar larger and more splendid than any in the world.”

Now, those who dwelt on the island were brave, heavily armed, and skillful fighters. Throughout their history they had fought off vicious pirate raids and resisted invaders from Crete, Carthage, and Mycenae. But their enemies had always been human, and when a band of walking crocodiles led by a brass-headed giant suddenly appeared on their shore, they were confused and frightened. They mastered their fear, however, and marched against the weird invaders.

But when the troops reached the beach and actually saw what they were supposed to fight, they halted abruptly and tried not to believe what they were seeing—an array of enormous lizards dwarfed by a giant whose head was a ball of blinding light in the noonday sun.

“Listen to me, good folk,” roared Amycus. He was trying to speak gently, which meant that he was bellowing a bit more softly than usual. “Before you attack, let me show you what you’ll be facing.”

He motioned to the dragons, who wheeled and spat flame at a nearby grove of trees. They spat simultaneously. Twenty jets of fire hit the trees, which immediately began to burn. Like tall torches they burned. A flock of birds rose out of the branches, feathers on fire. As the island troops watched, the trees burned to the ground.

“You see?” said Amycus. “If I had turned them the other way, it is you who would be burning. So why don’t you just lay down your arms like good little people, and surrender. We’ll work you hard, but it’s better than burning.”

“Never!” cried the battle chief. “Death before slavery!”

“It’s all right for you to choose death for yourself,” said Amycus, “but why take so many men with you? I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Search the island through and bring out your best fighters—ten of them, twenty, however many you wish. I’ll fight them all at once. If I do not finish them off in an hour, then we’ll withdraw peacefully. But if I vanquish your champions, then you’ll all surrender, and your lives will be spared.”

“Agreed!” cried the battle chief. “The best fighters on the island are those facing you now. I’ll choose twenty of them and we can set to work immediately.”

“How many in your entire troop?” asked Amycus.

“Fifty-six.”

“Make it fifty-six, then,” said Amycus. “I’ll fight your entire company—and without weapons. Nor shall my greenish friends here do any flamethrowing. But you need not disarm.”

He motioned to the dragons, who slithered away until they were almost out of sight.

“Charge!” yelled the chief.

The islanders attacked. They swarmed over Amycus, striking with sword and battle-ax. He gathered up an armful of the troops, lifted the struggling mass to chin level, and then systematically began to butt. Shield and helmet were like tissue paper before that flailing brass head. Skulls split like eggs, spilling a yolk of brains. When Amycus opened his arms ten corpses fell. The sand soaked up their blood.

But the others did not flee. They were gripped in a battle rage. They kept hacking at him. He pretended to retreat, not fast, for he wished them to follow close. He reached a tree, sprang up and hooked his legs over a massive bough. Hanging upside down, he began to swing. Faster and faster he swung. Now his head was like a wrecking ball, crushing helmets, breastplates, skulls, ribs.

By the time he stopped swinging, half the original troop lay dead, and the other realized how futile it was to contend against this giant. They let their weapons fall, and knelt on the beach.

“You are brave men,” bellowed Amycus. “And I spare your lives. Go now and inform the people of the island that they have a new master. And bid them report to me so that I may assign them their tasks.”

The men dragged themselves to their feet and shuffled away, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again, and almost envying their comrades who had died too swiftly to feel the bitterness of defeat.

The Spartan Twins

Some time before this story begins, Peleus the Proud had seized power in Iolcus by murdering the king. He would have killed the king's three-year-old son also, but the child had vanished on that night of blood and was not found despite a frantic search.

Now Peleus proved to be a very successful battle chief. He sent his troops against his neighbors, scattering their armies, looting their treasuries, and enslaving them. But his paunch grew with his power. He fed gluttonously, insisting on sixteen meals a day without counting snacks, and had grown grossly fat. Seven chins he had, all of them greasy, and his cheeks ballooned so that you could hardly see his tiny pig eyes.

These eyes now were fastened on a pair of twins who stood before the throne. And the king was scowling because he didn't like what he saw. Having grown so gross and ugly himself, he hated the sight of handsome men, and these twins were the most beautiful youths he had ever seen. Very young they looked, scarcely nineteen, but the tallest of the Royal Guard barely reached their shoulders, and these guards had been picked for size—and ugliness. The twins were yellow haired; they blazed with health and strength, and stood easily, not at all troubled by the king's scowls.

Studying them, Peleus saw that they were not quite identical. One was blue eyed; the other had icy gray eyes.

“Who are you?” rasped Peleus. “And what do you want?”

“I'm Castor,” said the blue-eyed one. “He's Pollux. We are princes of Sparta.”

“And what we want is employment,” said the gray-eyed one. “Heralds have been scuttling about, proclaiming that you wish to hire the best fighting men in the lands of the Middle Sea.”

“*Men*,” snarled Peleus. “Not pretty puppets who look more like dancing girls than warriors.”

The twins smiled an identical smile. “These heavily armed men who patrol this throne room—they are the Royal Guard, are they not?” asked Castor softly.

“They are,” said the king.

“Picked for their fighting abilities, no doubt?”

“No doubt.”

“Observe,” said Castor.

He whirled, seized two guards, one in each hand, and lifted them by the nape of their neck. They struggled, struck at him, tried to kick themselves free, but were helpless as kittens in his hands. Smiling at the king, he knocked their helmeted heads together and flung them, clattering, on the marble floor, where they lay motionless.

“They’re not dead,” said Castor. “Just out of it for a bit. I was quite gentle. My specialty is wrestling, by the way; my brother’s the boxer.”

Moving so fast that he was a blur, Pollux wrenched a shield from the hands of another guard, held it in his left hand, drew back his right fist, and punched a hole clean through the heavy bronze buckler. He cast the shield aside and licked his knuckles, which were bleeding slightly. And the twins stood again impassively before the throne, as if nothing had happened.

But the king, for all his girth, had no softness about him. He was not easily flustered.

“Yes, you seem to be able to handle yourselves,” he drawled. “Of course, if I employ you, you’ll be going against more fearsome foes than these. What’s your fee?”

“Depends on what you want us to do,” said Castor.

Peleus had been thinking very swiftly all this while. “These baby-faced thugs can prove dangerous as well as useful,” he said to himself. “They’re just too good at what they do. And much too independent. If they stay together and decide to join up with one of my enemies, they would pose more of a threat than I want to face. What I must do is separate them—use them as far as I can, then make sure they don’t get together again.”

Aloud he said, “You’re used to working as a team, I suppose?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Castor. “We fight as a unit.”

“But I have separate tasks,” said Peleus. “Both urgent, but one more difficult than the other. Working singly, you will earn double fees, and be able to rejoin each other in a few days.”

“Tell us more,” said Pollux.

“To the northwest,” said the king, “lies the island of Bebrycos. It is ruled by a monster named Amycus, a giant who butts people to death. No one has survived a visit to that place. Everyone who lands there has to fight Amycus or is cut down on the spot. It is said that the dented skulls of those who fought him form a tower higher than his castle. For years now I have been offering a rich reward to anyone who could vanquish Amycus. Many have tried, but no one has claimed the reward.”

“What is the other task?” asked Castor.

“Tricky ... difficult ... but much less dangerous. On a small round island, about twenty miles to the east, dwells an evil young magician.”

“What makes him so magical?” asked Pollux.

“He holds unholy sway over the birds and beasts of that place,” said Peleus. “Wolves and bears attend him. Snakes dance to his fluting. All foul wizardry, of course, and should be stamped out. Besides, he pretends to be my cousin, the son of the late king, and actually dares to claim my throne.”

“How is it you haven’t been able to kill him long before this?” asked Castor.

“I can’t send ships against him. That island is surrounded by a hidden reef that tears the bottom out of any vessel. But a strong swimmer can cross over unharmed. I’d like one of you to go there, strangle the tricky little rat, whose name is Jason, by the way, and return with some proof of his death. His head, perhaps, but any reasonable proof will do. That is the second task. It should take only a day or so, then he who has done it will be able to join his brother on Bebrycos.”

The twins looked at each other, nodded simultaneously to the king, and walked out of the throne room. As they left the castle, Castor said:

“It’s my turn for the dangerous task.”

“How do you figure?”

“You’re the one who took on the shark.”

“Only because you were busy tying knots in the octopus,” said Pollux. “But we won’t quarrel. You can go to Bebrycos first. I’m curious to see what that young animal tamer looks like.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Castor. “I’m uneasy about things. I don’t trust Peleus.”

“I’d be worried about you if you did,” said Pollux. “He’s a putrid lump of lard, every ounce of him. But I don’t think he’ll move against us as long as he believes we’re doing things for him. And he pays very well.”

“I’m still uneasy,” said Castor. “Let’s do the stump-water thing.”

This was a homely magic shared by the twins since they were small boys. What they did was go into the woods and find a tree stump in which rainwater had collected. They stood on opposite sides of the stump, inhaling its special smell of water and decayed wood and steeping leaves, all the while gazing into the puddle. They would go into a light trance and see pictures in the water. When they came out of the trance they would tell each other what they had seen. More often than not they had seen exactly the same things. If so, they believed, the matched images were telling what would happen to them in the near future. But these visions were not always reliable. Sometimes the pictures came true, other times not, and often led the twins into dangerous error. But they had happy natures. They remembered only what had come true and forgot what hadn’t. And, when in doubt about anything, still consulted the stump water.

Now, they went into the woods and found a stump. They stood on opposite sides of it and leaned over, taking deep breaths. It was bright afternoon but the stump was enveloped in its own time—neither day nor night, but a kind of livid twilight. A cheesy moon hung low, and the face in the moon was the face of Peleus, leering at them.

A ship, tiny as a twig, perfectly made, graceful as a gull, scudded across the puddle, sails full. On the deck were minute figures whom the twins recognized as themselves. In the bow stood a black-haired, slender lad, very young, but obviously in command.

A fog blew over the stump, almost hiding the ship. As the twins watched, the thick mist wreathed into pictures. Giants, slavering ogres, witches with tangled hair and bloody claws. And, in a place they had never been, an altar covered by a strangely colored fleece, purple and gold, the colors shifting and mixing as in a dawn sky ... then, sliding into the scene, an enormous serpent, jaws agape.

The fog blew away, taking the ship with it, and dissolving their trance. The twins found themselves staring into an ordinary stump that held a

puddle of rainwater. They looked at each other.

“What did you see?” asked Castor.

Pollux told him about the ship, its crew, the wreathing shapes, and the moon face of Peleus leering over all. “That’s what I saw,” said Pollux.

“What about you?”

“Exactly the same, every detail.”

“Well, the old stump-water magic is still working,” said Pollux. “How do you read it?”

“We’re destined to take a voyage, obviously. Meet giants, ogres, witches, serpents, and all the things that moved in the fog.”

“Yes,” said Pollux. “How about that skipper, did you recognize him?”

“No. And he looked mighty young and puny to be leading us. One thing I know is true; I thought so before, but now I’m sure. We can’t trust Peleus. What he wants is for us to do some dirty work for him and get ourselves killed doing it. And I think it’s Amycus who’s supposed to do the killing.”

“So I’ll finish off my job as soon as possible, and join you on Bebrycos.”

“Well, I hope I won’t need too much help,” said Castor. “But if I do, I’ll wait for you.”

The twins embraced briefly, and parted.

Jason, the Healer

As the king had said, some miles off the coast of Iolcus lay the little round island where Jason dwelt. He was the only person there, but didn't realize how lonesome he was because he had many animal friends.

Nevertheless, he sometimes felt that he would like to meet someone more like himself, and would spend hours standing on the beach gazing at the dim bulk of the mainland. He was especially excited when he saw a ship sailing toward him. Sometimes one would come close enough for him to see tiny figures moving on the deck, but always a ship would come only so near, then sheer off abruptly—and the lad would wonder why. He had no way of knowing that Poseidon had girded the island with a hidden reef.

But for some time now he had been too busy to watch for ships. He was trying to solve an important problem. For among the many snakes on this island was one that was particularly vicious—a small green viper, unbelievably swift, whose bite sent animals into foaming fits. The poison didn't actually kill them, but, maddened by pain, they would often shatter their skull against rocks or trees, or claw themselves to pieces. Now, Jason had taught himself to cure ordinary snakebites, even ones that were quite deadly, but he wasn't able to approach an animal bitten by the viper, for, in its madness, it would have killed him. He had to stand by and watch it destroy itself. He knew that if he could only quiet these viper-bitten animals, somehow, he would be able to draw out the venom, but he didn't know how to quiet them. And he kept thinking about how to do it.

He had been studying the flight of bees because he liked to eat honeycombs. Bees astounded him. They flew so fast, so hard—like flung stones—but they could also hover, float, change direction; they seemed the most active of all creatures. But he noticed that after visiting a certain

flower bed, the bees would slow up considerably, wobble in flight, seem almost to drowse as they flew.

He examined these flowers. They were unfamiliar. He thought that he knew every kind of flower that grew on the island, but these seemed to have sprouted overnight. Black and purple blossoms, except for a single flame-colored petal. He tore off a leaf and ate it. And immediately felt himself sinking into sleep.

Dreams thronged. He saw a young god, Morpheus, standing in the dark chamber of his father, Hypnos, God of Sleep. "I am weary, my son," said Hypnos. "You must help me tonight. You must fly about the world distributing my gift."

"Very well," said Morpheus, "but I wish to mix my own colors of sleep. Yours are too dark and thick and sad."

"So it has been and so it must be," said Hypnos. "For it is a little trial death we put upon man each night to prepare him for the long final death."

Morpheus, dissatisfied, went to his cousin, Persephone, the flower princess, and said: "Help me, sweet maiden, you who go with your paint box among the flowers each spring. I do not wish to scatter little deaths but hours of repose. I need something to brighten sleep."

"Yes," said Persephone. "Sleep can be brightened by something called *dreams*. Humankind is ready for them now. Take this."

She moved her slender hand through the air. In her fingers a flower blossomed. She gave it to Morpheus. "See, Cousin, black and purple like sleep with one fire-red petal for dreams. We shall call it the *lotus*. Plant it first in Libya where it is always summer; it will do well there. But save a cutting for a certain small island in the Middle Sea, where someone will someday use it in a very timely way."

When Jason awoke, he knew what to do. He gathered an armful of blossoms, which grew thicker than ever, and took them to his hut. He chopped up the petals, mixed them with pure springwater, and boiled the brew until it was thick and gummy. Then dipped his arrowheads in it.

He took bow and arrows and prowled the woods until he heard a bugling, a clattering. He followed the sound into a clearing where two stags were fighting. Horns locked, heaving; they were writhing shapes of brute strength. He notched an arrow, drew his bow, and loosed the shaft, aiming so that he would just nick the haunch of one stag. The arrow sang through

the air, flying true. The stag immediately collapsed. The other one stood over him, eyes rolling in astonishment. Jason ran to the fallen stag, which was breathing evenly, unhurt, but fast asleep.

Jason whooped with joy. In his exultance, he leaped upon the other stag and rode it out of the woods onto the beach. He galloped along the beach, shouting with joy. A black goat and blue fox raced after him. He saw something white coasting in on a wave. It landed on the beach and sat there in his path. He stopped the stag in mid-stride and looked down at a snow-white seal. The whiskered face gazing up at him looked so clever that he almost expected to hear words coming from its mouth. Nevertheless, he was astonished when the seal did speak.

“Do you know who you are?” asked the seal.

“I’m me,” said Jason.

“Is that all you know about yourself?”

“What else is there to know?”

“Much ... much ... Do you remember how you came here?”

“I’ve tried to forget.”

“Can you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then I will,” said the seal. “You were asleep in your nursery. Dreadful sounds awoke you. Men shouting, women screaming. Torches flared. You remember your nurse’s hand snatching you out of bed and wrapping you in a cloak. She is running with you; you hear her feet on the marble floor. Outside now, cold air, gull cries, sea smells, the hiss of the surf. You are in the small boat in your nurse’s lap. You hear oars dipping. You are rocked to sleep. You awake upon this island. Then day follows day in a bright blur. You are a little boy living alone except for animals. A she-goat and a blue fox. You drink milk from the goat; the fox brings you nuts and berries and honeycombs, until you learn to gather them for yourself and to take fish from the sea.”

“You seem to know all about me,” said Jason.

“Yes. I have watched over you since that dreadful night.”

“Who are you?”

“I am he who serves his master. My name is Proteus.”

“Who’s your master?”

“Poseidon, God of the Sea.”

“Is it he who bids you watch over me?”

“It is he.”

“What is his interest in me?”

“You shall know presently. First, let me unravel that terrible scene. The shouts were your father, the king, being murdered by his cousin, Peleus, who wished to be king himself. After killing your father he was coming to kill you, the heir to the throne. But your nurse, a remarkable woman, fled the castle with you in her arms, found a boatman and hired his boat. My master then, who had been observing all this, spoke from the sea, guiding her to this island and bidding her leave you here. She knew it was a god speaking and obeyed, although it broke her heart to abandon you. Then I was ordered to arrange for your care. I instructed the goat and the fox, and in various forms have visited this island from time to time to see how you fared.”

“And why do you reveal yourself to me now?” asked Jason. “What has changed?”

“You have. You have grown. Growth is slow change. You are old enough now.”

“Old enough for what?”

“To know,” said the seal. “Then to do.”

“Do what?”

“Act upon your knowledge. I have informed you that you are the rightful king.”

“King of what?”

“That fair land called Iolcus, which you can dimly see from this shore.”

“Have you come to tell me that I must claim my kingdom?”

“Hearken now. Your cousin Peleus, your enemy, is a famed battle chief. His army has swept over frontiers, subduing neighbors and adding their lands to his. His war fleet raids island kingdoms. Before you can even think of confronting him, you must learn to fight, learn to lead.”

“How do I begin?”

“You have begun.”

“What is my first task?”

“To survive another day.”

“I seem to have lasted this long. Why is one more day so important?”

“Because someone is coming to kill you. The king knows where you are and has sent an assassin—who is to wring your neck like a chicken, then twist your head off and bring it to Peleus to prove that you are dead.”

“What’s he like, this assassin?”

“Extremely beautiful, and even more deadly. One of a pair of twins, Spartan princes, so tall and strong and handsome it is as if whoever made the eldest took one look and immediately decided that there had to be another of his kind.”

“Are they both coming after me?”

“Just one. That’s all I can tell you. Take care.”

The seal slid into the sea and vanished.

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The Assassin

Bears do not howl. They rumble, they snarl, they chuckle; when in pain they utter a kind of sobbing roar. And it was this agonized roaring that awakened Jason just before dawn. He snatched up bow and arrows and rushed toward the sound. He knew it must be a bear, bitten by a viper, and clawing itself in a foaming fit. He sped through the wood into a clearing, and saw not one bear but two, a brown one and a black one, both huge, both maddened by pain and foaming at the mouth, and trying to tear each other to pieces before turning on themselves.

They were a whirling, furry mass. Jason notched an arrow, but hesitated. He was afraid that if he put one to sleep, the other would kill it before he could shoot a second arrow. He hesitated too long; the black bear flung the brown one halfway across the clearing. It landed next to Jason and swung its paw, knocking the bow from his hands.

He sprawled on the ground, groping for his bow. But the beast was upon him. Hot, meaty breath gusted against his face, choking him. He felt claws of fire raking his shoulder, then a coolness of blood. He knew he was about to feel a final crunching pain as the bear crushed his head between its jaws.

Swooning, he was dazzled by gold. Weight was lifted from him. "I'm dead," he thought. "This is the inlaid floor of heaven. Why was I not taken to Tartarus? Or is hell paved with gold also?"

When his vision cleared he saw a tall, yellow-haired youth fighting the brown bear. The beast stood erect, clawing at the youth—who was punching so fast that his fists were one streak of motion. Jason heard the bear's rib cage crack. The animal fell, spitting blood, then lay still. But the victorious youth was suddenly encircled by two enormous furry arms as the black bear attacked from behind, taking him into a hug that was certain death.

Jason had scooped up his bow. He notched an arrow now, and knowing how difficult it was for him to hit the bear without grazing the youth, thought a swift prayer. "Poseidon, guide my arrow!" And let fly. The shaft whizzed past the youth's head, passing so close that its feathers brushed the yellow hair before burying itself in the bear's shoulder. The furry arms loosened; the bear fell.

Instantaneously, the youth whirled, drawing a knife, and kneeling. Jason, astounded, saw that the stranger, absolutely unruffled by killing one beast and almost being killed by the other, was preparing to skin the black bear.

"Don't!" shouted Jason.

The youth swiveled his head. Jason saw that his eyes were not blue but gray, glinting now like frost. "Don't what?" he said. "I want its hide."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It isn't dead. It's asleep."

"Looks dead."

"It's not. My arrows are dipped in sleep."

"Well, I know mine is dead. I hit it square. So I'll just cut this one's throat and skin 'em both. Make a couple of bearskin cloaks for my brother and me. It gets cold in Sparta."

"Are you Spartan?"

"I am. Pollux is my name."

"Are you a prince by any chance?"

Pollux nodded.

"A twin?"

"All three."

"Then you've come to kill me, haven't you?"

"Are you Jason?"

"Yes."

"Whatever I've come to do, I can't. You saved my life."

"You saved mine first."

"Well, we saved each other. Killing you is out of the question, worse luck. I was promised a fat fee." Jason saw the prince cocking his golden head and staring down at him, studying his face intently.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Do something for me. Wash the dirt and blood off."

Jason went to a stream, dipped his head in, and swabbed his face with a handful of dry grass. He came back to the Spartan.

“Yes ...” said Pollux. “It grows more and more curious.”

“What does?”

“You’re the lad we saw in the stump water, my twin and I. We are to go voyaging with you. We shared a vision at the stump and saw you captaining a ship that was sailing toward strange encounters.”

“I don’t know what all that means, but it sounds marvelous.”

“Are you saying you don’t know anything about an expedition you’re supposed to lead? How can that be?”

“I was told that if I survived your visit I would be seeking adventure to train me for kingship.”

“Who told you?”

“A seal.”

“Do you usually hold conversations with seals?”

“This one serves Poseidon. Why do you look so doubtful? Talking seals are as believable as stump-water visions.”

“Well, I can tell you what your first adventure will be. We’re going to Bebrycos, you and I, to help my brother fight a brass-headed giant.”

“Oh joy! I haven’t done much fighting, but I’m a pretty good archer.”

“We’ll teach you whatever you need to know,” said Pollux. “You’re our little brother now.” He drew Jason to him and pressed his bleeding knuckles to the boy’s clawed shoulder. “Our blood has mingled,” he said. “We’re brothers. Which means you’re Castor’s brother, too.”

“I couldn’t ask for anything better.”

“Gather your sleepy arrows, Little Brother. Fill your quiver. We’re off to Bebrycos at the turning of the tide!”

The Scorching

When Castor landed on Bebrycos he spent a few days scouting the island before challenging its ruler. His only knowledge of the giant and of those he ruled was what Peleus had told him, and he decided to see for himself what the situation was.

He pretended to be an old crippled man, a beggar. Donning a ragged black cloak, he stooped to half his height, hid his face in the cowl, and went limping about the island, occasionally thrusting a bowl at people, begging for food in a high quavering voice.

He learned that Amycus ruled by terror, that even his courtiers were not safe because he would be taken by gusts of rage, seize the nearest person, and pound him to a pulp. Only the Royal Guard, who were the twenty wingless dragons, was safe from his furies. He would kill anyone who displeased him. Some offenders were chained to a rock at a low tide and would spend hours waiting for the rising tide to cover them. But since sharks prowled very close to shore, only the lucky ones drowned.

A prime offender, anyone who dared look too long at any girl Amycus was interested in, was given to the guard for special treatment. The dragons would take the man to the beach, shackle him to a massive iron ring sunk into an enormous charred boulder, and stand in a circle blowing flame at him, one dragon at a time—roasting him inch by inch until his screams were heard in the castle, making Amycus smile. Some victims tried to shorten their agony by beating their head against the rock, but only a few had wit enough to do that.

These torture sessions drew big crowds, and the old beggar sidled among them, unnoticed, observing everything. He felt an idea forming. He tried to fend it off, because it was unspeakably perilous, but the idea kept coming back, and he knew he would have to think it through.

Upon this day, the spectators were disappointed. The man being burned was inconsiderate enough to die quickly. The crowd drifted away. The old beggar stayed on the beach watching the gulls. Attracted by the smell of burned flesh, they were diving, screeching, waiting for the body to cool so that they could feast. In the meantime, they ate the big black crabs that had also come to dine. It was an unpleasant sight, but Castor had come to do something, and had to stay until it was done.

He waited until the bones were stripped clean and the gulls had departed. He went to the rock, took hold of the iron ring, braced his legs, and began to pull. The rock seemed as though it were rooted to the center of the earth; he could not budge it. He exerted all his strength—which, he realized now, he had never really used to its fullest. “Things have been too easy for me,” he said to himself. “Nothing I’ve ever wrestled, man or beast, has lasted two minutes against me. Now, let’s see what I’m really made of.” He pulled with all his might, and more than his might. Every particle of him fused into a wild surge of energy.

He thought he felt the rock move. “Father Zeus, help me,” he muttered. The gigantic rock seemed to loosen in its socket of earth. He grunted and let go. “If I can do this much now,” he thought, “a few licks of fire should really inspire me.”

He wandered off then. He felt dizzy from the strain, but had done enough to know that he could do more. He left that place, for the smell of burned flesh still hung heavy, and walked a mile or so along the shore, thinking hard.

“It’s definite then,” he said to himself. “I’ve got to do it and try to get it done before Pollux comes ... which means he’ll be the one to challenge Amycus. Because even if I succeed against the dragons—which is a very big *if* indeed—I’ll probably be too scorched to fight the giant. I wish we could trade jobs, Pollux and I, but he doesn’t have the temperament to handle the dragons. When faced by an enemy he lowers his head and charges. He hates tactics and trickery; he trusts only his fists. But these damned lizards must be taken care of or neither of us will get out of here alive, no matter what happens to Amycus. As for those slithering flamethrowers, there’s only one thing to do, and only me to do it.”

He had come now to where he had hidden his own clothes. He stripped himself of the stinking beggar rags and plunged into the sea, and swam until

he felt clean again. Then he donned his tunic and went to find the girl he had seen with Amycus.

He went to the castle grounds and lurked in the orchard, watching the great portal until he saw the girl come out. He waited again until he saw three dragons emerge from the castle, one of them carrying a big net. This was the girl's escort, he knew, assigned by Amycus to follow her and discourage any other suitors. They followed very slowly.

Castor hurried after her with long strides. He wanted some time alone with her before the dragons arrived. He followed her up a hill. Looking back, he saw that the dragons were far behind. He guessed that they were giving her plenty of space, hoping that she was really going to meet someone. Then they could catch him, and begin the scorching. They enjoyed their work.

When he reached her she was sitting on a rock, sobbing.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She choked back her sobs and looked at him. Her wet face was very beautiful.

"Why are you crying?"

"It's that beast, the king, my brother-in-law. He's tired of my sister and wants to marry me."

"I take it that doesn't appeal to you?"

"Oh no, sir. I hate, loathe and despise him."

"How about your sister?"

"She has nothing to say about it. When he gets tired of a wife he throws her away and gets a new one. My sister's his eighth."

"And you'll be the ninth?"

"And my little sister will probably be the tenth. He'll be ready to throw me away when she's big enough. But I won't be the ninth, I won't marry him, I won't! I came here to jump off this hill."

"Don't do that," said Castor. "You're too beautiful. It would be too much of a waste. There must be many young men who love you."

"There was one I loved, but he's gone. The king's lizards caught him in a net and did dreadful things to him. You'd better go away, sir, or they'll catch you, too. They follow me everywhere."

Castor saw her eyes widen in terror, and knew that she saw dragons coming up behind him. He stepped closer, whispering, "May I kiss you?"

And felt the net fall over him.

He didn't resist as the three dragons dragged him to the beach. He drew deep into himself as he had trained himself to do before a fight. He let all anxiety drain away, and tried to draw upon all the sources of his strength, some of which were mysterious even to himself.

He let them take him to the rock and chain him to its iron ring. He saw the crowd gather, watched the gulls thronging above in preparation for their feast. He made himself be absolutely passive because he wanted all the dragons to form their close circle around him. And he wanted them to be without suspicion.

When the green monsters closed their circle about the rock, one of them opened crocodile jaws and spat flame. A narrow jet. Castor braced his legs and began to pull, trying to lift the rock. It did not budge. He strained harder. His tunic had burned away and the crowd saw his back muscles writhing like serpents. Another dragon spat flame, then another.

Castor was prepared for pain, but he had been unable to imagine this kind of agony. "Father Zeus," he groaned. "Help me—please ..."

Another dragon shot flame, aiming at his middle.

Castor smelled flesh burning—his own, he knew—and the odor of it filled him with fury such as he had never known. Fury became strength. The crowd saw him sink toward the ground, then arise mightily, pulling the enormous rock out of the earth as a cork is drawn from a bottle. Astounded, they watched him pivot, swinging the boulder at the end of his chain. Saw him spin, faster and faster, and the tethered rock whirled in a murderous circuit, crushing dragons as it went.

No one had ever heard the giant lizards make a sound before. But now they were howling, a rattling phlegmy screech as they fell before the rock. As they fell, however, they belched final fire at Castor, great gouts of it now until he was bathed in fire.

But he kept whirling until all the dragons had fallen. Then he collapsed, falling among them, sprawling on the sand. The crowd had fled in terror. The green bodies lay still. Only the golden one writhed slightly. Castor, in agony, lay there praying for death to stop his pain.

And that is how Jason and Pollux found him, lying on the sand among the broken lizards. Pollux gasped in horror. "What are these ghastly things?" he whispered.

“Whatever they are,” said Jason, “he seems to have killed them all.”

“But they’ve killed him, too,” sobbed Pollux.

Jason was kneeling at Castor’s side, touching him gently. “He’s still alive,” he said.

“Look at him, though,” cried Pollux. “Half his skin’s burned off. He’s in awful pain. I’m going to put him out of his misery, then follow him to Tartarus. We have two bodies but a single soul. I can’t live without my twin.”

Jason felt himself melting with pity, but he tried not to show it. He knew he had to imitate coolness. “Do you really want to die before avenging him?” he said. “Don’t you want to fight Amycus first? You owe it to your brother who has prepared the way. Besides, the giant might spare you the trouble of killing yourself.”

“I know,” groaned Pollux. “I want to fight him. But how can I leave Castor in this pain?”

“I can do something,” said Jason. He drew an arrow from his quiver and scratched Castor’s forehead. The moaning immediately ceased, and the writhing. Castor breathed easily. “He’s asleep,” said Jason. “He feels no pain. He’ll gain strength as he sleeps. When he awakes, I’ll heal his burns. I promise.”

Pollux knelt and kissed his brother’s face. Then grasped Jason and cried, “Let’s find Amycus then! I must fight! I can’t wait!”

He rushed off and Jason followed.

Hero Meets Monster

By the time they reached the castle, word had already come to Amycus that his dragons had been battered to death. The news sent him into one of his rages, and he had killed three of his courtiers and was holding a fourth by the neck, strangling him, while issuing orders to the captain of his spearmen.

“They say it was a stranger who killed my dragons. A big blond youth, a Spartan. Find him, and bring him to me; I want to kill him with my own hands. Very slowly, and so painfully that he’ll wish he had let the dragons burn him.”

“I’m a Spartan,” called a voice. “Will I do?”

Amycus gaped in astonishment as he saw Pollux and Jason standing in front of his throne.

“Yes, I’m a Spartan,” said Pollux. “And blond. Not big by your standards, you overgrown brute, but big enough to make things interesting if you dare fight me.”

The king was speechless, and everyone knew he was too furious to utter a word. Jason was watching him closely. The brass head could not change expression, but Jason, who had trained himself to observe body changes, saw the veins swell in the giant’s neck. Saw the thick brown pelt that covered his torso grow spiky, like the hackles of an angered wolf. But when Amycus did speak, it was in a whisper, and somehow more menacing than if he had bellowed.

“Are you he who killed my dragons?”

“Not me,” said Pollux. “But someone very much like me. My twin, in fact. He has lost too much skin to do any fighting this week, so if you’re really itching to avenge yourself on anyone, I suggest myself. How many

times do I have to challenge you, you bowl-headed monstrosity? Let's go out to your blood-soaked meadow and fight."

"Can you be ready by midafternoon?" said Amycus.

"I'm ready now."

"I need a few hours to send word out so that we may have a good audience. I want as many people as possible there to see what I do to you."

"Midafternoon, then," said Pollux.

Jason had been studying the giant all this while, and was dismayed at what he saw. Although he respected his friend's skill, he didn't see how he could possibly stand up to a creature as powerful as the king. Amycus was about ten feet tall. His burnished brass head with its flat nose and ridged eye holes was simply a mallet. His neck was long and very thick, as wide as his head—one length of muscle, giving that murderous whiplike power to his butting. His shoulders were as wide as an ox yoke, his legs like tree trunks; his arms were almost as long as his legs. And although Jason could not see muscle under the bearlike pelt, he knew it was there. His hands were as big as garden spades. When clenched, they would be knobs of bone almost as hard as his head.

Jason cast a sidelong glance at Pollux, who was also staring at the king and was utterly undismayed at what he saw. A little smile played over his lips. His gray eyes were pale as frost.

"Go to the meadow now," said the king, "and examine the ground. I want you to have every chance to make a fight of it."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Pollux. "I don't think you'll be disappointed in my efforts."

He walked out of the throne room, the courtiers parting before him. Jason followed.

Jason was restless, seething with anxiety. He strolled about as Pollux studied the meadow. The hillside was filling with people. They were seating themselves on boulders along the slopes. A vast throng was gathering. Jason crossed to where Pollux was standing. "Have you chosen your ground?" he asked.

"Here," said Pollux. It was a spot where the field tapered toward a cliff face, a wall of sheer rock.

"Why here?" asked Jason. "Wouldn't you do better in the middle of the field where your speed would count? He'll simply corner you here and

pound you to pieces.”

“Exactly what I want him to think,” said Pollux.

Jason stayed with him now, waiting for the king to come. People were mobbing the slopes; it looked as though the entire population of the island had come. Vendors passed among them, selling prawns, honeycombs, and melons.

The king strode onto the meadow, surrounded by spearmen, attended by slaves. He went directly to Pollux. “Are you prepared to die?” he growled.

“I’m prepared to fight.”

“Have you chosen your ground?”

“Here,” said Pollux. “This rock wall is one boundary. The dimensions are whatever you choose.”

The king turned to his spearmen. “Pace it off. Fifteen strides long, fifteen strides wide. Stand your pickets.”

An officer paced off the distance and placed the men along the boundaries, making a square with the wall at one end. The armored men were a hedge of iron.

A trumpeter raised his horn and blew a clear blast. Then he addressed the crowd. “People of Bebrycos, you are gathered here to watch your king, Amycus, protector of the realm and hammer of justice, punish one who dares enter our land without invitation. Watch the fellow perish. Watch and admire.”

As this was being announced, the king’s slaves were stripping their master. The sun glinted on his brass head. The trumpeter sounded his horn again. The fight began.

Pollux was a big youth, but he looked very small as he backed away from the stalking giant. Jason watched in anguish as the king worked every advantage of the tightly penned space. He could corner Pollux here, maul him with his great fists until he was ready for the death butt. Yet Pollux himself had chosen this place. Jason couldn’t understand why.

But it was strange what was happening in the ring. It seemed more like a dance than a fight. Amycus shuffled after the youth, blocking him with shoulders and elbows, swinging at him. But Pollux drifted away from those fists and from those massive furry arms—moving very thriftily, just enough to escape the flailing fists. Stepping lightly away from the bull-like charges, dancing, twirling, dodging. He was untouched, though Amycus had aimed a

hundred blows at him. He was untouched, but had not yet struck a blow of his own.

Suddenly, Pollux changed tactics. He stopped dancing and began to leap. He sprang from one side of the ring to the other. As soon as he touched ground he leaped again. Amycus rushed after him. Just as he reached him, Pollux rose straight into the air. He leaped higher than the king's head and launched a scything sideways kick. Amycus ducked, and the foot whizzed past his head. Jason thought, "Why does he duck? Kicking that head is kicking brass. The foot must break."

Amycus must have thought the same thing at the same time. For, as Pollux landed with knees bent and immediately sprang into the air again and kicked again, this time the king did not duck. But foot did not meet head. It was exquisitely aimed. As Pollux came down, his foot swerved in the air and sank into the king's torso. He bent over, gasping.

But Amycus straightened up, immediately seeming to gain new strength from the pain. He bellowed, charged again. Pollux sprang away. This time Amycus did not rush after him but dove through the air. Dove halfway across the ring, hitting Pollux with his shoulder and hurling him against the hedge of armored men—who pushed him back into the ring.

Amycus was all over him now, blocking escape, mauling him. A terrific punch caught Pollux between shoulder and elbow. His left arm went limp. His mouth bled. The crowd roared. But it seemed that the taste of his own blood refreshed the Spartan. He moved swiftly, stepping away from Amycus, twirling, dancing, springing away, swaying out of reach. As reeds sway before a wind, so Pollux bent away from the giant's flailing fists.

Amycus was breathing heavily now. He kept rushing, punching. Now Pollux began to strike back, using only his right arm. He did not aim at the brass face, but at the body. The king's rib cage boomed like a drum under the youth's lightning fist. Nine blows Pollux struck, and whisked away before Amycus could strike back. The king's massive body was hidden by his pelt; it was hard to tell the effect of these blows. But Jason judged his torso to be one big bruise.

The giant's strength was undiminished, however—or so it seemed. He plowed ahead now, accepting all the punishment Pollux offered, taking all his punches, trying to get close enough to use his mallet head. The tactic filled Jason with anguish as he watched. It seemed to be working. Pollux

was retreating, but straight back, without springing away. Jason thought he might be too tired to leap.

Amycus shuffled toward him, like a bear moving toward a fawn. Pollux retreated until he was stopped by the wall. He slumped against the rock, and Amycus was where he wanted to be. He did not punch, but seized the youth's shoulders, and drew back his head for the fatal butt. And in Jason's vision, the presence of death thickened the air, slowing everything. He saw the brass head smashing through the sunlight toward that beautiful face.

Then, more swiftly than the eye could follow, the yellow head twitched away. It moved just enough so that the king's head barely grazed it, and smashed into the rock wall. The roaring of the crowd changed into a vast sigh as it saw the rock wall split. Fracture lines radiated from the dent. And for a moment, it seemed, the brass head was socketed in the rock, holding Amycus still. Only a moment, but enough for Pollux to slip away behind him, and to raise his own fist.

He pivoted on the soles of his feet and smashed his bleeding knuckles into the brown pelt, just above the waist—a terrible kidney punch that would have killed anyone else. But Amycus turned to face his foe. The brass forehead was dented slightly, his face was scratched, but he seemed otherwise unhurt. When he moved, however, he moved slowly; something was muffling him. He lifted his arms—slowly. Pollux's left hand clawed itself painfully into the air; the arm was indeed broken. With two fingers of his left hand he lifted the king's chin in what looked like a weird caress.

He swung his right fist again. He planted his feet, turned on his ankles and twisted his body around with all the whiplike power of his spine, all the elastic strength of his shoulders, all his love of fighting, and all his loathing of the brass-headed brute who had caused his brother such agony.

His fist landed on the giant's throat. Jason, watching breathlessly, felt that he was attached to that fist, and he could feel the king's windpipe breaking under the blow. Amycus swayed on the grass. Blood gushed from every hole in the metal face. From nostrils, ears, mouth. He bellowed weakly, blowing bubbles of blood—then fell face down. And everyone in the vast crowd knew he would not rise again.

The people were yelling, jumping, screeching, roaring—not with rage but with joy. For now that Amycus was dead they could show what they felt. Jason rushed to Pollux and threw his arms about him.

“Want to be king?” he whispered. “They’ll sit you right on the throne, if you wish.”

“I don’t know,” said Pollux. “I’d have to talk it over with Castor. He’d have to share the throne, you know.”

“No!” called a voice.

The young men turned. It was a seal rearing up on the bright grass, flipper raised. “No,” he repeated. “My master, Poseidon, has other plans. You must go voyaging, the three of you, but in a proper ship this time. And other heroes will join the crew. From island to island you shall sail, seeking a magical prize, rescuing maidens as you go, killing monsters, cleansing my master’s sea. Then, Jason, you will be ready for kingship, and all of you shall enter legend.”

“Spooky stuff,” murmured Pollux, grinning. “Let’s go find Castor. He’ll be waiting to hear about the fight.”

“A master builder shall come,” called the seal. “He’ll build you a ship. Wait for him here.”

And the seal slid into the sea.

ANTEUS

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For Cody Clinton,
our smallest giant

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Characters

Monsters

Anteus
(an TEE uhs) A giant, son of Mother Earth

Gobi
(GO bee) Giant archer who serves Anteus

Mordo Giant cudgeller who also serves Anteus

Kell Third of the giants serving Anteus; a skillful butcher

Hecate
(HECK uh tee) Queen of the Harpies

Gods

Zeus King of the gods

(ZOOS)

Hera
(HEE ruh) Queen of the gods

Gaia
(GAY uh or JEE Mother Earth
uh)

Prometheus
(proh MEE thee A Titan, friend to man
uhs)

Mortals

Hercules
(HER ku leez) Son of Zeus, strongest man in the world

Libyans
(LIB ih uhns) Hordes of them

Amaleki
(uh MAL e ki) Brave mountaineers

Others

Sharks, octopi, camels

Phoenix
(FEE nihx)

A bird who abides in flame and arises from the ashes, unconsumed

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Cannibal Stew

The parched hump of land called Libya was very different in the first days. It wasn't dry; it was green and wet. In fact, *Libya* meant "rainfall," and that spur of Africa was one of the most fertile spots on earth. But its people were not happy, for they were ruled by a monster.

His name was Anteus. He was the youngest of those dread creatures planted in Mother Earth by the Serpent of Chaos. Half-brother to the gigantic one-eyed Cyclopes and to the Hundred-handed Giants, Anteus was a giant also, and the most brutal of all that brood.

Many years before, his fancy had been caught by rich green Libya. He had invaded it, and made himself king by destroying everyone who stood in his path. He rapidly enlarged his kingdom, for he exulted in battle. There was nothing he relished more than the crunch of bones and the smell of blood. The shrieks of the wounded and the rattling gasps of the dying were music to his large hairy ears. And in the short intervals of peace, he amused himself by tormenting his subjects.

His entire court was composed of giants. Courtiers, counsellors, and the officers and men of the Royal Guard were gigantic. When they all reveled, which they did nightly, the mountains rumbled, the earth shook. And when their song was borne on the wind, utter choking fear took those who heard it. For this was the song:

“The stew, the stew,
the cannibal stew!
All you've heard is true
about what
goes in that pot ...

Not pork, or mutton,
or costly beef
but eyes and nose,
fingers and toes
of rebel or thief
or those doing time
for any crime ...

Into the pot,
ready or not ...
with pepper and garlic
onion and thyme ...

To boil and simmer
until it's through ...
the stew, the stew,
the cannibal stew!
Served from the pot,
piping hot ...

The stew, the stew,
the cannibal stew!
Why feed prisoners,
who can feed you?"

Indeed, over a fire-pit dug into the courtyard, a huge iron pot seethed and bubbled. Into this pot, as the song said, were thrown those who had happened to offend the king in some way—or, simply, certain meaty-looking unfortunates who chanced to attract his notice.

And although there were many, many reasons to fear Anteus, who, in a temper, had been known to trample an entire village underfoot, this steaming iron pot became a special symbol of terror.

But the people of this unhappy land, like all folk everywhere, were unable to live without hope. And there was a prophecy abroad, which no one dared speak aloud, but was whispered from household to household. It was: "Help will come from the sea." Just six words, very short ones, but

they fed the flickering flame of hope that warmed the Libyans through years of icy despair.

But like many other a tangled tale of monster and hero, the adventure that was to give meaning to this prophecy was being brewed in high, hidden councils. The fate of this monstrous king, youngest son of Mother Earth, was sprouting far from earth, out of plots woven by the feuding gods.

You might say it began with Prometheus.

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Sport for the Gods

When Zeus first became king of the gods, there was a Titan named Prometheus who occupied a special place in the heavens. He dwelt alone in a cloud-castle, refusing to join the court or take sides in any quarrel.

He was so wise that everyone sought his counsel. Zeus alone disliked him, but was not ready to show his feelings.

Prometheus came to him one day and said: "You have just begun your reign and I have no wish to discourage you, but I must tell you that we gods are doomed."

"We are immortal," said Zeus.

"We cannot die in a gross physical sense," said the Titan. "But we can cease to be gods. And that for gods is worse than death."

"What threatens us?"

"We are being starved."

"What do you mean?"

"A god's nourishment is to be worshiped. But there is nobody to do that."

"We have each other," said Zeus.

"And we love or hate each other, or, mostly, are indifferent. But we cannot worship each other because we are all of the same family."

"Do you have a remedy, oh wise one, or have you come only to spread gloom?"

"I have a suggestion," said Prometheus. "I propose that we plant a new species in this garden of earth. And these new beings, created by us, resembling us in some ways, will lack our power, of course, but will have what we lack—the capacity to worship."

"To worship *us*, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"Your idea has some merit ..."

“It is you, oh Zeus, they will especially worship.”

“Me?”

“You are king of the gods. Of course they will worship you most.”

“The idea gains merit even as you speak, good Titan. I shall consider it carefully.”

Zeus decided to take the Titan’s advice. After several trials, he succeeded in creating a clever two-legged race and set the first batch down on earth, dividing them into male and female so that they could begin to breed. At first, he spent hours watching them, but ceased to be amused by their antics. They seemed to be showing little impulse to worship their creator.... They did occasionally tie a bundle of straw into a kind of doll, mumbling to it and offering bits of food. But Zeus could not connect that crude figure with himself. So he lost interest.

The other gods, however, were fascinated—for a different reason. They began to believe that Zeus had planted mankind on earth as a landowner stocks a trout stream. Hunting humans became the gods’ favorite pastime. It didn’t provide the thrills of hunting a wild boar who could turn upon you with razor tusks, or a lion with claws that could rend you to shreds; man had neither horns nor tusks, nor claws, and was too slow-footed to offer the excitement of the chase. But the creature did possess that which other animals did not: self-consciousness, a sense of the future, a shuddering aversion to death and remarkable skill at evading it. Also, and most entertaining of all, these creatures were questioners; they groped for answers. Unlike other prey, they tried to understand what was happening to them. They could not comprehend the invisible arrows that struck out of nowhere, killing young and old, the strong and the feeble. And their agonized confusion amused the gods mightily. The anguished explanations humankind found for god-sport convulsed the Olympians with laughter. Manhunting became a craze. And the herds were dwindling rapidly.

Prometheus, who had appointed himself protector of humankind, came to Zeus and said: “You who made man, why do you destroy him?”

“I’m not destroying him,” said Zeus. “Oh, I bag one or two occasionally. But that’s not destroying, that’s *culling*. Improves the stock, you know. They breed quite rapidly.”

“Not as rapidly as they’re being killed. Look down, if you don’t believe me. You’ll see that your herds are shrinking daily.”

“Perhaps. I hadn’t really noticed.”

“Please notice,” said Prometheus.

“In regard for your age and reputed wisdom,” said Zeus, “I have overlooked a certain lack of respect in your manner toward me. But I must warn you, my patience is not inexhaustible.”

“If I have taken liberties, my lord, it is in your service. I promised you that if you created the race of man, he would nourish you with his worship. You are disappointed because he has not yet displayed that talent.”

“Yes.”

“But—and pardon me again, oh King—you have not waited long enough. The talent for worship, which is an offshoot of the capacity for wonder and the impulse toward praise, is something unique to mankind, and will develop only as he emerges from the animal state. Give him time, more time, I pray, and you will be pleased beyond measure.”

“You are eloquent on this creature’s behalf,” said Zeus.

“It is on your own behalf, my lord. Stop the slaughter. Let him develop at his own rate. He will learn to rejoice in your handiwork, and sing your praises so beautifully that you will be entranced.”

Thereupon, Zeus summoned the gods to a grand conclave. They thronged his throne room. He sat on the enormous throne made of cloud-crystal and congealed starfire, and wore his ceremonial sunset robes of purple and gold. The scepter he bore was a volt-blue zigzag shaft of lightning.

“Oh Pantheon,” he thundered, “hear my words! Our herds are being slaughtered at a rate that approaches extermination. I have decided to be displeased by this, and hereby impose game laws. The monthly kill shall not exceed six per god. And I mean six adults, no children under twelve, no pregnant females or nursing mothers.... Severe penalties attach to transgression. Whoever exceeds his quota shall be shackled to the roots of a mountain in Tartarus and abide in suffocating darkness through eternity. I have spoken. You may go.”

The new law was not popular. Hera came raging to Zeus one day, and although he was omnipotent, she was his wife and had one unique power; she could make him miserable. So he spoke to her gently and asked why she was so angry.

“It’s that ridiculous law of yours,” she hissed.

“You don’t think the quota large enough? I didn’t realize you were so keen a huntress, my queen.”

“It’s not that!” she shouted. “But I did fill my bag early this month, and now there’s someone down there who needs killing.”

“Wait till next month,” said Zeus.

“I can’t!”

“What’s your hurry?”

“She’s offended me.”

“Something personal?”

“Very personal. I hate her. I must kill her now. Please, my lord.”

“Very well, but don’t make a habit of this sort of thing. We who make laws shouldn’t break them.”

Hera did not hear his last words. She was sliding down a sunray. And in a few minutes had cooled her wrath by murdering the unlucky girl who had offended her... But what Zeus had feared came to pass. Other gods heard of this and came storming into the throne room, citing points of personal privilege and demanding that their quotas be raised.

Finally, Zeus became exasperated. The assembled gods saw that he was simmering with fury. He stamped his foot and the marble floor cracked. The blue lightning shaft that was his scepter went white-hot in his hand. Beyond the windows, thunder rolled. The gods shuddered. They knew that Zeus, generally good-natured, was sheer catastrophe when aroused, and that no one on heaven or earth would be safe from his wrath. They understood this because they knew the depths of their own cruelty, and he was of the same breed, but more powerful.

So they bowed their heads and did not respond when he tongue-lashed them, lowering the monthly kill-quota from six to four and laying a total ban on any complaint against the game laws. They filed out silently, submissively, and for a while were very careful about staying within their quotas.

But as time passed they worked out a way to break the law without getting punished. They used monsters.

Poseidon invented this method when a little village happened to displease him. A fishing village it was, beautifully set among hills rolling down to the sea. Only a handful of huts then, but it had been foretold that this little place was to become the most important city in the world. And since the people

here drew their living out of the sea, Poseidon, master of the deep, expected them to name their village after him. But Athene, goddess of wisdom, had ideas about this village too. She meant to plant special people there and make it a place famous for wisdom.

Green robed, green bearded, Poseidon coasted in on a wave and strode toward the huts—immense, dripping, eyes full of stormy light. He spoke, and his voice was like the surf battering the cliffs.

“Good folk,” he roared softly, “I am Poseidon, earth-shaker, lord of the sea. It is I who have given you an ocean to harvest, taming the wild fathoms for your sake, stocking them with fat fish. Therefore, I ask, when you come to name this place, as soon you must, call it, please, after me, and I shall be your patron and protector forever.”

He whistled up a great wave, which curled over him and drew him from the beach to the sea.

As soon as he had vanished, Athene appeared, shining so brightly in the dust of the little street that it hurt to look at her. She was clad in blue. An owl sat on her shoulder, and she bore spear and shield.

“Good folk,” she said, and her voice was like the west wind making a harp of the trees, “I am Athene, daughter of Zeus, goddess of wisdom, and I am prepared to look upon you with great favor. Name this little village after me and you shall see it grow into the most worthy city in the world, home of sage and warrior, yes . . . and of a prophetess who will decipher the scroll of stars and read what is to come. These rude huts will grow into marble mansions; temples will gleam upon the hills, and thousands of years from now the very syllables of your name shall be a chime of glory....

“And to prove my power, I give you this gift. Behold!”

She raised her spear high and stabbed it into the earth. It stood, quivering. Before the amazed eyes of the villagers, it began to sprout green branches. Fruit hung upon the boughs. Athene plucked a naked child from the street and lifted him so that he could reach into the tree. He snatched the fruit, stuffed his mouth, and gobbled happily. She kissed him and put him down.

“This tree is called the olive,” she said. “Its fruit will feed you, and what is not used for food will be turned into wealth. For you will press the fruit of the olive, and its clear oil will be coveted by the tribes of earth and they will trade for it, sending you what is most precious to them—silks and

amber, copper, spice, horses, slaves. And you shall grow rich and strong. All for giving your village my name.”

The people fell on their knees and thanked the goddess, and named the village Athens. And the goddess departed.

All she had promised came true. But other things happened too.

For Poseidon was very angry. He took great pleasure in whipping up winds to sink the Athenian ships, sending great waves to wash away beaches and bury houses under tons of water, and drown the cattle in the fields.

Nor did all this satisfy him, for the Athenians were a stubborn tribe. They built their homes again, and built new boats, and launched them right into his sea to hunt for fish before the next storm hit.

So Poseidon called up a huge serpent from the depths. It was a hundred feet long and could swallow a fishing vessel in one gulp, nets and crew and all.... It appeared offshore one sunny afternoon and swallowed a whole little fleet. It devoured half the village before nightfall.

Poseidon trod the swell, capering and chortling as he watched the fleet being destroyed. The mighty jaws of the sea serpent gaped and crunched down on a vessel, crushing it between gigantic teeth. As the beast held one ship in his jaws, he smashed another with his flailing tail. And the only reason there were any Athenians left to rebuild their village was that Poseidon realized he was using up his entire stock of this particular entertainment in a single afternoon, and decided to save some for later. So he called off his serpent, who swallowed a final fisherman and sank to the bottom.

Now the other gods had observed Poseidon’s vengeance and saw that it was a good idea to use monsters in that way. It allowed them to punish those they had taken a dislike to while still remaining within the law. Even Athene, who was furious at Poseidon for tormenting her favorite villagers, nevertheless called up monsters from time to time, and sent them to devour those who had offended her.

And the custom grew.

Gaia's Spell

The ancient earth-mother observed all this, and made certain plans.

“My youngest son, Anteus, is terrible in battle,” she said to herself. “And will certainly be persuaded by one vengeful god or other to embroil himself in some dangerous feud.... Now, he’s the most powerful of my offspring, the beautiful brute, and should be able to exterminate any pesky hero who dares challenge him. Nevertheless, I intend to take no chances with that precious life.... I shall concoct a spell that will assure him victory in all encounters.”

Thereupon, she descended into the deepest cavern where an outlicking of the earth’s core-fire smoldered in a natural stone basin. A spring of pure water ran through this basin and was kept at a boil.... This was Mother Earth’s own cauldron where she brewed her most potent spells.

Muttering, she dropped herbs in the boiling water. As the steam wrapped her in a fragrant veil, she began to chant:

“Oh, you who decree
whatever must be,
I call to you
from my deepest core...

If my son, Anteus
is ever thrown,
let him touch earth
who gave him birth ...

I shall staunch his gore,
his strength restore ...

He shall rise from me,
as mighty as before ...”

At this very moment, as it happened, Anteus was being threatened by an enemy more deadly than any he had ever met. They were the *Amaleki*, a warlike tribe of mountaineers—huge wild-bearded hot-eyed men; their women were just as big and just as fierce. This tribe had evolved a battle plan which always worked. During the short intervals of peace, they spent their time collecting the largest, roundest boulders they could find. These they lined up and balanced on a ridge at the top of the mountain. They had built this ridge strategically, laying logs in a trench to form a long mound just high enough to hold the great boulders teetering, emplaced against the mountain wind, but so balanced that a strong shove would send them thundering down the slope.

The boulders were always in place. When some were used in battle, the tribesmen would gather a fresh supply. Then, when an invading force approached, the *Amaleki* would send out a small patrol whose duty was not to fight, but to retreat. This force was made up of half-grown youths, boys and girls, who considered it the greatest honor to be able to risk their lives in this way. For it was dangerous duty. These youngsters were mounted on purebred racing camels, the most valued stock in all the northern rim of Africa.

The patrol would ride out to meet the enemy, allow itself to be spotted, then turn tail and pretend to flee. The invaders would immediately charge after them. The youths, expert riders all, would pretend to be racing their camels at full stride; in reality, they would be reining them in, traveling only at half-speed, allowing the enemy to catch up ... almost, not quite.

Retreating in this fashion, the patrol would lure the enemy into the valley. When the invaders filled the pass, the mountaineers, stationed at both peaks, would launch their boulders.

Now, fate had decreed that Mother Earth’s new spell was to be tested at the very moment of its brewing. As Gaia, lodged in her deepest cavern, was muttering over her cauldron, and the magic vapors were steaming out of the cave—up, up, through seams of coal and iron, through sapphire bed and fertile muck—just at that moment, Anteus was racing ahead of his army, charging after the *Amaleki* patrol.... The white camels were running before

him, carrying their young riders toward the mountain pass, but running as fast as they could; for Anteus could cover fifty yards at a stride and was gaining on them.

The patrol rode into the fatal valley, Anteus rushing after them. His giants were nowhere in sight; he had left them far behind. And the mountaineers, seeing the gigantic figure enter the trap, assumed that the rest of his army was on his heels, and began to roll their boulders.

A huge rock hit Anteus, knocking him off his feet. Other boulders rained down; rock fell on rock, chipping each other, filling the air with flying shale. Anteus was buried deep. And the mountaineers cheered as they saw the monster vanish under the rockfall.

They cheered too soon. For the first wisps of vapor from the magic cauldron drifted up through the valley bed and touched Anteus as the rocks fell. Dimly, he heard a voice chanting:

“... let him touch earth
who gave him birth ...
I shall staunch his gore,
his strength restore ...
He shall rise from me,
as mighty as before ...”

The massive weight of rock had driven him to the floor of the valley, deep into the lap of his mother. Half crushed as he was, bones shattered, ripped open, bleeding from a hundred wounds, he touched the primal energy that had made him be. He drank of her strength. He felt a strange force surging through him. A marvelous elation sang through his veins ... a joyous power.

He arose, shrugging off shale. He climbed to his feet, rocks cascading off his shoulders like water off a breaching whale. The mountaineers, staring from above, were amazed to see the entire valley shudder. The enormous rock pile was heaving as though the earth were quaking beneath. Before their astounded gaze a giant arose, holding a boulder in each huge hand.

He hurled the boulders, first at one peak, then at the other, crushing dozens of the Amaleki with each throw. By this time, his own troops had arrived. He motioned them up one slope; he, himself, charged up the other.

The brave mountaineers, who had never been defeated, streamed down to meet the giants.

They were massacred. Clubbed, stomped, hurled bodily off the mountain, or simply had their necks wrung like chickens. Some few were able to flee, and hide in caves. All the rest were slaughtered.

The giants were too heavy to ride camels. So they skinned the prize beasts like rabbits and roasted them over their camp-fires. Camel meat is tough and stringy, but the giants were very hungry.

From that day on, Anteus knew himself to be invincible. Earth's magic never failed. Stricken to the ground, he would rise again, stronger than before, and destroy whoever had felled him.

And it was this magical endowment that served him so well when he finally battled Hercules.

Bowman, Banger, Butcher

Anteus had picked giants for his Royal Guard—not simply outsized mortals but the offspring of monsters who had abducted nymphs and spawned gigantic, shaggy humanoid creatures. When he had recruited the largest and most savage of these, he trained them in the use of weapons. And although the weakest of them was capable of finishing off an armed warrior with his bare hands, they were kept hard at work until they were expert with bow, sword, spear, and battle-axe.

Now, Anteus was not the kind of war chief who stood on a hill well behind the front line, looking at maps. He led his men into battle. He charged like a bull, leaping over ditches, crashing through walls, battering to death anyone who couldn't scurry out of his way ... leaving his men to mop up after him. Which meant cutting the throat of anyone left alive.

If the enemy were strong enough to field an army against him—which seldom happened—the Royal Guard dogged the king's footsteps as he rushed into the hottest part of the battle, forming a hedge of blades about him.

After leading his troops through several campaigns, and studying each man's performance, Anteus selected three of his Guardsmen as his personal escorts, who would accompany him everywhere, on and off the field, and might be called upon for special tasks. They were the three most ferocious fighters, of course; their names were Gobi, Mordo, and Kell.

Gobi was a bowman, but with too powerful a pull for any wooden bow. He had to make himself a special weapon. After a successful mammoth hunt, when a beast had been killed with the loss of only thirty beaters, Gobi claimed a tusk for himself. The slain animal had been exceptionally big, even for a mammoth—whose size is calculated as having been at least

twice that of our own elephant—and its tusk was more than fifteen feet long.

Gobi split that tusk. And the shaft of ivory, cut and polished and bound at each tapered end with copper wire, became his bow. A cured strand of mammoth gut was his bowstring. His arrows, plumed with an eagle's tailfeathers and tipped with razor-sharp bronze points, were longer than ordinary spears.

When he bent that bow almost double and let his arrow fly, the enormous shaft could split an oak tree and pass through an armored man standing behind it.

Only Gobi himself could use that bow. Anteus was even stronger than Gobi and could bend it easily, but the bow was too refined a weapon for him; he preferred a club or his great mallet fists.

Mordo worshiped Anteus and copied everything he did. The club became his favorite weapon, and he had a collection of the most massive bludgeons ever used. Most of them were hardwood, carved to a perfect balance, but he also had one cudgel of glittering brass for ceremonial slaughter. And, in one battle, it was said, having shattered his club while squashing a chariot, he had raced to a nearby olive grove, uprooted a full-grown tree and used that as a club—roots, branches, and all—flailing an entire enemy patrol to bloody gobbets of flesh.

Modeling himself further on Anteus, Mordo sometimes cast aside his club and waded into battle armed only with his fists. He toughened his hands by soaking them in salt water. And when he clenched those huge paws into fists, planted his legs, thick as trees, and swung his oxbow shoulders, whipping his long arms about, then, indeed, those fists became weapons as deadly as any ever forged in a smithy.

As for Kell, he was a man of blades. He liked to cut and thrust. His dagger was as long as the usual sword, his sword longer than a lance. The shaft of his spear was tall as a mast. When he went into battle with these blades stabbing and slicing, he wrought such carnage that he chose to clothe himself not in armor but in a long one-piece leather apron such as butchers wear. Indeed, he was known as “the butcher,” and was perhaps the most feared of Anteus's band of killers.

A young poet, once, made reckless by moonlight, composed a song and was foolish enough to sing it:

“Gobi, Mordo, Kell ...
Bowman, Banger, Butcher,
Serve the tyrant well ...
And though we go there first,
we’ll wait for them in hell ...”

He vanished very soon afterward and was never seen again. And although people remembered the song and sometimes whispered it to themselves, no one dared sing it aloud. Indeed, it wasn’t heard again for many years—not until a young hero named Hercules landed on a Libyan beach and started doing what he had sworn to do.

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Hera's Grudge

Hercules' second task had been to kill the hundred-headed Hydra—each of whose heads held fifty teeth, and whose bite was so poisonous that a single scratch from any one of those five thousand teeth would kill a hippo in the wink of an eye.

After Hercules had slain the Hydra, he dipped an arrow into its envenomed blood so that he might have one ultimate weapon. Then, afterward, he found that he was unable to make himself use that arrow no matter how great his peril. For he was afraid that if he did use it, its poison would enter the flowing waters, and be carried by the wind, and seep into the earth, poisoning crops and cattle—and people. He felt that he would rather lose his own life than do such a thing.

Nevertheless, he kept the poisoned arrow. And its very possession was to cause him endless woe—which began when he faced Anteus.

It happened this way:

Of all the females in the universe, human and divine, Hera, Queen of the Gods, was considered the most fortunate. Her wealth was as boundless as her extravagance. Her power was limited only by the will of her husband, Zeus, and not always then. And her majestic beauty was renewable by means of a magic spring in which no one else was permitted to bathe.

Nevertheless, for all her wealth and power and beauty, Hera was not happy.

Having made a habit of indulging every whim, she could be thrown into a tantrum by the slightest disappointment. And because she considered now that she was suffering a series of major disappointments, her fury was shaking heaven and earth, and beginning to ruffle even the icy composure of the gods.

“I simply can’t bear it,” she snarled to herself. “That scurvy little lout, Hercules, has managed to defeat every monster I’ve thrown against him. It’s beyond belief how he has been able to do this. But he has ... he has.... He simply refuses to be vanquished, the mangy cur. And if I don’t destroy him soon, I’ll suffocate with rage. I’m finding it hard to breathe right now. The trouble with me is that I’m simply too kindly by nature to pursue a feud the way I should. What I need is some truly murderous counsel.”

Whereupon, she sent for her friend, Hecate, Queen of the Harpies, and the world’s foremost expert on various forms of vendetta and mayhem.

Upon receiving Hera’s message, the young hag who was Hecate spread her great wings and flew from her underworld aerie up to the top of Mount Olympus, where dwelt the high gods. She found Hera in the orchard. Sunlight sifted through a lacework of branches, and the two towering females met in a play of checkered light and amid the mingled fragrance of crushed grass and ripening fruit.

“Esteemed mistress! Patroness!” cried Hecate. “Beloved friend. How can I serve you?”

“Good Hecate, teach me to kill.”

“Pardon, my lady, but I should have supposed this to be the subject on which you would need no instruction.”

“Perhaps I have had some success in the past at eliminating those obnoxious to me,” said Hera. “But I seem to be losing my touch. Do you think I’m mellowing with age?”

“No, my queen, I do not. You seem to me as youthful, as energetic, as divinely vicious as ever. Perhaps even more so.”

“You are too kind,” murmured Hera. “The fact is that my worst enemy, the mortal I hate more than any other, more than any creature on earth, in the sea, or in your own smoky realm, continues to live and thrive despite my best efforts. I speak of Hercules, son of Zeus, by that cooing bitch, Alcmene, Lady of the Light Footsteps. Zeus has spawned swarms of children, as you know, and only two of them by me—and I hate and loathe and despise every one of them, of course. But worst of all, by far, do I abhor Hercules. For his mother was the most beautiful of my husband’s paramours, and he is the strongest of Zeus’s ill-gotten sons. Consequently, I decided to get him killed in the most painful way possible, and proceeded to involve him with monster after monster—all to no avail. He has overcome

the Nemean Lion, the hundred-headed Hydra, and the three-bodied Geryon, fearsome creatures all, each of whom had devoured several generations of heroes. Now I'm at my wits' end and need your help, if you have any to give me."

"What we must do," said Hecate, "is find Hercules' weak point."

"Don't you think I've tried?" cried Hera. "I've confronted him with three of the most dreadful monsters ever hatched. While they were looking for his weak point, he slew them all."

"Allow me to differ, gracious lady. His adventure with the Hydra did reveal a weakness in him, perhaps a fatal one."

"I'm listening...."

"It's not in the usual physical sense that he's vulnerable," said Hecate. "But he's cursed with a loving heart and an overheated imagination. He can be successfully attacked through those he cares for."

"Be specific."

"Hercules is a special hero to children. They dote on tales of his battles, follow him in hordes ... and he is very fond of them."

"So?"

"So ... this gives me an idea. As you know, he has never shot that arrow he dipped in Hydra blood. He's afraid the poison might spread. Well, we use this fear. We visit his sleep with a dream. We show him one of these children, a little boy, wanting to touch a weapon of the hero he adores. The boy rummages through Hercules' quiver and scratches his finger on an arrow—the poison arrow! The boy froths at the mouth, stiffens, dies. Hercules, knotted in this horrid nightmare, will view it not as a simple sleep vapor but as a prophetic vision, a solemn warning from on high. And once we hook him on this illusion, we'll know how to play him like a fish. We'll extract from him a penitential vow to go unarmed into his next adventure. And then we shall pit him, naked and weaponless, against a monster who has so far proved invincible, and whom I count as the most destructive force on earth."

"Who is this champion?"

"His name is Anteus, youngest son of Mother Earth and the Primal Snake, and the most fearsome of all that dreadful litter. He's a giant, presently king of Libya, and our current favorite down below. For the past few years, he has sent us more corpses than all other monsters combined."

“What makes him so invincible?” asked Hera.

“His size. His bloodlust. The fact that he has surrounded himself with a band of giants almost as fearsome as he is, and whom only he can control.”

“I don’t know ...” murmured Hera. “When I think of Geryon and the Hydra and what Hercules did to them, I can’t seem to put much confidence in ordinary giants.”

“Anteus is no ordinary giant,” said Hecate. “He is larger than the largest Titan, and of more than Titanic strength. He can kick over a fortified castle like an anthill and crush its defenders underfoot. Besides all this, he has a secret power. He is the favorite son of Mother Earth, and she has endowed him with a unique virtue. If ever thrown to earth, Anteus draws new strength from his mother. And no matter how grievously injured he has been, will arise whole, healed, unblemished, with strength restored. Doesn’t he sound a little better to you, my lady?”

“Well, my dear,” said Hera. “You are certainly eloquent on his behalf. Let’s just hope for the best. Shall we start concocting that poison-arrow dream?”

Landfall in Libya

Thus it was that when Hercules crossed the Middle Sea to challenge Anteus, he carried no weapons. He did wear his lion skin—that hide he had taken from the Nemean Lion and which made a marvelous lightweight flexible armor—for it could turn any blade. As a helmet he wore the lion's skull. But horrified by his dream, keeping his own vow, he had left bow and arrows, spear, sword, and club behind.

He was rafting across the narrow arm of sea that divided the Iberian Peninsula from the northwestern spur of Africa ruled by Anteus. He had chosen a raft instead of a sailing vessel because this was the season when strong winds blew out of the south, and in those days sailboats could not tack; they could only run before the wind.

He had made his raft very simply, by lashing fallen trees together. Another tree trunk, which he had trimmed of branches, was his oar. The raft was unsinkable, but huge and clumsy—so heavy that twenty oarsmen would have been unable to manage it. But Hercules, using his single tree-trunk oar, made it skim over the water like a canoe.

Day and night he rowed. It was heavy work, moving the raft against headwinds, but he rowed without rest. Always before, he had gone joyously into battle, but this time for some reason he felt gloomy about the coming ordeal ... and wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. He was, however, to meet Anteus sooner than he wished.

Anteus enjoyed fishing, but the ordinary ways were far too tame for him. His idea of good sport was to wade out hip-deep—which meant about twenty feet of water—and there to hunt the man-eating sharks and giant octopi that lurked offshore. Before this, however, he would have provided himself with live bait, and his method of bait gathering was another of the royal techniques that terrified the Libyans.

He would appear in the courtyard at the morning lineup where prisoners were being thrown into the stewpot. Roaring, “You ... you ... you ...,” he would select six of them—eight if they were small—and, while they were still thanking him for their reprieve, would snatch them up in his huge paws and, two by two, knock their heads together. He did it gently, just enough to put them out; then he would stuff them in a sack and stride off toward the sea.

On this particular morning, the bait was more vigorous than usual. Some of the men in the sack came to and began to thrash about before Anteus reached the water. He raised his fist to smash at the restless bulge, but then thought: “The livelier they are the more they’ll splash in the water. The more they splash the sooner they’ll draw the sharks....” So he simply shifted the sack on his shoulder and strode on.

He crossed the narrow beach and waded into the surf. The sea was rougher than usual. The south wind was behind him, blowing against the incoming tide, driving the breakers back on each other. Anteus frowned. Turbulent water meant that swimmers would be harder for the sharks to see. He would have to wait patiently in the water, or speed things up by spilling some blood. And Anteus had little patience.

When he was out far enough, he reached into the sack and pulled out one of the men, who screamed and struggled but was as helpless as a frog in the hands of a cruel boy. Anteus pinched his ear between thumb and forefinger and simply tore it off. He held the shrieking man upside down so that he could bleed into the water. Then, when the blood was spreading nicely, he tossed the man into the sea, and watched him as he began to swim frantically toward shore. Too late! A triangular black fin was cutting through the water toward him.

Anteus heard him utter a louder shriek, then disappear. But the giant made no move to catch this shark, for now there would be more blood upon the waters, attracting other sharks. Sure enough, he saw several fins slicing the tide toward the bloody foam. He ripped open the sack and spilled the other bait-men into the water, and grinned as he watched the fins coming closer.

For all Hercules’ unique strength, rowing the heavy raft against the wind had almost drained him of energy, and he was very happy to be making

landfall at last. But his happiness vanished as he heard whimpering and thin screams, and saw that the breakers were wearing manes of bloody spume.

Looking ahead, he saw an even worse sight. The biggest manlike creature he had ever met was standing waist-deep in water, scooping up sharks. He watched in disbelief. The giant, holding a great fish by the tail, snapped it in the air with such force that it became a blur. Hercules heard a loud cracking sound and realized that it was the shark's back snapping. The giant whirled and flung the dead fish toward shore. It sailed through the air and landed on the beach.

When the giant turned and saw Hercules, he dipped into the water and pulled out another shark and an enormous octopus. In the same motion, he threw them at Hercules.

There were some Titans and a few monsters and a giant or two who were stronger than Hercules, but none of them had reflexes so finely honed; none of them, in other words, could move as fast.

Now, when Anteus hurled shark and octopus at him, he swept the tree trunk that was his oar out of the water and swung it, smashing its base against the very center of the octopus's circular body, which was its head. It fell to the raft, stunned, and Hercules fell on top of it. The flung shark sailed over his head and landed in the water on the other side of the raft, and immediately breached, lunging toward Hercules.

But he had snatched the stunned octopus from the deck of the raft and was using it as a shield, so that when the shark struck, its jaws closed on the great squid. Moving with magical celerity, Hercules began to knot the eight rubbery arms around the raging fish. Before Anteus had time to understand what was happening, Hercules tethered shark and octopus to each other and hurled them back at the giant ... who lifted one huge paw and batted the fishy mass into the water.

"Greetings, stranger," he bellowed. "I see you're a man of meat, as we say here in Libya. And I offer you fine sport if you wish to come ashore and do a bit of real fighting."

"I accept your gracious invitation," called Hercules. "I do wish to come ashore. Your name is Anteus, is it not?"

"It is."

"King of Libya?"

"That's who I am."

“Well, I have come to fight you.”

“As I mentioned,” said Anteus. “I think we can provide you with some sport in that direction.”

“But can we do it tomorrow?” asked Hercules. “I usually try to get down to these things immediately, but I find myself somewhat fatigued from my journey, and would be grateful for a night’s rest before we meet.”

“Do you expect to fight *me* tomorrow?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, if you don’t mind waiting.”

“You’ll have to straighten out your thinking, little fellow. You don’t start with me. I’m the champion. You’ll have to work up to me.”

“In all modesty, sir, I’ve done a few things myself. In the past year or so, I have defeated the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, and three-bodied Geryon.”

“Yes, yes ... enough for a nice little local reputation, no doubt, but a couple of moth-eaten monsters and a triple freak are not sufficient basis for challenging an Anteus. There are three of my helpers you’ll have to defeat before I consent to meet you in single combat.”

“All at once or one at a time?”

“One at a time, my friend. And you’ll be in trouble enough, that way. You’ll first meet my bowman, Gobi, and fight with bow and arrow. Should you, by chance, survive that match, you shall go against Mordo and fight with club or fist, as you prefer. If, by some incredible twist of luck, you emerge alive from that encounter, you shall be entitled to meet Kell, and duel with sword, spear, or battle-axe—anything with a sharp point or cutting edge. And if, miracle of miracles, you are still alive and intact after fighting Gobi, Mordo, and Kell, why then, little man, you shall have the honor of combating Anteus.”

“Sounds interesting,” said Hercules. “I am quite willing to go through all these preliminaries, if you wish, but I have one condition.”

“Condition? Ha ha ... I knew you’d try to back out of it.”

“My condition, sir, is that I be permitted to go in unarmed against your archer, cudgeller, and man of blades.”

“Unarmed?”

“Weaponless, yes. I have so vowed.”

“Are you mad?”

“No, Your Majesty, quite sane. And very eager to commence hostilities.”

“Well, perhaps you’re not so mad, after all. Go in weaponless, and you’ll last about five seconds against Gobi ... and be spared other suffering.”

“Be that as it may,” said Hercules. “I should be grateful for a night’s rest before meeting the first of your henchmen.”

“You shall have luxury accommodations,” laughed Anteus. “Pray, come ashore.”

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Gobi

Although Hercules had vowed to carry no weapon into this particular adventure, he did permit himself to wear his lion-skin armor when he faced Gobi. In fact, that impenetrable hide was the pivot of his battle plan. He intended to offer himself as a target and allow Gobi to shoot arrows at him, knowing that the shafts would be stopped by the lion skin. Then, when Gobi had emptied his quiver, Hercules planned to close with him and fight hand to hand.

But Anteus was wise in the ways of battle. When he saw Hercules clad in lion skin, he immediately knew what to do. He announced that the fight would be delayed, not held that morning, but at two hours past noon.

Hercules didn't realize the meaning of this until he had taken his position in the field and was waiting for Gobi to draw his bow. Peering through the eyeholes of the lion skull, he saw that Gobi was moving very deliberately—restringing his bow, taking one arrow from his quiver and studying it; then sliding it back and selecting another. Several minutes had passed and the archer had shot no arrow. Finally, he notched one, drew the great mammoth-tusk bow almost double, and let fly. The shaft whizzed through the air and struck the lion skin where it covered Hercules' chest. The arrow could not pierce the hide but it struck with great force. Hercules staggered. Looking down, he saw that the arrow lay on the ground; its point was broken off.

He looked toward Gobi again. The giant bowman had not pulled a second arrow, but was lounging there, smiling. Hercules couldn't understand it. Then, suddenly, he did. He realized that it had grown unbearably hot inside the heavy lion skin. This was the hottest hour of the day in the hottest month of the African summer. The sky was cloudless. The sun was a white-hot ball hanging right over his head. He was basting in his own sweat, and

realized that Gobi meant to loiter there, wasting no arrows, but waiting for him to get so hot that he would have to strip off the lion skin and stand naked and unarmed before the deadly shafts.

Even as he was estimating the cost, he was shedding his lion skin. Every pore of his body rejoiced as the air touched his nakedness. But he didn't have much time to rejoice; an arrow was speeding toward him.

One of the secrets of Hercules' magical speed was that his mind did not direct his muscles; he thought *with* his body. Now, as the arrow sheared the golden air with such speed that its tail-feathers smoked, Hercules moved—as naturally and instinctively as a bird leaving a bough or a cat hooking its paw at a butterfly. He swerved, and the arrow that was going straight for his belly button just missed him; before it could pass, his hand shot out and grabbed it.

We know that Gobi's arrows were as big as ordinary spears. And Hercules, hefting the shaft, felt it as a well-balanced javelin. His conscience spoke:

“May I use this? Is it not a weapon? Am I breaking my vow? It's not *my* weapon, it's *his*. Does that make a difference?”

All this flashed through his mind more swiftly than a lizard flicking its tongue at a fly. But still too slowly. For Gobi had notched another arrow.

Without further thought Hercules flung his arrow like a javelin, but in a last scruple changed his aim so that he would strike not the archer but the bow. The arrow hurled by Hercules did strike the ivory bow, knocking it out of Gobi's hand.

Archers know that the least tremor in the fingers holding the bow or notching arrow to bowstring means a much larger difference when the arrow hits. So that a Bowman trains himself to be very cool under stress. And Gobi could stand in the field, aiming his deadly bolts, stand solidly as a tree stump as enemy spears fell about him and chariots hurtled toward him.

Never before, however, had one of his arrows been caught in flight and used against him. Never before had he had the bow knocked out of his hand. And now, his coolness deserted him. He seized one of his arrows and, holding it before him like a lance, charged toward Hercules.

Hercules saw the huge figure hurtling toward him. He flexed his knees slightly, hunched his shoulders, poised his arms.

A *cubit* was an ancient Greek measurement based on the average length of a full-grown man's forearm measured from elbow to wrist—or about eighteen of our inches. And Hercules was said to have been about six cubits in height, or nine feet tall. A giant, by our standards, or any mortal standard. But a real giant of the monster breed was about twenty feet tall and weighed in at half a ton, all muscle.

The giants belonging to Anteus's band were even larger, and the three he had chosen as his Royal Escort were the largest of all, reaching almost to Anteus's shoulder.

So that Hercules, big as he was, seemed like a child facing a raging adult as Gobi rushed across the field toward him. He stood his ground, waiting. He had doffed the lion skin but still wore the lion-skull helmet. And when the javelin point reached him, he leaned forward, gauging the angle so that the arrow-lance did not hit the helmet squarely, but skidded off. Nevertheless, the glancing blow was enough to knock him off his feet, something which rarely occurred.

Gobi stood above him, grinning, and drove the lance down, aiming at Hercules' midriff, trying to pin him to the ground like an insect on a specimen board.

Hercules, lying flat, whisked away just in time, feeling the arrow graze his side as it buried itself in the ground. Gobi had struck with such force that the shaft had buried itself to half its length, and the giant had to jerk hard to pull it free, giving Hercules enough time to regain his feet.

Gobi raised his lance and jabbed again. But Hercules was not there. He had leaped high, high enough to bring his head level with Gobi's. And Hercules' head, it will be remembered, wore the lion-skull helmet. Hercules arched in the air, whipping his head forward with all the tensile strength of his neck, all the shocking force of the writhing muscles in his back and shoulders.

Lion skull struck giant skull, and that of the Nemean Lion was harder. Gobi's head cracked, spilling a gravy of pink-gray brains. He was dead when he hit the ground.

Mordo and Kell

Anteus did not mourn the loss of Gobi. “Any giant who can get himself killed by an unarmed mortal is no giant I want around,” he said. “Gobi’s as well off dead as far as I’m concerned.”

He was talking to Mordo. The gigantic, black-pelted bearlike cudgeller was leaning on his club, listening—grunting in agreement once in a while. Mordo spoke mostly in grunts.

“How about you now?” Anteus went on; “Did you learn anything from watching that poor excuse for a fight?”

“What I learned,” said Mordo, “is that it won’t be any use to hit him on the head while he’s wearing that lion helmet. I’ll just break my club.”

“Poor thinking,” said Anteus. “If you hit him hard enough, you’ll ruin *his* head inside that helmet. Hit him, hit him! Break your damned club; you have plenty. But when you’re through breaking clubs, your man’s head should be a mush of blood and bone.”

“Sounds good. I’ll do it,” grunted Mordo. “And I’m ready for him if he tries that jumping butting trick on me. I won’t hold still for it like Gobi. I’ll swat him in midair. Squash him like a bug. I hope he tries it.”

“Go in there and take him,” said Anteus. “He seems to be ready.”

Mordo and Hercules faced each other in a tight ring of rocks on a grassy plain. Anyone stepping outside the circle would be declared the loser—the penalty for loss being immediate entry into the stewpot. This rule was designed to keep the opponents within arms’ reach of each other, and served to favor the bigger, slower Mordo, for it meant that Hercules could not use his speed. But Anteus was making the rules, and Hercules did not really expect fair play.

Now, the young man knew that all the giants had watched him defeat Gobi and were very much aware that the lion-skull helmet could ward off

any blow. So he expected Mordo to strike not downward at his head, but to sweep his club laterally in a blow designed to smash pelvis, rib cage, and chestbone, leaving him broken and helpless before Mordo, who could then, at his leisure, pound him to a bloody paste. And when the giant raised his cudgel high, clutching it in both hands, and started a downward smash, Hercules thought it was a feint—that Mordo would switch direction in midair, striking sideways at his torso.

But Mordo did not change direction. He continued the downward blow, smashing the enormous bludgeon down onto the lion-skull helmet. It was a terrible blow. Murderous. Mordo had practiced it on tree stumps, and was able to drive a massive oak stump into the ground as if it were a tent stake. So Hercules was quite unprepared for this dreadful blow to the head. The lion helmet held; the club shattered. But Hercules felt the column of his neck compressing; felt pain clamp his throat and claw down inside his chest. He felt himself suffocating; he couldn't breathe.

Nor could he think clearly. His head was ringing like a gong. Worst of all was the pain in his own skullbone. It was as if Hephaestus himself had laid his head on an anvil and was pounding it with his great iron mallet. He realized that while Mordo's blow had not broken his helmet, it had crushed it somewhat, tightening it around his temples, and causing this excruciating pain.

He reached up and yanked the helmet off, almost tearing away his ears in the process. Mordo watched, grinning, as Hercules staggered and reached up to pull off his helmet. Anteus had assured him that Hercules' head would be reduced to a paste of blood and bone, and he expected to see a gratifying gory hash when the helmet came off.

Now Mordo had always believed every word his chief said. And he was amazed to see his enemy's head emerge intact. His eyes were a bit unfocused and his face twisted in an effort to show no pain, but the head itself was definitely unbroken. And Mordo's club had shattered itself upon the helmet. His only weapons now were his fists. The prospect did not dismay him. He really preferred fists to clubs. He took a huge relish in using them. When he clenched his brutal hands and swung his enormous arms he was actually using two of the most dangerous kind of bone-studded cudgels, traveling faster and transmitting more sensation than any club. There was nothing he enjoyed more than driving those knuckles into an

opponent's body, feeling bones crack, feeling the taut flesh grow slippery with blood.

Mordo swung his right arm. His fist, big as a cabbage, hard as a rock, arched toward Hercules' face. But that face was no longer there. The young man moved his head just enough to let the fist whiz past. Then he fell, as if knocked over by the wind of the passing fist. Mordo, reacting swiftly, did not realize that Hercules had fallen on purpose. He loomed over his sprawling foe and lifted his great foot, which was almost half the length of Hercules' body. His intention was to stomp that body to a bloody gruel.

But that was why Hercules had fallen—to get Mordo to do exactly what he was doing. Hercules' hand shot out, grasped Mordo's other ankle. Rising suddenly, he yanked the ankle with all his might, pulling the great stanchion of leg from under the giant. Mordo fell like a tree.

He started to scramble up. When Mordo had arisen to his knees, his face was level with Hercules'. Pivoting upon his ankles, the young man swung his own fist, striking Mordo full upon the throat, shattering his windpipe. The giant uttered a hoarse gurgling sound. His huge face went purple. His eyes bulged. Swaying upon his knees, he choked to death before the astounded gaze of Anteus and the other giants who had gathered to watch the fight.

Hercules was allowed no time to exult in his victory. For Kell attacked immediately. The head of his battle-axe was the blade of a massive ploughshare, honed to a razor edge. Its haft was the mast of a Cretan war-vessel, captured by the giants off the Libyan coast. This battle-axe, wielded by the gigantic butcher, was the biggest and heaviest in the entire world.

Its blade glittered now in the afternoon sun as Kell came rushing over the plain to attack Hercules. It was a wide grassy plain, a great meadow. But some miles off, Hercules had observed, was a stand of oak marking the edge of a forest. The young man realized that it would be fatal to fight Kell in the open; that enormous whirling blade would joint him like a plucked chicken in the hands of a kitchen slave. He turned from his enemy and began to run.

He darted across the plain, and Kell followed. Now, Hercules could run faster than any mortal, but, as noted, giants can cover an inhuman amount of ground in a single stride. Kell, however, was slowed somewhat by the

weight of the axe he was carrying and, fast as he was going, could not quite catch up to Hercules.

The giant was amazed to see his enemy stop when he reached the oak grove. “Guess he’s winded,” thought Kell. Roaring like an entire pride of lions, he charged into the grove, swinging his axe.

Hercules dodged behind a tree. Axe blade met tree trunk, and sheared the enormous bole at its base. Hercules had to leap thirty feet from a standing position to escape the crashing boughs. He was in mortal peril, he knew. That huge sharp axe thirsted for his blood, and there seemed no way to defend against it.

This time he chose a straight half-grown tree to shelter behind. Kell whirled his axe, slashing at the tree. The blade passed through the trunk as if it were a celery stalk. The tree actually rose in the air before it began to fall. Hercules caught it as it fell.

“I vowed to fight without weapons,” he thought. “And I’ve tried, I’ve tried. Can I help it if the enemy insists on arming me?”

There was no more time to examine his conscience. The giant had raised his axe high and begun a downward blow that would divide Hercules from pate to heel. He jumped on a stump, swinging his tree trunk, swinging it level to the ground in a vicious sideways swipe that caught Kell in the side and smashed his rib cage. These ribs were as tough and springy as the hoops of a great wine keg. When they were smashed by Hercules’ club, their splinters became a dozen knives ripping into the giant’s lungs.

Kell sank to his knees, gasping and coughing. A red froth bubbled from his mouth. He fell among the fallen branches and lay still.

Standing among his courtiers, Anteus felt himself swelling with fury. This puny little stranger had stripped him of his Royal Escort—killed his three best fighters and most loyal counsellors, all in one afternoon.

He would not wait for a formal match, he decided. He would go out there right now, catch the miserable cur in the very flush of his triumph—yes, slowly, deliberately, luxuriously, would clamp his gigantic hands about Hercules’ torso the way a murderer of normal size would seize a victim by the neck and choke him. So he would take Hercules’ body in his two hands and slowly, slowly, close them, squeezing so hard that the man’s guts would ooze out of his mouth.

He started toward Hercules but caught himself in mid-stride. “Poor idea,” he thought. “The sun’s sinking; it’s almost dark.” And, light or dark, there was no one there except his own court to observe what he meant to do to Hercules. That wasn’t enough. For already, no doubt, the news of the stranger’s victories would have spread abroad. People would be talking about him. Rejoicing, jeering. No! He needed an audience to watch him execute this loathsome Hercules. An immense throng. He would bring all Libya to watch, and to learn again the awful power of their king.

Thereupon, he summoned Hercules, and boomed out for all to hear: “Congratulations, little Theban. You have performed well in your preliminary matches, and have earned the right to meet the champion, namely me. We shall fight tomorrow. In the meantime, eat, drink, rest yourself. Dinner tonight will be the last one you’ll ever eat, no doubt. Is there any dish you’d particularly like?”

“I thank you for your courtesy, my host,” replied Hercules. “And I’ll eat anything but your stew.”

Anteus had thought it best to conceal his feelings, but they boiled over again that night when he prowled the countryside, too angry to sleep. For now, once again, the faint mocking strains of the old song were borne upon the wind, but with its lines slightly changed:

“Gobi, Mordo, Kell ...
Bowman, Banger, Butcher,
They served the tyrant well ...
But now they’re sent below,
to wait for him in hell ...”

Anteus managed to hunt down some of the singers. He bore them to the courtyard of his castle and threw them into the stewpot. Their screams lulled him for a little while. Still, the night seemed very long. Nor would morning bring relief. It would take several hours, he knew, to assemble a great crowd to view the humiliation and destruction of Hercules.

A Gift of Fire

To understand what happened next in the strange conflict between the young hero, Hercules, and the monstrous earth-giant, Anteus, we must go back toward the first days when Prometheus was trying to befriend the newly created race called man. The Titan looked down from heaven one day and didn't like what he saw.

Men and women crouched in dark caves, cold, almost naked. They used tools chipped out of stone and ate their meat raw. They were dulled, brutish, speaking to each other in grunts. Prometheus went to Zeus, and said:

“Why, oh Thunderer, do you keep the race of man in ignorance and darkness?”

“What you call ignorance is innocence,” said Zeus. “What you call darkness is the shadow of my decree. Man is happy now and will remain happy until someone tells him he is unhappy. Do not meddle further with my designs.”

“I know that everything you do is wise,” said Prometheus. “Enlighten me with your wisdom. Tell me why you refuse humankind the gift of fire?”

“Because hidden in this race is a pride that can destroy us. Give him the great servant called fire and he will try to make himself as powerful as the gods. Why, he would storm Olympus. Go now, and trouble me no further.”

But Prometheus was not satisfied. The next morning he stood tiptoe on a mountaintop and stole some fire from the sunrise. He hid the spark in a hollow reed, then went down to earth. And went from cave to cave where men and women crouched, shivering, eating their meat raw.

Zeus, looking down later, could not believe what he was seeing. Everything was changed. Man had come out of his cave. Zeus saw huts, farmhouses, walled towns, a castle. He saw people cooking their food, carrying torches to light their way at night. Forges blazed; smiths were

beating out ploughs, keels, swords, spears. Men were raising white wings of sails and daring to use the fury of the wind for their passages. They were wearing helmets, riding chariots into battle like the gods themselves.

Zeus was furious. He knew whom to blame. He ordered Prometheus seized and bound to a mountain peak in a place where it always snows and where the wind howls ceaselessly. There the friend of man was sentenced to spend eternity, chained to a crag, two vultures hovering about him, tearing at his belly and eating his liver. He was immortal and could not die, but he could suffer. And suffer he did through long centuries for giving mankind the gift of fire.

It was a curious thing, but the image of the tortured god had a way of dissolving into starlight—becoming a kind of dream-pollen carried by the night airs and blowing into the sleep of those who suffered: orphans, widows, widowers, those otherwise bereft or deserted, sick people, dying people, prisoners. A stormy blue light entered their sleep, bathing a mountain crag where was chained a Titan with a torn belly, whose entrails were being devoured by a pair of vultures. The wind shrieked in that dream, mingling with the screams of the raw-headed birds, but the Titan uttered no sound.

And the look of utter stubborn courage on his face above the torn body acted to calm the dreamers—made them meet their own torments with a deeper acceptance, and slip into a deeper sleep.

Weary Hercules was having a hard time trying to sleep under an African sky too strange to offer repose. Night here was no absence of light but the presence of living darkness. It pressed on him with weird power. The stars were too big; they were daubs of crude light pinned on a great blowing sky. The wind strengthened. A black wind. It blew out the stars. Blackness flowed into his head. He felt he might sleep.

The hot blackness went away. He was being bathed in another light—a blue stormy light. He saw a mountain peak; snow lurked upon it. Not snow, but the flowing white hair and white beard of an enormous old man. Too big for a man. A Titan, bound to the crag. Birds dived at him; their screams mingled with the wind. And now the Titan's voice mixed with wind and bird-cry:

“Hercules ... Hercules.”

“I am here,” he heard himself answer. “But not for long.”

“You sound discouraged.”

“I don’t understand it,” muttered Hercules. “I’m not usually low spirited before a fight. I’m usually happy, excited, full of confidence. But now, I’m full of foreboding.”

“That’s a good way to defeat yourself.”

“I know. I know. I’m ashamed of myself.”

“That’s unprofitable too,” said the Titan. And, although he seemed to be speaking softly, his voice rose effortlessly over wind-howl and bird-shriek. “I mean to help you, you know.”

“Do you?” said Hercules. “You look like you could use some help yourself.”

“Yes, and you are the one who shall save me from my ordeal if I succeed in saving your life tomorrow.”

“Sounds eminently fair,” said Hercules. “I am all attention, venerable sir.”

“Listen closely, lad. A bird will come to you at dawn. She will fly straight out of the sunrise so that she will seem to be all ablaze. And, indeed, this singular bird abides in the core of flame and is unconsumed ... but resurrects herself from the ashes. Her name is Phoenix. I know her ways because I am familiar with fire. The Phoenix will fly to you. You will welcome her and pluck one of her feathers—the single blue feather that grows among the red feathers of her breast. That magic plume cools the heat of the hottest flame and may save your life tomorrow.”

“A blue feather from her breast ... yes ...”

“My time is up. Farewell. And blessings of the Phoenix be upon you.”

The blue-white cone of light faded. The African night pressed about Hercules again. He entered the hot blackness. He slept. And when the bird came flying out of the kindling sky at dawn, its feathers dyed with the colors of sunrise, he hardly knew whether he was awake or dreaming. But he pulled the blue feather from the blazing red chest of the gorgeous bird, as the Titan had instructed.

Hero Meets Monster

The giant, Anteus, liked everything about him to be big. When he performed, meaning when he fought in public, he ordered huge crowds to be assembled. And, because a system of compulsory attendance always guarantees a big audience, Anteus knew that the huge amphitheater would be filled upon this day, and that if he killed Hercules by early afternoon, as he intended, all Libya would know about it by nightfall.

They were to fight in a natural amphitheater where low hills cupped a flat stretch of meadow. Vast throngs could be seated on the slopes, and the largest of all had been assembled to watch Hercules fight Anteus. It wasn't the usual sullen mob, but one that seemed alive with joy and hope. For, although they had been roused out of their homes by the Royal Guard and herded like cattle to the amphitheater, nevertheless they were happy to be there. For word had spread. This stranger who had dared to challenge Anteus had come on a raft and seemed indeed to be the very embodiment of the ancient prophecy, which told the Libyans that a hero one day would come from the sea to deliver them from the tyrant. If the rumors were true, this had to be the Promised One. For it was said that he, alone and weaponless, had slain Gobi, Mordo, and Kell, all in a single afternoon.

So they were abrim with hope before the fight began. But their hope changed to shocked dismay when they saw Hercules. Why, the whole thing must be a lie! This youth down there was big for a mortal, but surely not big enough to have killed the Bowman, the Banger, and the Butcher. He barely reached to Anteus's kneecap.

Hercules was keenly attuned to the mood swing of the crowd. He had seen them literally steaming with hope on their hot hillsides, and he understood their collective moan when they had identified him as the one

who would fight Anteus. But the young man drove that thought from his head; he had more important things to think about.

Anteus had come into the arena, had stripped and was being oiled by slaves. To reach his great height, they had to lean ladders against him and toil up the rungs with sponges and buckets of oil until they reached the wide plateau of his shoulders and the enormous keg of his chest—then they would ply their sponges, swabbing him with oil.

Hercules down below studied the giant as he was being groomed. He was looking for a vulnerable spot. But as he examined the thewed pillars of those legs, the bulging torso, the enormous cabled arms, the keg of a chest—and his head, which seemed to have been rough-hewn out of rock—as Hercules studied Anteus, he simply did not know where to attack.

But attack he must. He had to strike first. He simply could not wait for the giant to go into action. He tried to remember all he had learned about how the body was built. His gaze was drawn to the giant's head. Somewhere there. But where? What could any fist do against that rocky crag of head? His eyes were so deeply socketed between beetling brow and jutting cheekbone that no one could possibly gouge them. The most fragile spot of the head, Hercules knew, was the platelet of bone behind the ear. In mortal man, a sharp blow upon that mastoid bone would shatter it, driving splinters into the brain, causing instant death. And even if all the giant's bones were armor-plate thick compared to a man's, still, in proportion, that bone behind the ear would be the most fragile. It was worth a try, anyway. It was his only chance. But how to reach it?

Now in a flash, he began to think with his body. Idea became action. He edged into the stream of slaves filing toward the ladder, pushed one out of line—gently, so as not to hurt him—seized bucket and sponge, and raced up the rungs of the ladder that was leaning against Anteus. No one noticed. He scuttled up like a squirrel. He stepped onto Anteus's shoulder, trying not to slip on the oily slope.

He eased himself toward the back of the shoulder, grasped the giant's ear, yanked at it, turning the head a bit, then swung his fist so fast that his arm was a golden blur in the sunlight. He felt a sharp pain in his knuckles as they broke bone, almost breaking themselves.

Ladders tumbled, buckets flew as the giant swayed. Slaves slid off him and fell to the ground. And Anteus himself, after reeling a moment,

collapsed like a stone tower in an earthquake.

Hercules, feeling the giant beginning to fall, had slid down the oiled arm and dropped safely to the ground. He stood there on the grass gazing down at the vast empty-looking face of his enemy. It was ashy, that face. Life seemed to have fled. He had no way of knowing about the malign magic that invested Anteus; no way of knowing that the giant, born of Mother Earth, was always renewed by contact with his mother.

But Hercules was to learn his lesson very painfully. He started back in horror as he saw the great eyelids snap open, saw those deeply socketed eyes blazing with furious energy. Before he could flee, a great arm raised itself. A hand bigger than a grappling hook caught him by the middle and lifted him high. Hercules hung there, clenched in that hand, as Anteus rose to his full height.

Standing there in the sunny arena, the giant pivoted slowly, holding Hercules high for all to see. Then, slowly, he lowered Hercules. Took him in both hands. Held him almost tenderly, it seemed, as a boy might hold a puppy. He spoke softly, just loud enough for Hercules to hear:

“How shall I do it, little one? Shall I squeeze you to a pulp? Or shall I twist you in my two hands—twist and twist until your spine is torn away from your pelvis and you are in two pieces, one for each hand? Which, eh?... Well, it’s a pleasant choice I have to make. They’re both slow deaths, squeezing and twisting, but still not quite slow enough. The pain simply won’t last as long as I should like it to. I cannot forget the way you killed my three best servants. Oh, you’ll have to pay for that, pay and pay. Squeezing is much too easy a death. Twisting too. Nor are those methods quite dramatic enough—for my hands will mask your sufferings, muffle your screams. People won’t really know what’s happening to you. Or, at least, they’ll miss the full glory of it. No! I mean to do something showy. I’m going to take you these few miles to the stewpot, and the crowd will follow us. We’ll be a regular procession. And when we reach the pot I’ll add you to the stew with full honors. When you’re done, I’ll order a great holiday feast. I’ll make them swallow every last greasy drop; I’ll choke them on their own hopes.”

He lifted Hercules high again. His voice thundered at the great throng.

“Follow me, all of you! Follow me to the courtyard and see what happens to one who offends your king. Come, come ... up and away! Who lingers,

dies.”

He marched out of the arena and toward the castle. The people came slowly off the slopes and followed him in a mournful procession.

Now, when terribly threatened—something that happened often—Hercules conducted himself in heroic fashion. He deliberately shut off a useless part of his mind. He wasted no time regretting any mistakes he might have made, nor did he allow himself to anticipate anything bad that might happen. He forced himself to live one second at a time, tuning his body to respond instantly to any opportunity for survival.

So he lay now very quietly in the giant’s hands. He knew that the slightest movement might arouse a reflex of brutality in those hands and make them move of themselves, no matter what Anteus intended. He lay there, hardly daring to breathe, just taking tiny sips of air. He had rejoiced when the giant had decided to leave the arena and take him to the castle. He did not allow himself to think of the stewpot; time enough for that when it happened. All he permitted himself to think was that the giant’s intention gave him a little more time to live.

Still the enormous hands clamped him, not squeezing, causing him no pain, but holding him too tightly for him to wriggle free. All he could do was wait. But when he reached the castle he shuddered despite himself. It was a windless day and the steam of the stew hung heavy over the courtyard. He felt himself gagging in the sweetish putrefying stench of boiled human flesh.

Now, he was rising into the air again. Anteus was lifting him over his head. The giant held him high for all to see. His voice boomed:

“Oh, Libyans, I have invited you here today that you might see what happens to one who dares challenge your king. This is Hercules I hold here. Hercules of Thebes, who for all his insignificant size has proved himself in battle against very worthy foes. Emboldened by his success with some local monsters, he came to Libya to challenge me, Anteus. And, indeed, even here he managed to wreak a bit of mischief among my people. Observe him well, my friends, as he lies helpless in my hands. Look at him, this hero, harmless as a flayed rabbit in the hands of a hunter ... fit only for the pot. Indeed, that is why I have brought him here: to add him to our royal stew.”

Hercules felt the fingers shift on his body, and knew that the giant was about to throw him into the stewpot. He braced himself. His own fingers

felt for the blue feather taken from the breast of the Phoenix. Prometheus had promised that this magic plume would protect him from heat. But would it protect him from drowning in the abominable stew? Or, if he did not drown, from suffocating in its stench?

Anteus suddenly drew Hercules toward his face as if he meant to eat him raw. The young man saw the great yolky eyes glaring at him, saw the teeth big as tombstones, and the huge meaty tongue behind them.

“No,” grunted Anteus. “On second thought, you’re too vile a creature for my stew. You might spoil the flavor. *Under* the pot is where you belong, in the cook-fire. Yes ... roasting’s just as slow as boiling, and just as painful.”

Anteus lifted Hercules over his head again, roared, “Behold!” and hurled him into the very center of the wood fire that was blazing under the huge stewpot. Hercules landed in the heart of the fire, and crouched there, clutching his Phoenix feather. Steam arose from him as fire touched his wet body. He welcomed the steam for it hid him from sight. And he didn’t want Anteus to see him sitting amid flame in a magical sheath of coolness cast by the ice-blue plume.

Nevertheless, he felt the enchantment beginning to melt in the intense heat. He needed a more intense blueness, more whiteness, the more powerful magic of ancient wisdom. Perching there in the core of flame, he sent his thoughts halfway across the world to a mountain in the Caucasus where Prometheus lay shackled. Once again he was fixed in a cone of stormy blue light. Once again, he saw snow in cracks of rock. And the sight of bloody-beaked birds tearing at the Titan’s guts made his own pain seem insignificant. He heard the rich voice rising above the screaming of the birds and the howling of the wind:

“You are he.”

“Who?” whispered Hercules.

“The Promised One. For the Libyans. For me.”

“For you?”

“Even for me. In the watches of night, a voice has spoken with utter authority, saying, ‘Whom the father torments, the son will save.’”

“What father? What son?”

“In time to come, son of Zeus, all shall be made clear. But for now, the now that must always come first, hearken to this: As your enemy, Anteus, the son of Earth, is restored by touching his mother, so shall you, Hercules,

be restored by fire. I, the fire-giver, tell you so. The sacred flame shall heal you, restore you. In return, you shall deliver me one day. And now, arise. Go forth. Fight again.”

Anteus approached the fire, waiting for the steam to lift, hoping to see his enemy charring as he sizzled in his own juices. The steam did lift. Something moved behind it. Anteus gaped in horror as Hercules hopped out of the fire. The young man was smiling. He seemed to gleam with health. His wounds were healed. He was uncharred, unscarred.

For the first time in his life, Anteus took a backward step in the presence of an enemy. But he was stupefied by shock. Then his fighting instincts took over. He stood where he was and considered what to do. One thing he knew: that when he caught that little rat again he wouldn't let him out of his hands until he was in many pieces.

Hercules did not wait for his enemy to move. Because all ways of fighting Anteus seemed equally impossible, Hercules did what he always did when he was in doubt: he charged. And the people who thronged the courtyard were amazed to see the man hurtling toward the giant.

Anteus stood waiting. Then he swung his leg in a terrible kick. Hercules glimpsed the foot coming toward him with enormous speed, and in full stride scooped up a paving stone, which he held before him. The giant's foot hit the stone. The small bones of the instep and ankle shattered like glass. It was agony. He hopped on his other foot. Hercules shoved his shoulder against that leg and pushed it out from under Anteus, who crashed to the ground.

The walls of the courtyard trembled as the giant fell full length, cracking his head on a flagstone. Hercules heard the dry sound of the head splitting. Heard the rattling gasp of his enemy's breath. Saw blood welling out of the split head and forming puddles on the stone. He stood over his enemy, watching him die.

He was astounded to see the blood stopping. To hear the hoarse gasping stop. He saw the giant's eyes flare with rage, saw the great biceps swell. Before he could dodge, Anteus reached out. His huge fingers caught Hercules by the throat and began to squeeze. The flagstones tilted; the sky darkened. Hercules tried to tear those strangling fingers from his throat. But in no fight he had ever fought with monsters of land and sea had he known

a force to match that of Anteus—who, lounging on the ground, was easily choking him to death with one hand.

And as his sight faded, he heard again the voice of Prometheus saying: “He is born of Mother Earth. When he touches her, his strength is restored.” And Hercules realized that he had repeated his first mistake—had laid his enemy in his mother’s lap, and she had revived him, healed him, restored his strength.

This awful truth glimmered in his murky mind, but flared up brightly as truth does even when things look darkest. Again he heard the voice of Prometheus. “You shall be restored by fire, even as he is by earth.” And the idea carried by these words cast a light that became power beyond the strength of muscles. He slashed the edge of his palm at Anteus’s elbow, making the elbow crook, and loosening the grip on his throat. He moved closer to Anteus and wedged his hands underneath the giant.

Drawing enormous breath into his tortured lungs, he grasped Anteus about the waist and began to pull him off the ground. Anteus kicked and flailed and clung to the earth. His mother, Gaia, Mother Earth, knowing her favorite son in danger, put forth her magnetic strength—which is called gravity—trying to hug her son to her, to keep him safe.

Hercules couldn’t pull him off the ground. And knew that if he didn’t he was lost. He pulled with all his strength. Anteus clung to the earth—who hugged him close. “Fire-giver, help me now,” whispered Hercules. And with these words, he felt his veins begin to run with flame. He saw the suffering Titan whose gift had transformed humankind, lifting it out of brutish darkness into light—he felt that magic voltage enter every fiber of his body, filling him with a power that enabled him to tear the giant from the clutch of earth and lift him slowly toward the sky.

Holding Anteus away from earth, he saw the great cracked head begin to bleed again. Saw the light fade from his eyes. Felt the huge throbbing body go limp as a bladder. He kept holding the body even after he knew it was dead; he didn’t dare let it touch earth again.

People were shouting now, roaring, shrieking with joy. He marched toward the stewpot and threw Anteus in. The body landed with a great splash. Hercules turned to the roaring crowd:

“He will feed you now whom you have fed so long.”

People clustered about the pot. They lifted it from its hooks. They did not dip in. They refused to eat the stew. They wanted no part of Anteus, even dead. They bore the great cauldron to the beach and emptied it into the sea and watched the black fins cut through the water. Sharks prefer live meat, but Anteus was only recently dead, and very large; so they feasted happily as the people danced on the beach.

Another group of dancing, cheering youths bore Hercules on their shoulders. They carried him to the harbor where he had asked to go. There he borrowed a sailing vessel, for the south wind was still blowing, and his ship would be able to run before it all the way home. This pleased him; he felt too stiff to push a raft through the Middle Sea.

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THE CALYDONIAN BOAR

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For a lovely, dreamy huntress
named PAMELA — who also
had trouble with her father

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Characters

Monsters

The Calydonian

boar

(KAHL ih DOH
nee uhn)

A giant wild hog, handmade by Artemis

Gods

Zeus

(ZOOS)

King of the Gods

Artemis

(AHR tuh mihs)

Moon goddess, Goddess of the Chase, Lady of the
Silver Bow

Apollo

(uh PAHL oh)

Artemis's brother, the sun-god, God of Music and
Medicine

Ares

God of War

(AIR eez)

Atropos
(AT roh pohs) Eldest of the Fates, Lady of the Shears

Charon
(KAHR uh) Giant ill-natured boatman who ferries the souls of the dead across the River Styx

Mortals

Atalanta
(at uh LAN tuh) Princess of Arcadia, a huntress

Meleager
(mehl ee AY juhr) Prince of Calydon, a hero

Clymene
(KLYM eh nee) Queen of Arcadia, Atalanta's mother

Iasos
(EYE ah suhs) King of Arcadia, Atalanta's father

Althea
(al THEE uh) Queen of Calydon, Meleager's mother

Oeneus
(EE noos)

King of Calydon, Meleager's father

Plexippus
(pleck SIH puhs)

Meleager's uncle, Althea's brother

Lampon
(LAMP ahn)

Plexippus's and Althea's brother

A shepherd

A robber band

Pirates

Assorted kings, heroes, and warriors who join the hunt

Animals

Alcon
(AL kohn)

The simba hound

The bear Atalanta's bear brother, a cub grown into a killer

Mother Bear

Various other dogs, horses, bears, and wolves

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Birth of the Boar

March wind whistled through the trees. Pine needles clashed softly. Epaulets of snow were melting off the high shoulders of Olympus. But in the Garden of the Gods it was always May; the air was scented always with summer flowers, cooled by the rumor of snow.

The gods had dined and were lounging about, gossiping. The talk turned to sport and how they had entertained themselves during the winter, tormenting humankind. This led to a discussion of monsters. Now the gods and goddesses began boasting furiously.

Some time before, Zeus, alarmed by the shrinkage of his human herds, had passed a law, limiting each god to a kill-bag of six humans a month. But the High Ones had found a way to evade this law. They employed monsters. Poseidon bragged of a sea serpent that could flail a fishing fleet to splinters in the space of an hour, and devour all the crews. Hera spoke smugly of her three-bodied giant, Geryon, and of the hundred-headed Hydra whom it was useless to decapitate because for every head cut off two sprang in its place. Athena spoke of the once-lovely sea nymph, Medusa, whose hair she had turned to living snakes, making her into a sight so frightful that anyone looking at her turned to stone. Hades, who was on one of his rare visits to the upper world, told of his hell-hags, the brass-winged, brass-clawed Harpies, and of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the gates of the Land Beyond Death.

Apollo, the sun-god, who had been listening quietly, noticed that his twin sister, Artemis, Goddess of the Moon, was growing sullen. "What's the matter?" he murmured.

"Come away," she whispered, and led him among the roses. "I can't stand those old braggarts!" she cried. "It's disgusting when they begin yammering about their dreadful pets."

“I know what’s really bothering you,” said Apollo, who understood his sister perfectly. “You’re angry because you have no monster of your own.”

“Since you’re so understanding of my needs, dear brother, give me some advice. What shall I do?”

“Obviously, there is only one thing to do. Get yourself a monster of your very own.”

“The trouble is, Apollo, I loathe and despise the creatures I’ve been hearing about. I love animals, as you know, beasts of forest and birds of air. Hawk and hummingbird, stag and wolf. I love some for fleetness, others for ferocity, and all for grace and strength. For their natural beauty, in fact. But these slithery sea serpents and fire-breathing dragons, these hundred-headed reptiles and three-bodied giants—no, not for me. Too freakish, too ugly.”

“You’re hard to please, Sister mine.”

“Always have been,” said Artemis.

“Well if you don’t fancy any of the huge assortment of monsters now available, then you must make your own.”

“How do I do that?”

“Oh, you must ask someone more bloodthirsty than I. I am God of Music and Medicine, you know, and must preserve my reputation for gentleness.”

Artemis smiled to herself, for she knew how savage her radiant brother could become when angered. She also knew that he would give her no more advice that day, and wandered away from him. She passed near Ares, who was sucking the marrow from two beef bones at once. The bones sticking out of his mouth looked like tusks. And these tusks taken together with his gross snout and poisonous little red eyes made him look like a wild boar.

Artemis drifted up to him and said, “Greetings, kinsman. Have you ever happened to make a monster?”

“I don’t need monsters to do my killing for me,” growled the God of War.

“Why not? Are you exempt from the game laws?”

“No,” said Ares. “As the eldest son of our king, it behooves me to obey his edicts. And I do dutifully limit my personal kills to six per month.”

“Do you?” murmured Artemis. “But you are famous for your foul temper, and are surely moved to rage by more than six humans per month.”

“Oh yes, Moon. By more than six, or sixty, for that matter. What I do then is simply start a war in the right place. I fan the hot ashes of hatred that reside in the human heart, fan those cinders into flame—either against

neighbors or against another tribe, for normal men entertain both kinds of hatred. And when the flame grows huge and red-hot, it is called war. I then take care to move those who have offended me into the worst part of the battle. And lo—those who have angered me are killed, and I am technically innocent of their death.”

“Thank you for your courteous explanation, Lord of Battles.”

“Nevertheless,” said Ares, “I have observed our uncle Hades making monsters when he needed to restaff hell. What he does is take up a handful of vital mud and mold it into any form he desires.”

“And where does he get this vital mud?”

“From the River Styx, which borders his dread realm, and is also known as the River of Tears. Over it, vultures hover like gulls. And the winds that blow from shore to shore carry the stench of the roasting pits, the demonic laughter of the torture crews, and shrieks of the tormented. These odors and these sounds sink to the bottom of the River of Tears, and invest its mud with a vicious potency, very good for the making of monsters.”

“Thanks again, War,” said Artemis, and drifted away, thinking hard.

The moon-chariot driven by Artemis was wrought of silver. Of silver also were the horns and hooves of the six white stags that drew the chariot across the sky, and their eyes were amber. Upon this rainy night, however, the moon was hidden; the goddess rode behind cloud cover.

Down to earth came the silver chariot. Across the meadow and plain it flashed, and through deep valleys, until it reached a chasm called Avernus, which was the gateway to the Land Beyond Death. Here Artemis untethered her stags and let them graze upon the plain. She made herself invisible then, and entered Avernus.

The chasm was really a chain of interlocking caves plunging toward the center of the earth. Down, down, the goddess sped, troubling bats; even invisible, she cast a faint radiance upon the rock walls as she passed. The caves ended in a rocky plain that stretched into darkness. But a river-smelling wind cut through the sulphurous murk. Borne upon the wind also were the curious yearning hopeless cries uttered only by ghosts.

Artemis followed the sound to the shore of a river, which she knew must be the Styx. She heard a strange thwacking sound and saw an enormous creature driving a flock of something before him. White things they were,

seeming now like clouds, now like sheep, now like spouts of steam. And she realized they were today's crop of the dead, half-vaporized, flesh still clinging to their bones, memories half-alive in their hearts. She also realized that the one herding them must be Charon, the dread Ferryman, who would take them across the Styx and through the gates of hell.

Charon was a giant. His arms were as big as tree trunks, his hands so broad that he needed no oars to row his heavy boat across the Styx. He simply reached into the water and rowed with his hands. Now, however, he was using those hands cruelly as he drove the whimpering shades toward the dock. Snarling and growling, he swung his tree-trunk arms, beating his flock toward the moored boat.

His hard hands smacking the ghosts sounded like a hundred fishwives softening the bodies of newly caught squid by beating them against rocks.

It was one of the saddest sights on earth, or beneath it, but the moon goddess, watching, was no more moved than we are watching cattle graze on their way to becoming beefsteaks.

She waited until Charon had driven the last of the shades across the pier and into the ferry—watched him dip his enormous hands into the water and begin to row. Watched the boat dwindle and vanish. Then she walked along the shore searching for a shallow place. For she did not wish to enter the black water; she needed a place where the shore shelved gradually so that she might kneel upon dry land and dip her hands into the water.

She did finally find such a place, reached into the river, and took a double handful of mud. The water was black, but the mud was a curious reddish brown, and was warm to the touch, seeming to pulse faintly as she watched it. She knew that whatever she molded would come terribly alive in her hands.

She began to shape the mud, working furiously, dipping into the river for more mud, pulling out great gobs of it as the wild beasts took form in her hands. Wolf, bear, panther, each one perfect of its kind, but three times the normal size. She set them on the riverbank to study them. Although she had not yet breathed final life into her creations, the magic mud had translated itself instantly into muscle, sinew, hot blood. The forms waited only for her to awaken them into full, throbbing life.

She couldn't decide which one to keep; they all looked beautiful to her. "I need only one," she said to herself. "And each of these magnificent fierce

creatures could serve as my instrument of vengeance, when needed. Let's see then, which of these do I prefer? Shall it be the bear? He's wonderfully big, but bears are sleepy in winter, and my beast must be able to serve the year round. How about the wolf? He's superb, and would be fully alert in all seasons. But wait! Wolves hunt deer—very successfully. A wolf this size might decide to devour the silver-horned stags that draw my moon-chariot. I can't have that. So it will have to be the panther. On the other hand, the great cats are even more frantic for live meat than are the wolves. And the deer family is their favorite prey. No, none of these will do. Back to mud they must go.

“What I need is a beast as fierce as these, and as powerful, but one that will kill only people. Is there such a one?”

Artemis pondered. Suddenly the snouted, red-eyed face of Ares gnawing beef bones floated before her. She laughed with joy. “Of course!” she cried. “A wild boar! It can pierce armor with its long, sharp tusks, trample a warrior to bloody rags beneath its razor hooves. And the only animals it kills are hunting dogs that bring it to bay.”

She pointed her hands at panther, bear, and bull. They lost shape, became mud, a heap of steaming mud on the riverbank. Artemis dug her hands into it and began to work again. She made an enormous wild boar with tusks like ivory spears and hooves like hatchets.

She stood on the bank of the Styx, admiring it. “Now that I've made this magnificent thing, what shall I do with it?” she murmured to herself. “I'm not yet angry enough at anyone to need an instrument of vengeance. I know! I'll set it down in Africa. There among the lions and apes and crocodiles, it will learn to fight and be ready with its deadly skills when I need them.”

She pried open the jaws of the great boar and breathed into it. The mud shape quickened with life. Its red eyes rolled. The goddess leaped onto its back and began to ride it like a horse, urging it into a terrific short-legged gallop, making it go faster and faster. For she was weary of Hades' realm, and wild with eagerness to get back into a drench of sunlight, to breathe air that smelled not of basted sin and ashy tear, but of sea and grass.

Give Her to the Mountain

Springtime in Arcadia. Trees were budding, birds singing, flowers opening. Cows were calving; sheep were lambing. It was a happy time; earth and sea rejoiced, and the kindling sky. But all this fertility made King Iasos very uneasy. He summoned his wife, and said:

“If you intend to get pregnant again, my dear, try to produce a son for a change.”

“You have something to do with my pregnancies,” said the queen. “And why are you belittling our daughters? They’re lovely girls.”

“Daughters are all right,” said the king. “They can be delightful, in fact. But five of them in a row is overdoing it a bit, don’t you think? I’ll need five large dowries to marry them off to decently powerful princes, and my treasury simply can’t stand the strain. What we need this time is a son—who will grow up to be a mighty warrior and help me invade a few neighbors so that we may refill our coffers. I’m counting on you, my queen. Don’t let me down.”

He was speaking gently, which made the queen shudder. She knew that her husband was never more dangerous than when he was pretending to be gentle. But she concealed her fear, smiled sweetly, and promised to do her best to bear a son.

“Oh, woe,” said she to herself when the king had left. “I already feel myself with child again and know that it will be another girl. I don’t know how I know, but I do. I also know that he won’t keep this one. He’ll give her to the mountain, and break my heart.”

For in those wicked days, people who did not want their children would take them up the mountain, above the tree line, and abandon them there. Because death by freezing was painless, these parents could pride themselves on taking a lot of extra trouble to spare their child unnecessary

suffering. And, to further soften their abominable act, they refused to call it by its right name of *infanticide*, or child murder, but said they were “giving the child to the mountain.”

Queen Clymene, however, was very maternal, and resolved that no child of hers would be left to die. She thought and thought, and finally hit upon a plan. “I know what I’ll do,” she said to herself. “I’ll imitate the goddess Rhea, whose husband, Cronos, was devouring her children as fast as she bore them. When her final child, Zeus, was conceived, she concealed her condition until she could conceal it no longer, and only then did she inform her husband that she was with child again. Then she bore it secretly, three months before it was expected, smuggled it out of the palace, and gave it to the mountain nymphs to raise. Then wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and gave it to her husband, who swallowed it and suffered a major bellyache. Well, I’ll do the same thing. I know a pair of kindly, reliable shepherds who will raise the child as their own—especially as I shall pay them well. As for defying my husband this way, I’d do it a hundred times over to save this daughter, whom I already love. What was good enough for the goddess is good enough for me.”

The queen kept her secret. The child ripened within her for three months; only then did she tell her husband what was happening. He frowned and repeated his demand for a son, and she promised to do her best.

Six months later she gave birth to a girl, whom she named Atalanta, and bade a faithful servant take the baby out of the castle and deliver her to the shepherd family. She also sent certain instructions to the shepherds, and a fat bag of gold. Then she told her husband that she had miscarried.

But, as has happened to so many parents since, her anxiety for the welfare of her baby was what brought great trouble to the child. For she had overpaid the shepherds. The husband drank himself foolish one night and bragged about his new wealth. No one quite believed him, but the story spread and reached the ears of an outlaw band, who didn’t believe the rumor either, but checked it out anyway. Robbery was their trade, and they were very professional.

They caught the shepherd as he was pasturing his sheep, built a small fire of twigs, and grilled the soles of his feet until he told them where the gold was hidden. After they killed him, they went to his cottage, collected the gold, and the new widow, and vanished into the hills.

The child, Atalanta, awoke in the empty cottage and immediately began to call for food. Although only a few months old, she had a loud, bawling cry—which grew louder when no one answered. She cried herself to sleep, finally, and awoke hungrier than ever, and began to howl. No one came.

She swung herself out of her cradle and fell to the floor with a loud thump. But she had a sturdy, rubbery little body, and was unhurt by the fall. She started to crawl. The cottage had only two rooms. She searched both of them, and knew that she was alone. She crawled outside. It was a cloudless morning. The grass was warm. The air smelled of sunlight and pine needles and distant snow. She rolled in the grass, gurgling happily.

She ate some grass and spat it out. She ate a handful of dirt and a few ants, and was not pleased. She craved milk and barley mush. She crawled off to find them.

The eastern slope of a mountain gets the morning sun, but cools off quickly in the late afternoon. The naked baby, still searching for food, was stabbed by a cold wind. She wedged herself into the cleft of a rock that still held heat. She was miserable. Bushes loomed and seemed to grow as she watched them. Hunger clawed her belly. She howled into the blue shadows.

Her cries attracted the attention of a she-bear that was searching the slope for a lost cub. The huge blunt-headed shaggy beast came nosing up to the squalling baby. She didn't know what it was, but it was alive and young and very edible. She came closer.

Atalanta felt a great vital warmth; she smelled milk. Her hands reached out and grabbed fur. She swung herself up under the bear and began to nuzzle for milk. The she-bear, amazed, felt a tiny mouth upon her. She was shocked by its toothlessness, but knew the sweet easement of milk being drawn from her swollen udders.

Very gently she took the baby in her jaws and began to climb the slope with her swaggering shoulder-rolling walk. She hadn't found her cub, but this thing would do for the moment.

Atalanta felt the great teeth upon her; they seemed as gentle as the arms of the shepherdess. She was not afraid. She rode happily through the cold blue light, up the slope toward the bear's cave.

The Wild Child

She-bears produce one or two cubs a year. They begin life as fluffy balls of fur, cute and playful as puppies; within a year, however, they are half-grown, full-grown at two. By the time the child Atalanta was five years old she had wrestled with five different litters of bear cubs, and was as strong and fleet as a little wild animal herself.

She loved to climb rocks, run full tilt down the hills, scramble up trees and ride their branches, race along the beach and swim in the sea. Only one thing troubled her: Why was she so smooth skinned while her brothers and sisters were so nice and furry? She was also different in her refusal to hibernate. When she was very small she had no choice because the mother bear blocked the exit with her huge body, and when Atalanta tried to squeeze past to the mouth of the cave, Mother Bear would simply swing a big paw in her sleep, knocking the child back inside.

But by the time Atalanta was five she had learned to vanish into the woods at the first signs of cold weather and remain outside till spring. When she returned to her family the mother bear, always irritable after hibernation, would cuff her a few times, then roll her over on the ground and lick her tenderly to show that she still loved her hairless little Atalanta even though she was too wicked to spend the winter sleeping in a cave as all proper bears do.

Atalanta wondered about being so different. It puzzled her mightily. If she wasn't quite a bear, what was she? She sought the answer in other animals. Deer looked smooth, but on closer examination she found that they, too, had fur—short fur, but fur nonetheless. Worms were smooth, but she didn't relish the idea of being related to them. Besides, some worms—caterpillars for instance—were quite furry. She came upon a python one day, and watched him engorge a young doe and then fall asleep while

digesting it. She went closer and fearlessly rummaged among the great snake's coils. It was quite smooth. On the other hand it was very unlike her—legless as a worm. And she didn't like its feeding habits. So things were more of a puzzle than ever.

It was early autumn. The sun was still hot, although the night winds had begun to show a sharp edge. Atalanta sat on a warm stone dangling her legs into a stream and gave the big question more thought. How else was she different besides the furlessness? Well, there was the matter of her slow growth. Young cubs that she could hold on her lap were wrestling with her on equal terms by the time of their first hibernation and were much larger by the end of a year. They had become full-grown, powerful beasts by the end of two years, while she seemed to have hardly grown at all.

Perhaps it was because of their habit of sleeping all winter in a cave? This year she might try it herself. And so to the mother bear's delight, Atalanta did not vanish that winter but entered the cave with the others and tried to fall asleep.

She couldn't. It was too stuffy in there. She found it hard to breathe. Nevertheless, she wanted to be like the others, oh, how she wanted to be. She decided on a compromise. She would sleep with her body inside but her head outside. Ah, this was splendid! Her body was warm but her face was nice and cool. She smelled pine and could see the stars.

Just as she was sliding into her first sleep, however, she came suddenly awake. She saw a pair of burning eyes; a foul smell enveloped her. She knew that something was about to eat her face off. Swift as a lizard darting between rocks under the shadow of a hawk, Atalanta slid into the cave and nestled close to the huge hot throbbing body of her mother and realized that her idea had no chance of working. She could not sleep the winter through half inside the cave, half outside, because by spring only the inside part would be left.

At dawn, she slipped outside again, raced down the hill, and dived into the surf. She entered color, was in a cauldron of pink and blue, purple and gold. The sea was very cold but the colors seemed to keep her warm. When she came out her teeth were chattering. She raced along the beach as fast as she could—until the sun had climbed a bit and she was warm again.

Then, walking slowly along the beach, watching the sea change, watching it lose its hot colors and become a tilted jade saucer, she kept

wondering what to do, since hibernation didn't work. How else could she try to become more like the other bears? How else was she different besides being smooth skinned?

An idea flared. The answer to her question lay in the question itself. For nothing troubled her brothers and sisters. Or full-grown bears either. They did not ask themselves questions. They were what they were, were happy to be what they were and nothing else. Nor did deer or fox or fish, wolf, or python ask themselves questions. To be more like them she would simply have to stop tormenting herself with questions, stop challenging her own existence.

At noon when the sun rode high, she ran into the surf again. Swimming underwater, she could not see that a small fishing boat had darted out from behind a jutting of rock and was casting a dragnet. She was pleased because she knew she had swum farther underwater than she ever had before. But now she needed to breathe. Shooting up toward the surface, she swam right into a net.

Her weight made the mouth of the net close. The fisherman felt his net sagging and pulled it in swiftly. And was amazed to see what he had caught. Then he shouted with joy. For he thought that he had caught a young Nereid. And the legend among fisherfolk was that anyone who landed a young sea nymph and was able to keep her for a year would be ensured a rich crop of fish for the rest of his life.

Gain, Loss, and Revenge

Satisfied with his morning's catch, the fisherman sailed for home. The child lay in the bottom of the boat, still wrapped in the net. She kicked and thrashed and tried to bite through the mesh, but its cords were tarry and fishy and too strong to cut with her teeth.

The boat sailed into a tiny harbor girded by boulders. The fisherman lifted the net out and carried it to his beach hut, which he had built out of driftwood. He carried Atalanta inside, making her more furious than ever. This was the first time she had ever been in a house, and she hated it. It seemed like a small fishy cave, even more airless than the bears' den.

The man lifted the net onto a stone slab where he scaled fish. In order to deceive him, the girl had stopped struggling and lay very still. He opened the mouth of the net. She sprang out like a little demon and bit his hand savagely, clawed with her fingers, and aimed for his eyes. He shrank back, but she slashed her nails across his face, leaving bloody furrows.

She sprang off the slab and flashed toward the door, and sped down the beach toward the sea. But she heard something that stopped her in mid-stride. It was his voice, calling. It was like nothing she had ever heard, not like birdcall or wolf howl or the grumbling summons of Mother Bear. Those sounds were easy, very simple: "Come." "Hunt." "Eat." "Flee." But the voice of this bitten man held meaning behind its sound and meaning behind its meaning. It was speech, human speech, cleaving its way through her hard head bone to the very center of her thoughts. Identifying her. Creating a magical response. Binding her to the spot.

She turned and waited as the man slogged slowly through the sand. She waited until he came to her. She kept staring at him as he knelt on the beach and stroked her hair with his bleeding hand. She watched his lips move—as

if listening with her eyes. She had never heard words before, but half understood them as he spoke.

“Do not run away from me, little sea nymph. Stay with me. I’ll be very good to you. I live here alone, all alone. I have no children. My wife was swept overboard in a storm and drowned. And so was our child. You shall be my child, and I shall love you like a daughter. You shall be my Nereid daughter, full of strange powers. You shall go fishing with me and my nets will always be full. And after a year you may leave me again, if you wish. But I shall love you all my life long.”

Atalanta dwelt with the fisherman through that winter. She did not miss her bear family. They were asleep in their cave and she wouldn’t have been with them anyway. She would have been living by herself in the winter hills. And the fisherman was a man very close to the earth and to the sea, attuned to the movement of animals and of fish. He knew where mullet dwelt, and cod, where lobsters fed, and what lured the octopus. He understood that only a sense of freedom would bind the wild child to him, and he allowed her to do as she pleased.

Although not a man of words, by any means he knew that she craved to learn human speech. And so he spoke to her. He taught her the meaning of words, and she learned faster than he taught. By springtime she could speak as well as he.

She went fishing with him, and was a great help. For she could swim like a seal, and was able to dive overboard and stay under to free a tangled net. She could even catch fish in her hands, and could skim across mossy, slippery rocks and catch crabs, which he used as bait for octopi.

She told him stories. She told him about how she had lived with bears. And he listened, enraptured. But the meaning of the tales did not sink in, for he still thought she was a Nereid child, and that the tale she was telling was some fragment of ancient undersea lore from time beyond memory when the earth was covered by water and those he knew as land animals dwelt underwater with the fish—wolves and bears, deer and panther and hawk. And the proof of this, he knew, was the seal, which had remained half animal even after the seas had withdrawn from the land.

But fisherman and wild child were fated to part before their year was up.

The robber band that had killed the shepherd who had taken care of the infant Atalanta had now split up. Former seamen, they had decided to return to the sea, but as pirates. They had stolen a ship and begun to prowl the waters. Laden ships they allowed to pass, and waited till they came home, riding high on the water, for then they knew that the cargoes had been sold and that the ships now carried treasure. These ships they grappled and boarded in the dark of night. Then they cut the throats of their crews, threw the bodies overboard, and helped themselves to the gold.

Normally, they did not bother with fishermen whose only wealth was their daily catch. But, as it happened, they were on the lookout for a small hidden harbor where they could moor safely between voyages. They sailed into that harbor one night, slipped silently into the circle of rocks, moored there, and sneaked ashore. They moved very silently, but Atalanta, who was still unable to sleep indoors, had bedded down beyond the hut. She slept as alertly as a wild animal, and heard something coming.

She sprang into the hut and shook the fisherman awake. "Something's coming," she whispered.

He leaped out of bed, seized his fish spear, and rushed out into the moonlight—and received an arrow full in the throat, and died as he fell.

The pirates rushed into the hut to see if there was anything of value inside. One of them caught Atalanta. While it was not their habit to take prisoners, they sometimes kept a healthy child to sell at a slave auction. Atalanta swept a knife from the scaling table and slashed the hand that held her, cutting its finger tendons. She wrenched herself free and darted out the door. When they chased her outside she had vanished.

But she did not leave. She yearned to be off this bloody beach and into the hills where her bear family would be emerging from their cave. She stayed on the beach, however, keeping herself well hidden, and watched the pirates as they made themselves at home in the fisherman's hut. They enlarged the hut so that they could use it as a headquarters when resting between voyages. She observed their habits. When they sailed out on a raid they always left someone behind. For they returned at night always, and it was the duty of the one left behind to build a signal fire on moonless nights so that the ship could find its way back into the tiny harbor.

A plan ripened in the child's head. Like all wild animals she could read the weather. And she waited for a day that promised a cloudy night. After

the ship slipped out of the harbor, she took care to study the man left behind. For he would get his breakfast, she knew, as soon as the ship vanished from sight. And each of the men had different feeding habits. One of them liked berries for his morning meal. Another preferred to catch a fish and roast it on a stick. A third liked to dig up clams and eat them raw. While still another craved honeycombs.

And it mattered to her which one would eat which breakfast. If it was the honey eater she would lie in ambush near a hollow tree where bees hived. If it was the berry eater she would hide among the blackberry bushes. She knew these bushes well, for they provided her own breakfast. She had a bear's taste for berries. Hiding among a fringe of trees, observing the hut, she saw a man come out, carrying a bow and arrow, and knew it was the one who liked to shoot a brace of doves for his meal.

She would have preferred the honey eater or the berry eater. Still, this one was better than the one who dug clams or caught fish, for either of those she would have had to stalk across an empty beach. This one, although carrying a bow with a notched arrow, and alert for sound and movement, would at least have to come among the trees.

She climbed a tree where doves roosted. They flew away as she climbed, but that didn't matter. She could imitate their mourning call. She had kept the scaling knife, and unsheathed it now. The man came among the trees, arrow notched. She cooed like a dove.

He came to the tree and looked up. It was a thick-boled oak tree. She crept around the trunk, moving silently as a squirrel, until she had come around in back of him and was poised above him. Then she leaped.

The man beneath the tree was a huge fellow. She knew that her weight could never bear him down. So she did not jump feet first; she dived upon him, knife held at arm's length, straight in front of her as she dived. And it was the knife that drove into him first, severing his spinal cord. He flopped like a fish on the ground, then was still.

Having been killed so suddenly, and in the midst of such hungry life, his wide-open eyes still seemed to be searching the tree for pigeons. Atalanta left him there. She ran down to the sea to wash the blood off her in a long, cold, cleansing swim. She ran back into the woods, found her berry bushes and had a big breakfast, then went to sleep.

She awoke in the late afternoon. She was restless, full of boiling energy, and she had things to do before nightfall. She walked down the beach for a few miles to where the rocks formed a jagged barrier between land and sea. On the beach were barks of driftwood, very heavy, but not too much for her strength. She dragged together a huge pile of logs.

By the time she had finished, night had fallen, the moonless night she had wanted—solid cloud cover, not a chink for light to shine through.

She ran back to the hut, took a dry branch and thrust it into the fire that always smoldered on the hearth. Then, holding her torch high, ran back to the woodpile. Shadows coursed after her, ran before her, as the windswept flame of her burning stick bent this way and that. And the dancing shadows seemed to rejoice in the vengeance that was to come.

She reached the pile of driftwood and poked her lighted branch among a bunch of dry twigs at the base of the pile. Pine twigs they were, rich in tar. The fire flared. She dragged more driftwood near in case the pirate ship had to stay out so long that she would need to feed the fire again. Then she squatted on the beach and waited.

The wind was light that night, coming in puffs from different directions. It didn't matter. The pirates always dropped sail at night and rowed into the harbor. No, it didn't matter, sail or no sail, wind or no wind. Beyond these jagged rocks the water swirled in a ferocious riptide. Just that afternoon she had seen huge tree trunks caught in the riptide, spinning like chips before being hurled upon the rocks.

She waited, watching the fire, trying to judge whether it was time yet to build it higher. She didn't want to build it too high, for the pirates, professionally suspicious of everything, might become alarmed by too huge a blaze. So she kept the fire as close to the size of a normal signal fire as she could. But she didn't mind this labor. She was being eaten by impatience, and fetching wood passed the time.

Finally, she heard what she had been waiting for: the grinding of wood upon rock, breaking timbers, men screaming. They screamed for a long time. They were all strong swimmers, she knew, but no one could last in that surf.

The screams died to whimpers, then stopped. But she could not leave. She waited on the beach till the sky paled; then she heard other cries, very welcome ones, the shrieks of gulls spotting an early feast. She knew what

the gulls were saying, but she had to see for herself. Nimble as a water rat, she skimmed out on the slippery rocks until she found what she was looking for: the bodies of men sprawled among the jagged boulders. And fat black crabs scuttling away from the white blur of the men's faces, lest they, too, be caught by the diving gulls.

Atalanta was satisfied. Those who had killed her fisherman were dead themselves now. She turned and raced away, off the beach, through the woods, over meadows to the foothill, and up into the mountains where the mother bear was waiting, she knew, for her return.... And this year's cubs would be big enough to wrestle.

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The Fatal Crones

Those three dire sisters, the Fates, were busily at work. Clotho, the youngest hag, was twirling her spindle, drawing thread from flax. Lachesis, the middle sister, was measuring the thread. And Atropos, eldest of the fatal crones, and their leader, wielded her shears cutting the thread of life, which Clotho had spun and Lachesis measured.

Every time she cut a thread, someone died.

Suddenly, Atropos shrieked. "What's the matter?" cried Lachesis in alarm.

"I'm bored," growled Atropos. "Bored, bored, bored."

"Oh, no," murmured Clotho.

"Oh, yes," cried Atropos. "Things can't go on like this. They must change."

"But we're changeless," said Lachesis.

"We can decree change," said Atropos. "For we are the Deciders. Drop your spindle, Clotho. Lay down your measuring rod, Lachesis. Stop working, both of you, and listen to me."

The younger hags, who always obeyed Atropos in everything, put aside spindle and rod and sat quietly.

"What is so boring," said Atropos, "is that we sit up here ordaining how everything will come out. Who will live and how long; who will die and how soon. Then, having decided, we watch everything turn out exactly as we planned. Well, that's our duty in the high scheme of things, but I tell you that after ten thousand years of it I'm bored. And I've decided that even our stern routine can have a little variety. For have not the creatures called mortal been created for our entertainment? Well, let us be like the other gods and give ourselves a little sport with these humans before we kill them off. You ask me how?"

The others nodded in unison, although they had not asked anything.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” said Atropos. “We’ll play with something I’ve just invented and choose to call *free will*. We’ll decide what to do with each life as before, but sometimes we’ll pick a certain destiny and put a twist in it. We’ll say, ‘You shall die young *if* you do this,’ or ‘You shall live long *unless* you do that,’ or the other way around. We won’t do this with everyone, of course. Only the strongest mortals can handle free will. So we shall choose some strong, interesting ones and mix some choice into their destinies, and watch them struggle in our net of *ifs* and *unlesses*, trying to decide what to do. And that will entertain us, will it not, Sisters, will it not?”

“Oh, yes,” murmured Clotho and Lachesis. “That will surely entertain us.”

“Very well. I’m off to Calydon.”

“Why Calydon?”

“I have been watching a birth. A strong prince has just been born, heir to the Calydonian throne, and his personality should prove interesting enough to provide us with some sport. His and his mother’s, too. I shall go down there now and bestow the treacherous gift of alternatives.”

A Prince, a Hag, and Two Evil Uncles

Althea, queen of Calydon, lay in the royal bedchamber, reaching her arms to take her newborn infant from the hands of the midwife. She expected to see something red, bald, and squalling, but this one had been born with a black shock of hair. He did not scream or whimper, but uttered a deep chuckling sound.

Then she did hear a scream, but it was the midwife, who was scuttling backward, retreating from something that had appeared in the room without coming through the draped archway. And what the young queen saw was fearsome enough to make anyone scream: a very tall and emaciated crone. Lank white hair fell about the wedge of wrinkles that was her face. And out of that face glared two eyes, blue as the core of flame.

The hag stood there, leaning upon a staff, glaring down at the royal bed. Then she raised her staff and pointed it at the young woman.

“Althea, Queen of Calydon,” she growled, “young mother, behold!” She whirled, flinging the staff into the hearth, where it immediately caught fire. “See that stick burning there? When it is consumed by flame, your son shall die.”

The queen leaped from the bed with such furious speed that no one would have thought that she had given birth just an hour before. She rushed to the hearth, stuck her hand in the flame and pulled out the charred stick.

“Will my son live?” she cried.

The hag laughed. “*Unless* you return the stick to the flame, or someone else does.”

“If I keep it safe, unburned, will he live?”

“If, if, if!” shrieked the hag. And vanished.

The queen had no way of knowing that she had been visited by Atropos, “Lady of the Shears.” She did know, however, that whoever the crone was,

goddess or demon, she possessed awful powers and had to be believed. Althea, thereupon, took the charred stick in a massive brass chest, had it bound around with heavy chains, and ordered no one to open it on pain of death.

“Now my beautiful baby is safe,” she said to herself, “and shall grow into splendid manhood, and become a mighty king.”

And she took him into her arms to feed him.

Now, Althea had two brothers who were very wicked. Ever since their sister’s marriage to King Oeneus, these men had been plotting to overthrow the king and seize the Calydonian throne for themselves. They pretended to love their younger sister very much. And she, who had a very trusting, passionate nature, believed them and tried to love them in return, although there was something about them she had never liked. But she blamed herself for this, and tried harder than ever to care for them as much as they said they cared for her.

They felt hopeful about their chances of seizing power because they knew they could manipulate the queen. They also thought that their royal brother-in-law would be easy to undermine because he was more interested in the hunt than in ruling. But they were furious when the prince was born, for their favorite oracle had warned them that this infant, if allowed to live, would grow up to be a mighty warrior.

The brothers, whose names were Plexippus and Lampon, always met in a certain secret grove when they were plotting. They were extremely suspicious, both of them, and always feared that servants were trying to eavesdrop.

“Well, our course is clear,” said Plexippus. “We must see to it that this pesky nephew of ours does *not* grow up to be a mighty warrior.”

“What do you mean?” said Lampon.

“What do you think I mean? We’ll have to get rid of him.”

“How?”

“Well, we can’t do much while he’s in the nursery. The castle is too closely guarded. We’ll have to wait till he gets more active, runs about, and so forth. Then we’ll have plenty of opportunities to arrange a little accident.”

“Sounds good,” said Lampon.

The tiny prince, who was named Meleager, grew into a child, and his mother loved him more than ever. His father, too, was pleased with him. He was different from other children. As soon as he could talk, he demanded weapons, declared his love for dogs and horses, and insisted that his father take him hunting or he would run away and hunt by himself.

The king was delighted to humor his only son. He ordered his smith to make a tiny spear and a bow that shot arrows no larger than darts. These were not toys; they were weapons. Meleager practiced spear handling and archery for hours each day, and became very expert.

The evil uncles had been waiting more or less patiently all this while. But now Plexippus thought it was time to strike. He summoned his brother to the grove.

“Well, Lampon,” he said, “the time has come to move against that brat. No doubt you’ve been spending the years since his birth in planning some brilliant stroke.”

“No, I haven’t,” said Lampon. “I leave the planning to you.

“All of it?”

“Every bit.”

“Why?”

“You’re smarter.”

“Then what is your contribution to our effort?” asked Plexippus.

“I’m braver. And for what we want to do we’ll need brains and guts. Me as much as you. So let’s hear your plan. I know you have one.”

“Yes, I do. Fortunately for us, the foolish king spoils his son in every way possible. Actually allows him to go hunting with the court. He has his own pony, his own dogs, his own special little weapons. Disgusting spectacle. But it serves our purpose. Do you know that dog I just imported from Africa? That simba hound?”

“Call that murderous beast a dog?” cried Lampon. “Looks more like a cross between a wolf and a lion.”

“Well, they use them to hunt lions there.”

“You’d better get rid of him or we won’t have any servants left. He’s already killed one dog handler and bitten the arm off another.”

“Yes,” laughed Plexippus. “Good practice. Now we’ll provide him with a royal feast.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll starve him for a few days first, then turn him loose near the king’s kennels. He’ll prowl about looking for something to eat. The dogs inside will smell a strange dog and begin to howl. They’ll make a mighty clamor. And Meleager, who meddles in all kennel matters, will run out to see what’s happening. He fancies he can handle any animal, you know. I’ve heard him bragging about it. And his parents boasting, too. So he’ll come out and see this strange, impressive-looking dog and decide it’s something he wants for his pack. He’ll go up to it, and our hungry simba hound will do the rest. Should be able to finish him off in two bites.”

“And I suppose,” said Lampon, “that you’re expecting me to let that damned brute out of his pen and lead him all the way to the castle? Is that right?”

“Why yes,” said his brother. “Now’s the time to show some of that bravery you were talking about. I’ve done the thinking, the next part is up to you. None of our dog handlers will go near him. Nor any of our slaves. They say they’d rather be flogged to death than eaten alive. So now it’s up to you. You should be all right if you wear a full suit of armor. Even a simba hound can’t bite through brass.”

“I’m going to try to develop some brains,” said Lampon. “It’s getting too dangerous to be brave.”

The Simba Hound

Meleager awoke to the sound of his dogs making a racket such as he had never heard before. Not the baying of hounds following a hot trail, nor the ragged snarling of a pack going in for the kill, but a howling chorus of pure outrage.

He leaped out of bed and rushed from the castle, ran out onto the courtyard and across the flagged stones to the kennel. The dogs' voices changed as they heard him coming. The howls were laced with barking which said: "Let us out! Let us loose!"

The moon swam into a chink in the clouds and he saw what the pack was howling at. A shape loomed near the kennels. The moonlight struck green fire from its eyes. It stood like a dog, but larger than any he had ever seen. It seemed as big as a pony. Its mouth was wrinkled back in a terrible mirthless grin. The green light of its eyes pierced Meleager's chest like twin skewers. It was a cold night. The stones felt icy beneath his bare feet, but he was boiling inside. He had to have that noble beast for his own. The wonderful power pent in that lionlike shape was meant to serve him; he knew it was. The great heart that held such ferocity must be filled with passionate obedience to him, Meleager. This was to be *his* dog, the dog of dogs. The gods meant it so; that's why they had sent it.

He heard the animal snarl, a snarl that said death! Those huge jaws were about to tear out his throat. Across the darkness he could feel the whole body of the beast tensing to spring. He backed up, never taking his eyes off the dog, moving so swiftly and smoothly that he seemed to be sliding across the courtyard without moving his legs. Reaching behind him, he caught the edge of the kennel gate and pulled it open.

The dogs came pouring out, wild to attack, but he held them with a single word: "No!" They looked at him in bewilderment; they couldn't believe he

was calling them back from attack, he, the beloved little figure who always led them in a pell-mell chase after their prey.

“No!” he said again. “Stand!”

They stood. But he could feel mounting force behind him, felt as if he were the frailest of dams holding back the mighty surge of a river in flood. And the simba hound, who had been prepared to leap, stood also, trying to understand. And what he understood was that he might kill that small morsel of a boy, but he’d never get to eat him—because those other dogs loved that boy. And they would fall upon him, the attacker, and tear him to pieces. For while he was larger and more powerful than any one of them, or any two, still these were big, fierce dogs and would be too many for him.

Nevertheless, he had never refused a fight in his life. He trembled with hunger and rage. Twenty pairs of eyes gleamed at him from behind the boy; as many sets of teeth flashed in the moonlight. Then, amazed, he saw the boy coming toward him. Heard him speak.

“You, big dog, accept me. We shall go hunting together. I shall show you such game as you have never known. See this splendid pack, finest hunters in all the world—well, you shall be their leader. You shall join your life to mine and we shall do nothing but hunt from morning till night. And what shall we pursue? Not merely meat on the hoof, but we shall know such sport as the gods enjoy. Killers we shall kill. Special creatures called monsters designed to be the bane of mortal man and mortal beast. These shall we bring to bay. For such have I been promised in my dreams—which also come from the gods. So stay, good dog. Let me come to you. Do not bite me.”

Of course, the five-year-old Meleager could not say such words, nor could the great dog have understood them if they had been said. But Meleager, like all young heroes, was born with a magical lore that lived in his voice before he had the words for it. And the simba hound, like all great-hearted dogs, heard meanings in the human voice beyond what any words said.

So the child crossed the courtyard, walking toward the dog. Step by step his pack followed him. The simba hound growled low in his throat; the pack answered. Deep growling enwrapped the boy who was walking so slowly beneath the moon. He felt he was within a great vibrating bell. Danger bubbled in his blood. Made him smile. Made him laugh. He wanted to run

across the courtyard now, and, risking all, fling his arms about that big furry neck.

He did not. He knew enough not to make any sudden move. He glided across the flagstones, the pack keeping pace.

Finally, boy and dog stood facing each other. Their heads were on a level. They stood eye to eye. Green fire mingled with hazel fire. But dogs judge by smell. And this boy cast a strange, joyous aroma: clean wood and goosefeathers of arrows, smell of running dog and lathered horse, cold scent of running water, and a fragrance of sunshine and crushed grass. The smell of the chase.

And the hungry dog wanted that chase to start immediately. The hot rage in his heart became a fire of comradeship. His hackles sank. He dipped his head, put an icy nose to the boy's face, then his hot tongue. Then indeed did Meleager fling his arms about the great furry neck, press his face to the dog's muzzle, and say, "I name you *Alcon*."

He whispered it into the simba hound's ear so that the others would not grow jealous. For *Alcon* meant mighty.

Lampon sat on a tree stump, thinking bitter thoughts as he waited for his brother. His leg was stretched straight before him; it was bandaged from ankle to knee. He felt that the birds in the trees were jeering at him. He heard someone approaching but didn't look up. He knew it was his brother and was too angry to look at him.

Plexippus spoke in a timid voice. "What's the matter with your leg?"

"Oh, nothing to trouble yourself about," said Lampon. "I'll just probably be lame for the rest of my life because of that damned dog."

"How could he do that? Weren't you wearing armor?"

"Indeed I was," said Lampon. "A full suit. It didn't seem to discourage him, though. He simply knocked me to the ground and tried to bite my leg off."

"He couldn't bite through brass. Don't tell me that."

"He closed those awful jaws about the brass greave covering my leg. He couldn't bite through, but he crushed the greave. Felt like he was pulping my shinbone. The smith needed a torch to cut me loose. Added a few burns to complete a charming evening."

"Well, things didn't turn out as we planned," murmured Plexippus.

“As we planned? Don’t try to give me any credit for that plan. It was all yours, as you pointed out before we tried it. All yours, Brother, and it stank.”

“Well, I’ll simply think of something else,” said Plexippus. “We’re no worse off than we were before last night.”

“Yes, we are,” said Lampon. “At least I am. And as for our goal of taking over the kingdom, we’re farther away than ever. It was bad enough that the king had assigned a special squadron of Royal Archers to protect the kid, but now we’ve helped out by providing him with a guardian worth three squadrons of Archers. That savage brute is utterly devoted to him and will rip anyone to pieces who even thinks an unkind thought about the brat.”

“Things didn’t turn out well, I admit it. Even the best generals lose a battle or two.”

“But they occasionally win one.”

“I’ll find a way,” said Plexippus. “I promise.”

“That’s a promise I seem to have heard before.”

“Please, I’m studying the situation from every angle. Have a little patience.”

“I’ve had nothing but patience,” said Lampon. “We’re not growing any younger, you know. I’d like to dip my hands into the royal treasury while I’m still young enough to enjoy it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re still quite young, both of us. And very healthy.”

“I was a lot healthier yesterday,” said Lampon. “I had two legs.”

“I’ll make it up to you, brother. I’ll give you that slave girl I took when we raided Lemnos last month. I’ve seen you looking at her.”

“No, thanks,” said Lampon. “She dresses her hair with rancid butter. Have you ever passed downwind of her?”

“Well, take your pick, then. I have a whole string.”

“I know you do. I remember that raid. It was typical. While I was busy fighting, you were taking slaves.”

“I’m offering you your pick, am I not?”

“Mmm. I might consider that blond Scythian.”

“I was reserving her for my own use,” said Plexippus. “But very well.”

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A Death and a Promise

For fifteen years boy and dog were inseparable. They hunted all over Calydon and into Arcadia and Aetolia. What they chased they caught; what they caught they killed. Bear, wolf, wild bull. They did not care to hunt any animal that could not put up a fight for itself.

When Meleager was nineteen, Alcon was fourteen, which is old for a hunting dog. He was as powerful as ever, but he had lost a lot of speed. The boy tried not to recognize this, but he knew that his dog had slowed down, and that he shouldn't be bringing big wild animals to bay. But when Meleager tried to go hunting without Alcon, the dog looked at him with such tragic eyes that he didn't have the heart to leave him behind.

"He's bound to get himself killed this way," said Meleager to himself. "But if I don't take him he'll die of grief. And I know he'd rather go out full of excitement and joy and battle fever. I know I would. I'd much rather die fighting."

So they continued to hunt together, the prince and the simba hound, and Meleager tried not to think what had to happen. Then one day it did happen.

They were chasing a gigantic bear up a hill. Meleager had wounded him with an arrow, but the beast seemed to be climbing very easily. Finally, it turned, backed up against a rock, and stood at bay. And Alcon, as if knowing this to be a special day, appeared to regain the speed of his youth and rushed up the slope in a headlong charge as if he were chasing a doe instead of a bear. He left his feet, flew through the air straight for the bear's throat. The bear hunched its huge shoulder and swung its thick paw so fast it became a blur—batting the dog to the ground in mid-leap. Alcon sprang up immediately and closed his jaws on the bear's hind leg. Something he would not have done had he been able to reach higher. But he could not; his back was broken.

Meleager rushed up the slope, leveling his javelin. He did not dare throw it lest he hit his dog. Nor could he shoot arrows for the same reason. He was running as hard as he could but seemed to be going with agonizing slowness. For the bear was allowing the dog to bite one leg, while the great talons of his other paws were ripping Alcon to shreds.

By the time Meleager reached the spot, his beloved friend was a heap of bloody fur. Forgetting all about the bear, he stooped and gathered the dying dog in his arms. Alcon's green eyes looked into his. They were dulling now, but still held a spark of love. A warm tongue and cold nose touched his face for the last time. The great head lolled.

Then Meleager remembered the bear and sprang up, wild to kill. But the beast had sidled off. Meleager drew his sword; he meant to dig a grave. Then he shoved the sword back into its scabbard and lifted his face to the sky.

"No," he said. "I won't shut him away in a dark hole. Let him abide in the open air that he loved, under the wide sky and the sun and the moon and the stars. Let his bones be plucked clean by eagle and crow and carrion worm. Aye, let his brave bones whiten on the hillside; he shall be his own tomb. And shall live always in my memory as long as I myself live. And may the gods grant me as noble a death when my time comes."

From that time on Meleager haunted that range of hills, trying to find the bear that had killed his dog. But he could not. He sighted several bears; they were smaller, though, and he didn't bother chasing them.

His parents, the king and queen, were very worried about him. He would leave the castle at dawn and not come home until nightfall, and he looked so stricken by loss that his mother couldn't stand it. She had never wanted him to marry, had always feared the day when he would tell her that he had chosen a bride. But now, seeing him the way he was, she decided to speak to the king.

"I think our boy should marry," she said.

"Marry? Whom?"

"Anyone he chooses."

"Why, though? He's still very young."

"He needs something to make him happy—or someone. His heart is breaking because of that stupid dog."

“Nonsense!” said the king. “Hearts don’t break so easily, and if they do, they mend themselves. Men die of sword thrust or spear thrust or well-aimed arrow. Or a bull gores them, perchance, or a bear claws them. But they do not die of grief. Only women do that, and not as often as they think.”

Nevertheless, the king, who doted on his son almost as much as his wife did, went to Meleager and said: “Perhaps it’s time you married.”

“Have anyone in mind?” said Meleager.

“No. But I thought you might. Calydon is famous for its beautiful girls.”

“Father, please! I can’t stand them. Soft, squealing little things, no good with spear or bow, hopeless on horseback. I’ll not marry until I can find a girl who can hunt by my side.”

“As you like, my son,” said the king. “But remember this. We who are royal enjoy total privilege. One thing, however, are we not permitted—to appear downhearted. We may feel grief but not show it. For when kings weep, their tears water the seeds of fear and rage that are buried deep in the souls of those who are not kings, and these seeds ripen into revolt. You are heir to my throne, Meleager. If you would govern, smile—though your heart is breaking.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Meleager. “I shall not disappoint you.”

He kissed his father’s hand, then hurried out.

The Bear's Sister

Meleager returned to the hills and hunted harder than ever, but with no luck. He kept hunting. Now he camped out instead of returning to the castle after dark, for some bears prowl by night.

Then, finally, he spotted a bear that looked big enough. He couldn't tell whether it was the one he wanted, but he thought it might be. It was gigantic.

The bear had seen him also. It stood halfway up the hill, looking down at him. Meleager tethered his horse well back among a fringe of trees, and started up the hill. He was surprised that the bear did not retreat. The huge beast seemed to be waiting for him, welcoming his attack. Anger flamed in Meleager. He made a great effort to control himself and advanced very cautiously.

The bear backed up a few steps, then wedged itself between two rocks, and waited there. The young man's hair whipped about his face, and he realized that a hard wind was blowing, a crosswind, that made him hesitate to use his bow. He could hope for no accuracy in such a wind, expert archer though he was. And to merely wound a beast that size would be worse than useless. It would not be weakened enough, and pain would feed its rage, making it even more dangerous.

Meleager danced about and shouted, trying to make the bear leave its shelter, trying to tempt it into charging downhill so that he might use the bear's own weight against it, meet the hurtling beast point-first, allowing it to impale itself upon his spear. The bear did not budge, just waited there between the two rocks. It uttered a chuckling growl that sounded to Meleager as though the beast were jeering at him. More than ever the prince was convinced that this was the bear that had killed his dog.

Forgetting all about caution, he charged up the hill straight at the rocks. The bear waited, and as soon as Meleager came within reach, swung its paw, knocking the spear out of his hand. It then charged so swiftly that the lad barely had time to draw his dagger before the beast was upon him. He saw the bear loom above him, stretch its enormous furry arms to catch him in a bone-crushing hug.

But to lift those heavy paws for the fatal embrace took slightly more time than if the bear had simply swung a paw knocking the youth to earth, or had raked him to shreds with its claws. Meleager was just able to slip under the outstretched paws, duck behind the bear, and sink his dagger into the back of its neck, but was knocked off his feet by its backward lurch. As he sprang up, he saw it rushing away up the slope, the dagger stuck in its neck. Blood was welling from the wound.

Meleager scrambled after it. Despite its terrible wound, the beast moved swiftly and was soon out of sight. Meleager followed the trail of blood, knowing that sooner or later the animal had to drop. It had been midmorning when he fought the bear; now the blazing summer sun was directly overhead, and he was panting as he ran.

Then, rounding a big boulder, he saw an astounding sight. A tall, bare-legged maiden was running down the hill with long strides. He gaped at her. She was wearing a great shaggy fur cloak. Just as he thought, "Why is she wearing that heavy thing in all this heat?" he saw that blood was dripping on her shoulders, and realized that it was not a fur cloak she was wearing, but that she was carrying a huge bear on her back, the bear that he had fought.

The animal's head was lolling on her shoulder. Its blood was dripping all over her. He saw his dagger sticking out of its neck. He stood there, facing the girl. She stopped, let the bear slide to the ground, straightened up, and faced him. He was stunned by her beauty. Standing on long, sleek, powerful legs, she was as tall as he, perhaps taller. She was clad in a brief tunic of deerskin, her red-brown hair hanging to her thighs. Her face was muddy, her bare arms and shoulders streaked with blood.

He knew instantly that this was the one girl in the world for him.

"That's my bear," he said. "But I give him to you."

"Your bear?"

“My kill. That’s my dagger, you know. I’ve been tracking him for hours, but you can—”

He was interrupted by her hoarse cry of rage. She stooped, scooped up a huge log as if it were a stick, and hurled it at his head. He ducked, felt it graze his hair. She bent again and pulled the dagger from the bear’s neck. Then came slowly toward him.

“This bear is my brother,” she said. “You have killed my brother. Now I shall kill you.”

“Sweet maiden—”

“Sweet? I’m bitter as death, you’ll find. Pick up your spear and fight.”

He picked up his spear and threw it in the same motion. It cut through the air and split a sapling neatly in two. He turned and stood facing her with empty hands.

“You’ll need a weapon,” she said. “I mean to kill you.”

“Come ahead. Try. Use the dagger if you like. It will make things more even.”

She howled with fury and flung the dagger away. “Do me no favors,” she cried. “I’ll kill you with my hands.”

She rushed at him. He caught her arms, trying to hold her back gently. It was impossible. She was as strong as a wild mare. She caught him in a great bear hug. He felt his ribs being crushed. Kicking, twisting, he broke her hold, then closed with her. There on the hillside, under a hot sun, before the dead eyes of the bear, they wrestled.

Atalanta was a powerful fighter. Adopted by a she-bear, she had grown up among bears, running with them, hunting with them, wrestling with them. She had grown into a gloriously tanned, supple young woman, strong as a she-bear herself. More than once she had taken a wild bull by its horns and twisted it off its hooves, so she was sure she could overcome Meleager easily. She planned to crush him in her hug and hurl him off the cliff.

However, as she wrestled with him under the sun, in the fragrance of trampled grass and pine needles, something new began to happen. As we know, when wrestling shaggy bears she had been puzzled that her own arms and legs seemed so smooth against their fur. She had wondered why she was so different, and didn’t know whether she was glad or sorry. But now as she held the young man in her mighty hug, she felt his smoothness. It was as though she were holding herself—so that this body that was so

strange to her was also wonderfully familiar. Trying to crush him in her arms, she found that she no longer knew where her body ended and his began. It seemed to her then that the fragrance of the trampled grass was rising in a sweet mist, robbing her of sense. She was dizzy. Her knees sagged. She, who could run up the side of a mountain, leaping from rock to rock, catching mountain goats in full stride ... unbelievable to feel her legs weakening now. Her mind swooped and darkened and cast up a last thought.

“It’s magic. He’s fighting me with magic ...”

When her head cleared, she found they were sitting on the ground, their backs against an olive tree near the edge of the cliff, and looking onto a great scoop of blueness where a black hawk floated. Their arms were wrapped about each other’s bodies as though they were still wrestling. She was telling her name.

“I am Atalanta. I belong to the clan of mountain bears.”

“I am Meleager,” he said. “I belong to you.”

Two Jealousies

So the prince of Calydon found the mate he had dreamed of. They hunted together over hill and valley, through forest and field and swamp, on foot and on horseback—with dog pack or with long-legged Egyptian hunting cats called cheetahs. But more often they went out by themselves, for they preferred to be alone.

Plexippus was pleased by what was happening. He went to Lampon and said, “I have a plan, Brother.”

“Another one? I hope it’s better than the ones you’ve had before.”

“It is. It is.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Lampon. “Your record is so bad that all you can do is improve.”

“Do you want to hear it or not?”

“What’s the difference? I’ll hear it whether I want to or not.”

“I’m setting no more physical traps for the lucky prince,” said Plexippus. “All his life he’s dwelt in the protection of his parents’ love. But now, now I have the brilliant idea of turning that love against him. At least I’ll turn his mother’s, and she’s more important in this matter than her husband.”

“You’re raving,” cried Lampon. “Our sister dotes on her son. Nothing you can say or do can turn her against him.”

“It is her love itself that will curdle, I tell you. She has always been ready to be jealous of any girl he might want to marry. And I’m talking about eligible girls, heavily dowered, princesses and so forth. Imagine how she must feel about him wantoning around with this barefoot mountain slut. Well, I mean to fan the flames.”

He left his brother and stalked off to find his sister. At first he chatted of this and that, Althea only half listening to him as was her habit. Then he said, “I heard an interesting tale, Sister. I heard that this new friend of

Meleager belongs to a clan of mountain nymphs who hold to a very curious custom. It seems that they put their suitors through a courtship test. Each one of these nymphs demands of her suitor that he prove his love by cutting out his mother's heart and bringing it to her as a gift. I don't believe the tale, of course. But I thought it strange enough to tell it to you."

"Thank you," said Althea, and turned away. But he had caught the look in her eyes before her face was hidden by her hair. He strolled off, smiling to himself.

Althea nursed her grief in solitude. She knew how malicious her brother was, didn't really trust anything he said. Nevertheless, his words had found their mark. Her beloved son was tearing out her heart, if not literally with a knife, then by neglecting her for the sake of that wild wench from the hills. And Althea in her jealousy forgot that Meleager, who had been so sad after the death of his dog, now glowed with happiness. All she could think of was that her lovely boy had no thought for his mother anymore, only for that long-legged huntress.

As it happened, though, the beautiful couple had aroused the jealousy of someone more powerful than Althea. For the folk of Calydon who had glimpsed Atalanta and Meleager running across a field in the morning mist, or seen them silhouetted against the sunset, began to whisper that their prince had found a goddess to be his mate. No one knew her name but it was certain she was a goddess, for she was as tall and strong and fleet as Artemis herself, and perhaps more beautiful.

These whispers drifted up to Artemis, Goddess of the Chase, Lady of the Silver Bow, and she burned with rage. She had always considered herself the fairest of the goddesses, more beautiful, in her own opinion, than Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Oh, yes, she far preferred her own lithe, suavely muscled figure to that of the lazy wide-hipped Aphrodite. And to have a mere human girl compared to her made her blaze with fury.

"I'll show them there's only one Artemis," she cried. "I'll send them such game as they'll never forget!"

And she whistled up the monstrous boar she had made of Stygian mud. Out of the steaming jungle of central Africa it came, trotted around the rim of North Africa, going west, then plunged into the waters of the Middle Sea and headed north toward Spain. As it swam it amused itself by killing a shark or two and mangling a few giant squid. It climbed ashore on the horn

of Spain, galloped overland then, eastward to the great peninsula we now call Greece. And Artemis guided her monster pig through Euboea and Boeotia, through Mycenae, Achaea, and Arcadia, not letting it stop until it reached the lush hilly land called Calydon.

And the instructions she gave it then were, “Kill, kill, kill!”

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The Monster

The monster boar immediately began to spread terror throughout the land. It uprooted trees, dug up crops, killed horses and cattle and those who tended them. It attacked men and women working in the fields, punching holes in them with its tusks, trampling them under its hooves until they were bloody rags. Nor was there any way to escape it when it was on a rampage, for it would hurtle into a house, knocking it to splinters, then kill everyone inside.

Shepherds and cowherds were afraid to graze their flocks, farmers refused to harvest their crops. So the people began to go hungry. The king didn't know what to do. He asked Meleager's advice. The young man was wild with excitement.

"Father, Father," he cried, "I'll kill the boar!"

"You alone?"

"Just I myself and one other."

"Are you mad?"

"We can do it, Father. We can kill any beast ever born."

"No, my son," said the king. "This is no ordinary boar. It's huge, incredibly strong, totally murderous. It's a monster. I'm afraid we have offended some god who has sent this beast to ravage the land. I don't understand it. I always sacrificed regularly to every one of the gods. Nevertheless, we have been cursed, and this dreadful beast roams the country, destroying, killing."

"I must hunt him, Father. This is the quarry we have dreamed of—something at last worthy of our skills."

"I forbid it," cried the king. "You are my only son. If you are killed, the throne will fall to your mother's idiot brothers, who will stuff into their pockets all that is left of my ravaged land. No, no, no, you shall not risk your life this way."

“The beast must be killed, Father. Or there will be no kingdom for you to rule or me to inherit.”

“Yes, yes, we must contend with the monster, no doubt about that. But you shan’t do it alone, or with that huntress of yours. We need a regular war party to go against the monster. What we shall do is invite all the best fighters in the lands of the Middle Sea to hunt the beast. They’re all a little crazy like you, these heroes, and are always looking for a challenge. Well, they shall have one. It will be a famous affair.”

“Call whom you like, Sire, but I shall lead the hunt,” said Meleager.

Whereupon messages were sent to the greatest warriors of the Hellenic lands, inviting them to Calydon to hunt the giant boar. Those who weren’t too busy killing each other accepted the invitation. Kings, princes, pirates, warlords, robber chieftains—they came flocking into Calydon.

The king was old now, however, and uneasy about playing host to so many rambunctious warriors. “I won’t be able to go with them,” he said to his wife. “Meleager will have to do the honors while I stay home to guard the castle.”

“Why must you guard it?” said the queen. “Don’t you trust your guests?”

“I trust them to act like themselves. They didn’t become so rich in land and cattle by buying them, my dear. These men have always taken what they wanted. And may see in this enfeebled kingdom only a chance for booty.”

“You must do what you think best,” said the queen.

“I don’t know what I think best. Sometimes I think this, sometimes that. I fear our guests as much as I do the boar—and yet my heart tells me my son may die on this hunt and that I should ride with him.”

“You need not fear for our son,” said Althea. “The Fates themselves permit me to guard his life.”

“What fates? Where? How? What do you mean?”

Whereupon she told her husband how, upon the hour of Meleager’s birth, she had been visited by Atropos, Lady of the Shears. Told him how the hag had thrown a stick into the fire. How she, Althea, had leaped from the bed to snatch it out of the flames. And how Atropos had promised that while the brand remained unburned the prince would not die.

“Do you expect me to believe this rigamarole?” cried the king. “Hags, sticks, promises. We can’t risk our son’s life on such nonsense.”

“Be careful what you call nonsense,” said Althea. “You’re in enough trouble now without offending the eldest Fate.”

“Prove that it’s not nonsense.”

“Behold!” cried Althea.

She unlocked the great brass chest, lifted its lid, and showed him the charred stick.

The king was still inclined to disbelieve, but looking at the blackened branch and studying his wife’s face, he knew that she was speaking the truth.

“I see,” he muttered.

“So set your mind at rest, dear husband. Let him lead the hunt while you stay here and guard the castle. Besides, I’m sending my brothers to keep an eye on him.”

“Who’ll keep an eye on them?”

“Stop it, please,” said the queen. “I know your opinion of my brothers, but they’ll be more careful than you about certain matters. They’ll carry out my wishes and prevent him from bringing that wild hussy of his to join the hunt.”

“You’re very wrong to interfere,” said the king. “Meleager loves that girl and will never love another.”

“Love, love, what does he know about love, that stripling with his mother’s milk scarcely dry on his lips? I tell you that he shall never bring her home as his wife, not while I draw breath.”

“Well, I can’t worry about that at the moment,” said the king. “I have heavier things on my mind. Monstrous beasts, fearsome guests—the wild girl will have to wait.”

“She’ll wait long before she marries my son,” said Althea.

Early the next morning, everyone gathered for the hunt. The guests were astounded when Meleager rode up with Atalanta at his side. They goggled in wonder at the lovely, lithe young huntress who sat a great grey horse. She was clad in a deerskin tunic, wore bow and quiver, and held a javelin. All of them were surprised, some of them were angered at the thought that Meleager was taking the hunt lightly, and some younger ones were inflamed by her beauty and growing jealous of Meleager.

The couple sat their horses solidly. Meleager was stone faced, Atalanta smiling. The prince's uncles rode toward him.

"You're disgracing us," croaked Plexippus. "And dishonoring our noble guests. They do not wish to ride out with this bear's whelp from the hills."

Meleager touched his horse with his heels, walked it between his uncles' horses, and grasped an arm of each—squeezing them until they felt their elbows cracking in his iron grip.

"One more insulting word out of you," he whispered, "and I'll call off this hunt and send everyone away. And Atalanta and I will hunt the boar alone, as we have always wished. But first, I will smash your heads together so that our guests may see where the fault lies."

The uncles were silent. Meleager lifted his horn and sounded a call that rang through the hills. Laughing, shouting, arms glittering, the company rode forth to hunt the boar.

They did not ride far. The boar came to meet them. It selected its position very cannily, choosing a canyon where the walls narrowed so that it could be attacked only from the front and by no more than two men at a time.

But these were expert hunters. Meleager did not have to guide them by hand signals. They knew what to do. They did not rush in to attack, but strung themselves out before the mouth of the canyon. They pranced and shouted, clashed spear against shield, trying to excite the boar so that it would charge out of the canyon.

It did not.

They advanced, shouted more loudly, beat their shields harder. No movement from the boar. The uncles had not advanced. They had reined up their horses well away from the canyon and were watching from afar.

The men were losing their caution now. They advanced to within a spear's throw of the canyon mouth. Then, although the beast was half-hidden in a tangle of brush, they sent a flight of arrows into its hiding place. They were determined to draw the beast out. It was simply too dangerous to go into that narrow cleft after it. They came closer and sent another flight of arrows into the brush.

This time they succeeded, and their success was a disaster. They had underestimated the monster's size and speed. It came. It came hurtling out of the canyon with the crushing force of a boulder rolling down a mountain side. It charged into a party of hunters, scattering them in all directions, then

whirled lightly as a panther, trampling two of the men to bloody shreds under its razor hooves.

The hunters fled; the boar followed. It caught two of them, spearing one with its tusk and shearing his leg off at the hip. Two warrior brothers, Telamon, who became the father of Ajax, and Peleus, who was to become the father of Achilles, showed their enormous courage by walking slowly in on the boar, spears out-thrust. Their example inspired others to form a ragged circle about the boar.

But the beast charged Telamon, breaking through a hedge of spears. Peleus flung his javelin. It skidded off the boar's shoulder and pierced one of the hunters, who fell dead. Another man swung his battle-axe at the boar; it tilted its head, parrying the axe—then with a savage counterthrust ripped out the man's belly, gutting him like a fish.

The beast then charged Peleus, who would have died on the spot, leaving no son named Achilles—and Hector might have lived and Troy stood unburned—but Atalanta drew her bow and loosed a shaft into the unprotected spot behind the boar's ear. The arrow sank in up to its feathers. Any other animal would have been killed instantly, but the boar still lived, and seemed as strong as ever, murderously strong.

Howling with pain, it chased Atalanta. She did not flee. She notched another arrow and stood facing the beast as it rushed toward her. There was just enough time for her to send an arrow into its eye. But it kept hurtling toward her.

Meleager, shouting a war cry, flung himself right into the boar's path, hurling a javelin as he ran. It sank into the boar, under its shoulder, turning it from its course.

Now it rushed toward Meleager, who kept running toward it and leaped clear over the charging beast like a Cretan bull dancer. He landed behind it. Before the boar could turn, he swung his sword in a glittering arc, slashing under the great hump of muscle, cutting the spinal cord. The massive low-slung body tottered, tilted, fell. Even that incarnation of monstrous energy could not live after the cable of its life was cut.

The boar lay dead.

A great cheer went up from the bloody, battered crowd of hunters. Meleager nodded at them, pulled out his knife, knelt at the side of the giant

carcass and calmly began to skin it. When he was finished he came to Atalanta with the pelt in his arms. He bowed and said:

“Your arrow struck first. The hide belongs to you.”

Now this boar hide made a priceless gift. It was so tough that it made a wonderful flexible battle garment, lighter and stronger than armor, able to turn wolf bite, spear thrust, flying arrow.

Plexippus, who had hung back from the actual fighting and hadn't come anywhere near the boar, sensed that the other hunters might resent Meleager giving this splendid trophy to the girl, and decided to take advantage of this resentment. He rode toward Meleager, beard bristling. Lampon joined him.

“What kind of hospitality is this, O Nephew?” he cried. “It would be unprincipled, of course, for you to claim the hide for yourself though you killed the boar, but the least you can do is offer it to one of your distinguished guests.”

Then he turned upon Atalanta, spittle flying from his lips as he berated her. “And you, you're a vile witch. You have cast an enchantment upon this poor lad. His wits are addled; he doesn't know what he's doing. Give that hide back, instantly—or you'll regret it.”

Meleager was listening quietly. He wiped the blood from his sword with a handful of dry grass, studied the gleaming blade, then swung it twice. The heads of his uncles fell in the dust, so quickly parted from their necks that they still seemed to be cursing as they fell. The guests were stunned. Meleager turned to them, and said:

“I beg you, sirs, to pardon this unpleasant family brawl. However, if any of you, perchance, feels too much offended, I shall be glad to measure swords with him. If not, you are all invited to the castle to a feast celebrating the death of the boar and honoring the fair huntress, Atalanta, whom I intend to make my wife.”

The hunters raised a great shout. Some of them may have been angry, others jealous, but they all admired courage whenever it showed itself. Besides, none of them were too eager to fight Meleager; they had seen him in action. So they all rode toward the castle, all but Atalanta and Meleager, who excused themselves and rode off to be alone for a few hours before the festivities began.

When the hunters reached the castle they were met by the king and queen who eagerly demanded to hear their tale. Peleus, who was their spokesman

more or less, told of the fight with the boar, how some of the party had been killed, others wounded. How Atalanta had shot an arrow into the boar, drawing first blood, and would have been killed herself had not Meleager rushed into the beast's path and slain it with his sword.

But when it was told how Meleager had presented the boar's hide to Atalanta, how his uncles had protested, and been beheaded for their trouble, then the queen went white with fury and left the room. She went to her chamber and sank to her knees on the stone floor that was covered by the skins of the animals Meleager had slain—wolfskin, bearskin. She had always trod them with pleasure because he had given them to her.

She tried to picture Meleager's face, tried to remember how much she loved him, for she was shocked by her own feelings, could not believe the intention that was forming within her. "No. no," she cried, "I love him. I love him."

Then she heard her brother's voice, saying: "Curious tale of these mountain nymphs. Seems that before one of them will accept a suitor he has to cut out his mother's heart and bring it to her as a gift."

Althea walked on her knees to the brass chest, leaned her arms upon it and buried her face in her arms, sobbing. "Bad prince, cruelest of sons, you have sent my two brothers to Tartarus, and in their stead propose to bring home this wild nymph of the hills. It shall not be, my son, my enemy. The Lady of the Shears has given your mother the power to prevent you."

Mad with grief, Althea flung open the brass chest. She pulled the charred stick from its place and threw it on the fire, and watched it burn.

While this was happening, Meleager and Atalanta were in their favorite place under the twisted olive tree on the cliff, looking out into a great blue gulf of space.

"I want to be your wife," murmured Atalanta. "You're the only one I have ever loved or ever shall love. But, my dearest, I don't want to live in a castle. I don't want to be a queen and wear dresses and sit on a throne. Why can't we stay the way we are, roaming the hills, hunting, fighting? Oh, can't we?"

"We will, we will!" cried Meleager. "King and queen we must be. But for every day we spend indoors sitting on thrones, making laws and so forth, for every day spent so poorly, I promise you that we shall spend ten days

riding, hunting, fighting ... you and I together, side by side. This is my solemn vow, Atalanta—Atalanta, my lovely one—and this I swear, too—”

She heard his voice stop. She saw him clutch his chest. Saw his eyes bulge, his face go purple. She caught him in her arms. His head snapped back. His scorched lips parted. He uttered a scalding cry of agony as his hair caught fire. She tried to bat out the flames, but only burned her hands. And it was no use. He was dead. His charred body smoldered on the grass.

In the castle, Queen Althea scattered the ashes of the burnt stick with her foot, stamping out the last spark. Then she straightened her robes, combed her hair with a silver comb, and went down to tend to her guests.

But the moon goddess, for all her power, had failed. Her boar was dead while her rival still lived. And although Atalanta wished she had died with Meleager, life ran too richly in the tall girl for her to kill herself. She left Calydon and went back to Arcadia where she had been born. And wherever she went, legend attended her.

Poseidon, it is told, glimpsed her running along the shore one day, fell violently in love with her, and gave her name to his most important ocean. And Artemis, whose jealousy has not cooled after all these thousands of years, still instructs her moon to swing the Atlantic tides very roughly, making it the most feared of all the seas.

CERBERUS

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For KATIE EVSLIN, who has only one head
but something special inside it—not to mention
an extra ration of beauty

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Characters

Monsters

Cerberus
(SIR bur us) A three-headed dog employed by Hades to guard the portals of death

Echidne
(ee KID nuh) Cerberus's mother, the serpent-woman

Typhon
(TY fuhn) Cerberus's father, a dragon-headed giant, most fearsome of the monster tribe

Argus
(AHR guhs) A huge creature with a hundred eyes and not an ounce of mercy; employed by Hecate and Hera

Hecate
(HECK uh tee) Queen of the Harpies; chief aide to Hades

Harpies
(HAHR peez) Brass-winged, brass-clawed young hags who patrol Tartarus

Two serpents of Tartarus Monstrous snakes who serve Hades

Gods

Uranus
(u RAY nuhs) The First One; the Rain God

Gaia
(JEE uh) or
(GAY uh) Mother Earth; wife of Uranus and mother of the first gods and Titans

Zeus
(ZOOS) King of the Gods

Hera
(HEE ruh) Zeus's wife, Queen of the Gods

Hades
(HAY deez) Zeus's brother, ruler of the Underworld

Hermes
(HUR meez) Zeus's son, the Messenger God

Charon Giant ill-natured boatman who ferries the souls of
(KAHR uhn) the dead across the River Styx

Mortals

Delia A brave young girl
(DEE lee uh)

Glaucus Delia's father, a wise fisherman
(GLAH kus)

Others

A killer shark Who plagues the coastal waters

Wild boars Who reside in a dense forest

A helpful gull Who knows the ways of the sea

A soldier's shade The ghost of a young soldier who acts as spokesman
for the stubborn dead

Shades of chariot horses Ghosts of the fallen horses on the battlefield on the Dardanian plains

Io
(EYE oh) A river nymph courted by Zeus, transformed by Hera into a cow

A giant gadfly Employed by Hera to annoy Io

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The Three-Headed Sentinel

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The Serpent-Woman's Pup

Hades' hiring policy had always favored monsters. Those bat-winged, tiger-clawed young hags called Harpies were his most valued employees; their queen, Hecate, was his chief aide. Charon, the huge, brutal boatman who ferried the souls of the dead across the River Styx was an authentic monster, as any of his passengers would testify. And the crossbreeding of such monsters produced the lesser demons who staffed the roasting pits and torture pens of Tartarus.

But Hades' partiality for monsters extended beyond his hirelings. He also valued those who roamed the upper world. Although they came in a great many different shapes and sizes and personalities, all the monsters had one thing in common: they were killers. And mankind was their favorite prey. Each day they dispatched shoals of corpses to enlarge Hades' kingdom.

Now, of all the monsters on earth and under it, Hades most esteemed a frightful couple named Typhon and Echidne. Typhon was a giant, the youngest, largest, and most ferocious son of Gaia and Uranus. It is said that even the gods feared him. Tall as a mountain, from the great plateau of his shoulders sprouted the scaly stalk of a dragon's neck. From it grew a dragon's head, spitting flame. His temper matched his appearance. He hated everyone, except his own family, whom he only disliked. No one knew when his ever-smoldering rage would erupt into sheer disaster. Once, in a tantrum, he had stamped a village to paste under his great feet. In yet another gust of fury he had leveled an entire hill with his foot, just as a boy kicks over an anthill—burying the cities of the valley under tons of earth and timber. Typhon was so greatly hated and feared that a particularly destructive storm was named after him. Our word *typhoon* mes from his name.

His wife, Echidne, daughter of the original serpent-woman, Ceto, was also half-woman, half-snake, but larger and more savage than her mother. A fit mate for Typhon, she produced litter after litter, each more horrible than her last. Naturally, this monstrous pair and their monstrous offspring were admired by Hades. Among them they sent him a thousand corpses a year—and not old, worn-out ones but fine, strong shades, cut down in the flower of their youth.

Hades, however, had never been able to convince any of this tribe to join his hellish crew. They were sea monsters, mostly, or things with wings, and had no wish to go underground. But Hades was very stubborn, very patient, and rarely failed to get exactly what he wanted. Each time one of Echidne's eggs hatched into a new little horror, he would send rich gifts—something he could afford to do, for the treasures of the earth belonged to him.

As our story begins, which is not long after the world began, Hades was still organizing his kingdom. It must be understood that this realm was not pure hell; it was also a place of rewards for those who had pleased the gods. The Underworld also held a vast zone known as Limbo, where wandered the shades of those who had neither pleased nor displeased the gods. There were no torments here, nor pleasures either—just a faceless horde of gray, vaporous ghosts pressed so thickly together they seemed like a mist rolling over the plain. Occasionally, a faint wailing sound arose, not weeping but a muted lament as if they realized that they had been condemned, not by Hades but by habit, to spend their deaths as they had spent their lives.

One day Echidne laid a curiously lumpy egg. It hatched into a three-headed dog. Its middle head was wolfish, with stand-up ears and great, glowing dark eyes. The right head was skull-like and popeyed, a bull terrier's head. And the left head was that of a hound with flap ears, mournful eyes, and quivering nose. All three heads had huge jaws with teeth like daggers. Though only a pup, it was already the size of a calf, and everyone looking upon it knew that, if allowed to live, it would grow as large as a bull.

The monster family was gathered in an enormous undersea cave. No water entered it, but it was part of the sea and filled with wet, sapphire light. All who had been born there and drawn their first breath of its salt-strong air returned from time to time, no matter how far they roamed.

The three-headed puppy stood blinking as he gazed about him. Newly hatched creatures always look about eagerly to see what kind of a world they have entered. And this pup had six eyes to peer out with. The three heads turned, the six eyes rolled, searching every corner of the dark cavern, trying to read the shadows.

His middle eyes fixed on a pair of huge feet. Tall columns of muscle sprouted upward ... up ... up ... and the rest of the body was lost in darkness. The side heads swiveled to fix their eyes where the middle head was staring. The dog saw huge, bolsterlike toes planted too near his mother. Three necks felt hackles rising. Three muzzles wrinkled. The single, untried heart, already fearless, began to race with wild rage.

With a triple snarl the pup flung himself on the foot. Each pair of jaws snapped off a toe. A tremendous yell split the shadows. The other foot swung in a savage kick. But the puppy leaped out of the way. He scuttled off to a corner and began chewing on a toe. They were Typhon's toes he had bitten off. He didn't know that the giant was his father, didn't know what a father was, and wouldn't have cared if he had known. All he knew was hunger and rage and a wild joyous curiosity about this place so much more exciting than the egg—this new place with its dancing shadows and sudden voices and flailing feet and tasty lumps of gristle.

He crouched in the corner, chewing happily, ignoring Typhon who stamped about, toe stumps spouting blood, as he tried to find the pup and crush him underfoot. His dragon-head dipped down, spitting fire, chasing shadows.

Typhon saw the pup in a corner and lifted his good foot. But Echidne, for all her great size, could move as swiftly as a garden snake. She slithered across the cave floor and cast her coils about the pup, enclosing him in a tower of leather. The woman-end rose out of the serpentine loops to face her raging husband. She held a rock in one hand and a sword in the other.

"I'm going to strangle that little monster!" roared Typhon. "All three necks at once."

"You'll have to strangle me first," said Echidne. "And that may be difficult."

"You mean to say you care for that misshapen cur?"

"He's mine," said Echidne. "I shall call him Cerberus. Now run off and start an avalanche or something."

By this time Typhon's mutilated foot had sprouted three new toes, for he was the kind of monster that could replace itself. But his foot still hurt; he was in a foul temper, and yearned to murder his latest offspring. Nevertheless, he knew what Echidne could do when aroused. So with a final growl, he departed, vowing never to return. This hardly bothered his wife. She had heard such pronouncements for a hundred years and expected to hear them for a hundred more.

Thus it was that the three-headed dog, Cerberus, was born. Echidne, that dread serpent-woman, treated her pup most tenderly, and he adored her.

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Hades' Visit

Word reached Hades in the Underworld that the monsters he most admired had bred again and that their latest offspring was showing early promise. “Just what I need,” he said to Hecate. “A three-headed dog to guard the gates of Hell. I’ll pay them a visit immediately. For beasts of that line grow to full size in seven days, and I want to see this one while he’s still a pup.”

Black-robed, driving a black chariot drawn by six coal-black stallions of enormous power and speed, Hades charged up from Tartarus through rocky chambers and out of the mouth of a cave called Avernus. His great black stallions galloped so fast that the road seemed to smoke behind them. They came to a strip of golden beach at the edge of the sea. Here Echidne had swum ashore with her pup. Hades had sent her a message, asking her to meet him there, and even monsters do not ignore a summons from the Lord of the Land Beyond Death.

Hades never traveled unattended. Two demon outriders clung to the back of his chariot. They sprang off now and began unloading gifts for Echidne. The presents were all opulent—gold hoops as big as chariot wheels, set with diamonds big as onions. Echidne liked to slide her long, serpentine body through such hoops when she performed her hunting dance before a shark chase.

“You are generous, my lord,” said Echidne. “If these gorgeous hoops are meant as another birthing gift, then I accept them with thanks. But if they are offered as a purchase price for this pup, I must refuse. I doubt that he’ll go underground to serve you, Hades, or ever serve anyone anywhere. All my children have independent spirits, as you know. But none of them are as willful and stubborn as this one, young as he is.”

Before Hades had a chance to reply, Cerberus began to prove his mother’s words. The pup had been seized by an immediate loathing for the

tall, black-caped figure standing before him. But he knew that his mother would be displeased if he attacked Hades while she was speaking to him, so he dashed at the horses instead.

Instinctively cunning, Cerberus avoided being crushed under their great hooves. He sprang to the shafts of the chariot and bit through the harness, then whirled faster and faster, his three pairs of jaws becoming a circle of teeth. The sight was so ghastly that the stallions kicked themselves free of the shafts and bolted down the beach, trailing their reins behind them. Cerberus scampered after them, barking furiously.

Hades, ruler of the hereafter and master of torment, was not easy to surprise. But now he stood stupefied, watching his gigantic black stallions being chased across the beach by a four-day-old puppy. The horses had disappeared in a cloud of sand, and the pup came racing back, muzzles wrinkled, not barking now, but uttering a triple snarl. He charged over the sand and launched himself through the air, straight at Hades' throat.

It was only Echidne's swiftness that saved the god from an unspeakable affront. Quick as the flick of an eyelid, she flipped her tail, catching the pup in mid-air and knocking him to the sand. Swiftly, she curled her serpent's tail about him, binding him fast.

"My lord, I beg your forgiveness," she said. "But he's very young. Too young still to distinguish friend from foe."

"I bear no grudge," said Hades coldly. "Let us hope that his judgment ripens with age."

"In the days to come," said Echidne, "I shall explain to him how much your favor has meant to our family. In the meantime, my lord, I observe that your demons have caught the horses. I think it best if I leave you now, and cool this young one off with a long swim."

"Take these golden baubles with you," said Hades. "They are yours. I shall leave it to you, Echidne, to convince the brave little fellow of the advantages that will accrue to anyone entering my employment at the highest level—and I mean highest. He would rank with Charon and Hecate as my chief aides."

Echidne reached down, lifted Cerberus from her coils, and held him tightly in her arms as she wriggled through the golden hoops, and slithered into the water.

"Farewell," she cried. "Thank you again."

“Farewell to you,” said Hades. “But I shall reserve my thanks until a later date.”

“You’re a wicked, wicked, reckless pup,” Echidne murmured to Cerberus, as she glided through the water. “But I love you more than all my other children combined. And you shall never go underground to work for that arrogant fiend as long as I live. Still, we must beware. His disappointment can curdle into hatred—and his powers are vast.”

Cerberus did not answer. He was fast asleep in his mother’s arms.

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The Shark Hunter

Now, Echidne's brood fed upon the flesh of bird, beast, and fish. Man was considered a delicacy, though not too filling. Nor do monsters exclude each other from their diet. But this sea-dwelling family into which Cerberus had been born had a preference for sharks. They were big enough to make a main course and especially tasty when eaten fresh. But since sharks preferred eating to being eaten, and were accustomed to enforcing this preference, catching them was always a risky business.

Sharks offered exactly the kind of sport that Cerberus liked best, and he immediately proved to be a great help on the hunt. He began carving a legend for himself with his ability to follow an underwater trail. His three keen noses could pick up a shark's scent and follow it from reef to reef. And when he had closed in on the savage fish, he could be assured of the kind of action he craved.

Cerberus grew with monstrous speed and reached full size without losing any of his frisky, affectionate nature. But much as he wanted to, he couldn't find a playmate. He simply looked too fearsome to other creatures, and there were none of his own kind. Indeed, he was as big as a walrus now and much more powerful. And those three pairs of jaws studded with ivory teeth were more terrible than a crocodile's. He could seize a shark in each set of jaws, drag them down to the bottom of the sea, braid their tails together, and pull the three sharks home to the cave.

After a while Echidne and her brood grew weary of shark meat, and Cerberus was sent out after octopi. These were gigantic creatures, equipped with eight long arms set with powerful suction cups. Fishermen feared them more than they did sharks. For octopi could cling to the underside of a boat, snake up over the edge, grasp a fisherman, and pull him overboard. Some octopi, it was said, grew large enough to capsize sailing vessels. But these

were only rumors. Certainly nobody who had encountered one that size had lived to tell the tale.

Cerberus hunted octopi with the same joyous ferocity he displayed in hunting sharks. Even more, perhaps, because these creatures were bigger and more strange. The greater the peril, the more Cerberus enjoyed himself. He would charge an octopus, stretching out his three necks and curling the rest of himself into a ball so that he became a wheel of teeth. Seizing an arm in each pair of jaws, he would braid them as he had the shark's tails, actually knotting the giant squid to itself. Then he would swim home, towing it behind him.

It came to pass that there was no creature in the sea that Cerberus feared—though he was feared by all the others.

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The Fisherman's Daughter

In a small coastal village lived a little girl named Delia. She was the youngest child in a family of fisher-folk, and, from the very first, held strong ideas about everything. She could not endure, for example, being left at home with her mother while her father and brothers went out to fish.

Again and again Delia tried to hide herself on board her father's boat, crouching inside a barrel or rolling herself up in a net. But there wasn't much room to hide: she was always found and set ashore. Each failure made her more determined to succeed. She longed to do as her brothers did—to go out with her father upon the flashing sea among the great fish and come sailing home, all sunburnt and swaggering, laughing, and telling wonderful lies.

Since she could not stow away without getting caught, she decided to follow the fishing boat in a tiny, canoe-like craft called a coracle, which her father had made for her. She awoke at dawn, slipped out of the family hut, and hid herself among driftwood until she saw her father and brothers sail away. Then she slid the coracle into the surf, pushed it out past the breaking waves, and climbed in.

Delia was gliding into a great dazzle of sunrise. The wind whipped her hair. She laughed with joy. She was absolutely at home in the tiny boat, for she could paddle as well as her youngest brother and swim like a water-rat.

She was not worried when her father's fishing vessel vanished from sight. She knew where he would cast his nets. In this season, at this phase of the moon, the mullet were running, and her father knew where they ran.

In searching for a small fishing boat on the vast expanse of water, those wise in the way of the sea know that it is best to study the sky. For gulls throng where fishermen cast their nets. So Delia stared at the sky, looking for gulls, and did not see the triangular fin cutting the water toward her.

Cerberus was also prowling the sea that morning, quite unaware that this was the day that was to change his life forever. He was not after sharks but hunting octopi. His mother was about to lay another clutch of eggs, and at such times she had a monstrous appetite. Suddenly, Cerberus picked up a strong scent and forgot about foraging for octopus. He knew that something huge and terrible had crossed his path, a small killer whale perhaps, or a great white shark. Either of these meant a fine fight if he could track it down.

Now, fishermen built their own boats in those days, and Delia's father had used as much care in making the tiny coracle as he had in building his broad-beamed fishing vessel. Instead of using wood for the ribs, he had traded a month's catch for antelope horn, the same kind of tough, springy horn that was used in making bows. Over these strong ribs he had stretched sealskin instead of the woven reed fiber ordinarily used for the hull. He had made the swiftest, most durable coracle on the coast, and he was very proud of it.

"It'll last a hundred years," he said. "My grandchildren's grandchildren will use it. My ghost will float on the wind like a torn sail, laughing all the way."

Nevertheless, that coracle, made with such loving care, was not to last another day.

Delia shipped her paddle and let the little boat drift as she searched the sky for gulls. Something bumped the boat—hard. It rocked violently, almost spilling her out. The water split. An enormous fish burst out. It seemed to stand on its tail, towering above the tiny boat, its jaws gaping. Delia saw its teeth flash, felt herself choke in the stinking gale of its breath. It was a shark, a blotched white one, the biggest she had ever seen. She fell flat into the boat, pressing herself to the floorboards. The shark dipped, clamping its jaws on the edge of the boat like a child crunching a candy bar, wrapper and all. The coracle collapsed. Sealskin and ribs of horn closed about the little girl, shielding her from the butcher-knife teeth.

Things look bigger underwater. Cerberus, who had been following the shark's scent, found himself rising to meet a fish that looked as big as a war vessel. He had learned that the best way to meet a giant shark was to come up from beneath it and bite off its tail ... something only he could do. It

would take three bites, one with each head. For the tailbone of a shark is a continuation of its spine, and that spine is perhaps the toughest, most flexible in all animal creation. The first bite would slice through nerve fiber, paralyzing the great fish. The second bite would cut halfway through, and the third would shear off the tail completely. The shark, mortally wounded, spouting blood, would sink, and be easy to finish off underwater.

When Cerberus saw this shark, however, he decided to abandon his usual habit and surface in front of it. For this creature looked big enough to put up a real battle, and that is exactly what Cerberus craved on this beautiful summer morning. But when the dog reached the surface and poked his heads out of the water, his six ears quivered in wonder. The shark was screaming, screaming with a child's voice.

Then Cerberus saw that there was a little boat wedged between the shark's jaws, and he immediately understood that there was a child inside, still alive, still screaming. The dog moved so swiftly that his three heads blurred into one. He flung himself through the spray and hit the shark from the side. His left head lunged, striking into the fish at the hinge of its jaw, slicing through tendon and muscle. The great mouth fell open, allowing the two other dog heads to flash inside and pull out the crushed boat.

The wreckage floated. A voice still screamed from inside. But Cerberus was underwater again, busy with the shark, whose jaws still gaped, revealing the terrible rows of teeth, now made harmless. He tore out the shark's throat, and the fish sank, trailing blood.

The dog surfaced, grasped the bow of the coracle in one of his mouths, and drew it swiftly into calmer waters.

Delia had gone into a kind of swoon when the shark crushed her boat. She heard someone screaming, and realized it was herself. She didn't know that she was inside the boat. She thought she was in the shark's belly and that she was being crushed by the walls of a great intestinal valve, such as she had seen when her father gutted big fish.

She came out of her swoon to find six eyes peering at her. She thought she saw three dogs, then realized it was one huge dog with three heads.

"Don't be afraid," said the middle head.

"Am I dead?"

"No."

"No.... It's not dark enough, is it?"

Indeed, she was bathed in brilliant sunlight and seemed to be floating. She pulled herself up and looked about. She was lying quite comfortably on her wrecked coracle, which was floating like a raft. The dog swam alongside.

“Where’s the shark?” she asked.

“That’s who’s dead.”

“Did you save me?”

“By accident. I was hunting sharks and found one chewing a boat. When I killed it, you floated out.”

“He didn’t swallow me?”

“He didn’t have time. What’s your name?” asked Cerberus.

“Delia. What’s yours?”

“Cerberus.”

“You speak quite well for a dog.”

“Just with my middle head. It’s the smartest.”

“Don’t your other heads get jealous when they hear you say that?” asked Delia.

“Not really. They’re all me, you know. Besides, they can do other things better.”

“Most of us speak with only one head,” said Delia. “But thank you for saving me from that awful fish.”

“Well, I’d hate to be eating a shark and find a little girl inside.”

“Do you eat sharks?”

“Too often.”

“Do you like wild pig?” asked Delia.

“Never had any. But my uncle says they’re good eating.”

“You should come home with me then. Our woods are full of wild pigs. They come for the pine nuts and acorns.”

“Don’t you live on the shore?” asked Cerberus.

“Right on the shore. Sea in front, woods behind. Do you want to come?”

“You’re not afraid of me?”

“Why should I be?”

“You don’t think I’m ugly and horrible with these three heads?”

“As you say, they’re all you,” Delia assured him. “And whatever’s you is what I like.”

“Nobody’s ever liked me much, except my mother,” Cerberus replied.

“Don’t you have brothers and sisters, or anything?”

“They’re not very affectionate—they’re the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, and the Sphinx—just to mention those least likely to please.”

“I know what a lion is, of course, but I never heard of a Hydra or a Finks,” said Delia.

“Sphinx.”

“SS-ff-inks!”

“Yes. She has a tiger’s body and a woman’s face and wings and claws. And a very dangerous disposition.”

“Sounds awful. What’s a Hydra?”

“A huge lizard who lives in a lake. He has a hundred heads, and each head has a hundred teeth. His bite is so poisonous that anyone who’s even scratched by a Hydra tooth turns black, shrivels up, and crumbles into ash. Nor is it any use to cut off any of those heads, for two more will take its place.”

“How dreadful! And these are your sisters and brothers?”

“Yes.”

“Do you suppose that when you come home with me I’ll have to meet your relatives?” asked Delia.

“I’ll make sure you don’t.”

“You know ...”

“What?”

“You do the two things I like best—saving me from being eaten and telling scary stories.”

“I can’t tell stories,” insisted Cerberus.

“Sure you can. You just did. About the something lion and the Hydra and the SS-ff-inks.”

“They’re not stories. They’re true.”

“That’s what a story is, impossible but true. Like you. Are you my dog now?”

“Nobody else’s.”

And the girl and dog paddled their way to shore.

Glaucus

Having no experience of humans, Cerberus did not realize that he had attached himself to the household of a remarkable man. Delia's father, Glaucus, was the best fisherman on the coast. He had a matchless instinct for the feeding habits, spawning patterns, and migrations of fish. He always managed to fill his nets, even on days when others caught nothing.

Nevertheless, he remained modest about his abilities. "It's not because I'm smart," he said. "Actually, it's because I'm stupid. I think like a fish; that's how I know what they'll do."

But his wife and children appreciated him and loved him for his gentleness, his bravery, and his radiant wisdom. He had observed that ailing fish ate of a certain underwater plant and swam away with their vitality restored. He brought a sprig of that plant home to his wife, who was as good a gardener as he was a fisherman, and asked her to replant it in a salt pool. The plant flourished and Glaucus was able to bring wounded fish to the pool and heal them.

He became known then as the "Fish doctor," and his fame spread rapidly along the coast. He asked his wife to transplant the saltwater herb to a freshwater pool and crossbreed it with a certain kind of river-cress that also had healing properties. The freshwater pool became charged with vital energy. Sick animals drank of it and were healed.

The wise fisherman was delighted when Cerberus appeared on his doorstep, so much so that he didn't scold Delia for risking her life on the shark-infested waters and losing his precious coracle. He had always feared that the reckless little girl, who roamed the wild wood as well as the sea, would be injured or eaten one day by a shark or a boar. But now, under the protection of this enormous three-headed dog, he was confident that she would be safe. For all Glaucus's wisdom, he could not understand the evil

seething in the bowels of hell—nor how Hades was plotting to extend his empire of Death.

Glaucus was a small, leathery, white-bearded man, very youthful for his age. In those first magical days when language was still in bud, people were often named for their appearance. *Glaucus* means “gray-green”; his mother had named him for his sea-colored eyes. Delia’s eyes were the same color but larger. She didn’t like to close them. She told Cerberus that she slept with her eyes open to see where dreams came from. And he believed her because he could actually do that. At night, his heads took turns sleeping, one remaining always on guard.

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Wild Boars

Behind Delia's fishing village was a great forest. In this dark, dense wood was something more menacing than shark or bear. The trees were held sacred by Dodona, a powerful woodland goddess, who permitted no one to chop them down. They grew tall and broad. The acorns and pine nuts they dropped were very fat. And the wild boars that fed on pine nuts and acorns grew to enormous size. Weighing between seven hundred and a thousand pounds, they ran with crushing speed on their short legs. Their tusks were ivory spears, their hooves sharp as hatchets, and their bristles like barbed wire. Everyone feared them; no one hunted them. And they had formed a taste for human flesh.

To make matters worse, these wild pigs were very intelligent. They had learned to hunt in small herds, helping one another, as wolves do. When the killer boars went on a rampage, even bears and lions would slink out of their way.

But Cerberus, who had hunted the great white shark and giant octopi, viewed these boars as small game. His overconfidence was to plunge Delia into dreadful peril. She had promised him wild pig to eat. One day, blithely ignoring all danger, as was her habit, she led Cerberus across a wide meadow into the forest, where she knew the boars came to eat the acorns. The great dog bounded along, full of delight. Everything pleased him—the meadow grass, the smell of trees, the salt wind, the hot sun—and, most of all, the slender child running beside him.

Seeing the shadow of a hawk gliding over the field, he swerved suddenly and began to chase it for pure joy, leaving Delia far behind, whirling back only when he heard her scream. Beyond her, swifter than hawk shadow, dense, hurtling, murderous, was a wild boar. Delia ran toward Cerberus, but the boar was coming so fast she seemed to be standing still.

Cerberus left the ground in a mighty leap, sailed over the girl's head, landed on the other side of her, and crouched to meet the charging boar. The beast came fast, aiming the ivory spears of its tusks straight at the dog's chest. Three heads lunged. Each pair of side jaws seized a front leg of the boar. The jaws of the center head closed on the boar's snout, twisting it, trying to heave the animal over.

But a boar with its short legs and great weight is harder to overturn than a bull. The beast planted itself firmly, bracing its legs and shaking its head, trying to work free and stab its tusks into Cerberus. But the dog twisted with such cruel strength that the beast, wanting to ease the agony on its snout, began to turn away from the biting, and slowly let itself be pulled over.

Then all three sets of jaws savaged the belly of the boar. Its hatchet hooves struck. Cerberus bled. But he ignored his wounds and tore at the boar's guts. Then he crouched before Delia. She leaped on his back, and he galloped toward a nearby river. The rest of the herd appeared on the brow of the hill and began to race toward them. The beasts sped past the fallen boar, who, greedy even in his death throes, was eating his own entrails.

Cerberus raced to the river and plunged in. The herd surged after him, but they skidded to a halt at the edge of the water, watching the dog swim across, bearing the child on his back. Pigs swim, but slowly. They knew they could never catch him in the water. They watched as he swam to the opposite shore. To their amazement, the little girl, instead of vanishing into the woods, scrambled off the dog's back and climbed a tree, while the dog jumped into the river and swam back toward them.

The mob of wild boars howled savagely. Their enemy was actually coming back to challenge them. They couldn't wait for the pleasure of bearing him to earth beneath their weight, thrusting their tusks into his loathed body, trampling him to bloody rags under their sharp hooves.

Cerberus was swimming toward them. He stopped in the middle of the river and swam in slow circles, all three heads barking a challenge. The boars pawed the water's edge, hesitating—then, with a great splash, they rushed into the water.

Cerberus ducked under. The pigs tried to swim faster, but they were already pushing through the water as fast as they could. They reached the spot where the dog had been and swam around in circles, waiting for him to

surface. They knew he had to come up to breathe. But like all things that seem certain, this had a flaw in it. What they did not know was that Cerberus, though dog-shaped, was sea-monster born and could breathe underwater. And such ignorance was fatal.

One by one the wild boars disappeared. Cerberus, hovering invisibly beneath the surface of the river, simply caught their legs in his jaws and drew each beast under, holding it there until it was thoroughly drowned. Then he'd let it sink to the bottom. The boars on the surface were barely aware of what was happening. If they saw the others disappearing, they thought they were diving for the dog and didn't realize their error until they felt their own legs being seized in a terrible grip, felt themselves being pulled helplessly underneath and watched with popping eyes as their own breath of life became bubbles rising away from them forever.

Delia balanced herself on the bough of an oak, watching the river. Cerberus was invisible, but having seen him kill a shark, she knew his prowess underwater and understood what was happening. She grew so excited that she began to dance on the bough. The heavy limb started swinging and almost threw her off. But she was as comfortable in a tree as a squirrel.

The last pig went under. Dragonflies, which had departed when the herd came, skimmed back, wings glittering. Cerberus surfaced and swam to shore. He shook himself mightily. Delia dropped out of the tree and ran to meet him. She flung her arms about each of his necks and kissed each cold nose.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome," growled the middle head.

"You're bleeding!" she cried. "Let's hurry home. My father can fix you. So can I. I know how to use those herbs."

"Just a few scratches," muttered Cerberus. "Nothing at all."

"Not nothing!"

She leaped onto his back and lovingly drummed her heels into his side. He galloped toward home.

Hecate's Idea

Down in Tartarus, Hades sat on his great throne of ebony and pearl, receiving a report from his chief aide, Hecate. She was frowning importantly, but her wings quivered with secret pleasure. For she had bad news to pass on to her employer, and nothing pleased her more. She was the kind of underling, in fact, who believed that trouble and confusion conferred status upon her. If there was none, she made some. That was how she had risen to be High Hag of all the departments of Hell.

“I regret to inform your majesty that five more ghosts escaped last month,” announced Hecate. “And I had to send out a whole squadron of Harpies to catch them. Also, two of the Undead managed to smuggle themselves in, trying to join two who had died. This also took much time and effort before they could be found and deported. The fact is, oh king, our security is not what it should be.”

“What you tell me,” said Hades, “makes me even more determined to get that three-headed dog down here. Some time ago I asked you to give thought to this problem. Have you?”

“I have, my lord. I sent two of my best Harpies to spy upon him. And I, myself, have braved the loathsomely cheerful sunshine of the upper regions so that I might observe him personally. I believe I have arrived at a strategy for his recruitment.”

“Do you think you can stop praising yourself long enough to describe it to me?”

“My strategy is based on a reading of his character. You must understand that he is afflicted by an ailment to which gods and monsters are usually immune; he has a loving heart. This means that his wits are muffled by a kind of innocence and that, for all his strength and ferocity, he can be manipulated.”

“Speak on.”

“He has found someone to love besides his mother. A little girl whom he rescued from a shark and who has become the dearest thing in life to him. We’ll use her to bend him to our design. We’ll have her killed. Her shade will be brought to us; Cerberus will follow. Once he is here, we shall know how to keep him.”

“Your idea seems promising,” said Hades, “but I detect a few loopholes in the plan. Let’s think it through.”

“Any strategy must profit from your wisdom, my lord.”

“If Cerberus dotes on this child, he must guard her night and day, for that is a dog’s nature. Who then can possibly get close enough to her to separate her soul from her body?”

“Difficult, I grant,” said Hecate. “But not impossible.”

“You have a candidate for the job?”

Hecate whistled. Something shambled in. Hades, employer of monsters, was experienced in various forms of ugliness. But he gasped as he saw what had entered his throne room. It was huge, hunched, sidling, and covered with a flaming red pelt. Through its fur Hades saw blue things crawling, seething, glinting, as if its entire body were covered by bluebottle flies.

“I have been using him as a sentinel,” said Hecate. “But he is ready for higher tasks. His name is Argus.”

“What’s crawling on him?”

“Eyes,” said Hecate. “He has a hundred of them. He sees anywhere, everywhere. He has eyes on the ends of his fingers so that he can poke them into places where others cannot see. Nothing escapes his vigil, nothing! And he’s a killer, too. If you give me leave, my lord, I shall send him after the little girl.”

“Send him, send him,” muttered Hades. “Just get him out of my sight.”

Hecate waved her hand. Argus bowed and sidled out of the throne room, eyes rolling and glinting.

Decoy and Death

It was a sunny morning. Cerberus was sullenly prowling the beach. Delia had gone to the tidal pool, bidding him not to come, for she knew he was jealous of the attention she paid her father's animal patients.

The shadow of great wings glided over the beach; Cerberus crouched, hackles rising. He goggled in surprise at the creature hovering above him—a female figure with brass wings and a whip curled at her belt. She was tall and stern-looking, white-haired, but with a young face. She landed nearby and came striding toward him. “Greetings, Cerberus,” she said.

He had no way of knowing she was a Harpy; he didn't know there was such a thing. But he remembered something his mother had told him. “Are you one of my Gorgon aunts?” he asked.

“Why, yes,” said the Harpy, who, like all those who work for the King of Hell, had been taught to lie very smoothly. “That's who I am, an aunt. But I come on a sad errand, dear nephew. Your mother is quite ill.”

“Ill? *Her?*”

“Well, “wounded. She chose to take on a shark and octopus simultaneously, both the biggest of their kind. She was almost strangled, and lost much blood before she could dispose of them.”

“Is she dying?” asked Cerberus.

“We hope not, we hope not. But she's asking for you. You're her favorite.”

He thought of racing off to inform Delia, but he didn't want to waste a moment. “She'll know,” he thought. “She'll understand it's something important that takes me away and that I'll be back as soon as I can.”

Without further hesitation he charged into the sea and began to swim as fast as he could toward the underwater cave where he had been born.

The Harpy mounted on the air, cackling, and flew off to report to Hecate that the ruse had worked—that Cerberus had been lured away, leaving the girl unguarded.

Delia was at the saltwater pool, feeding herbs to a seal that had been stabbed by a swordfish and was bleeding to death in the water when her father had rescued it. Glaucus had taken it home, bound its wounds, and put it on a diet of healing herbs. Now it was recovered enough to pass to Delia's care. The seal was a clever, playful animal, and Delia had grown quite fond of it. She was careful, though, not to spend too much time at the tidal pool, for she knew how jealous Cerberus could be of other animals in her care.

Delia fed the seal some more herbs and patted its sleek head. A shadow fell upon her. She thought it was one of her brothers and did not turn around. Her reckless courage had become a kind of family joke, and her big brothers were always jumping out at her, trying to scare her.

Delia reached behind her to give a pinch and touched coarse fur. She turned swiftly and found herself in the grasp of something huge, hairy, and flaming red. Most horrible of all, under its fur it was crawling with eyes. Even the paws grasping her had eyes. And they were all looking at her.

She tried to call for Cerberus. But the creature took her slender throat almost gently between two great, furred fingers, and tweaked the life out of her like someone snuffing a candle flame.

The seal flung itself at the monster, who, as calmly as a horse whisking away a fly, lifted the seal by its tail and shattered its head against a rock. Draping Delia's body over one arm, he scuttled away like a giant red crab.

Argus climbed a cliff, as Hecate had instructed, and dropped the body onto the rocks below, so that it would appear that the girl, who was always rock climbing, had been killed in an accidental fall. Then he sped toward the cave called Avernus, that would lead him back through underground chambers to Tartarus and his mistress, Hecate.

The Body on the Rocks

After swimming a short distance, Cerberus was astonished to meet his mother. “Mother, mother!” he cried. “Are you all again?”

“Well? Of course I am,” replied Echidne. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

“I mean, are your wounds all healed?”

“What wounds?”

“Weren’t you almost killed in a terrible fight with a shark and an octopus?”

“My dear child, who’s been telling you these tales?”

“One of your sisters. A Gorgon.”

“What did she look like?”

“Brass wings ...”

“Yes, Gorgons have those.”

“White-haired, with a rather handsome face, though cruel.”

“Handsome face? The Gorgons are all frightfully ugly. Squashed noses, bulging eyes, yellow fangs, seaweed hair. Besides, they’re not in this part of the world. They’re far north. They dwell upon a frozen marsh with their sister, Medusa. Whatever you saw was not a Gorgon.”

“Who is she then?” asked Cerberus. “And why was she telling me lies about you?”

“Brass wings ... white hair ... anything else you remember?”

“She had a whip at her belt.”

“Of course. My dear pup, it was a Harpy that came to you. One of Hecate’s dreadful hellish echelon. They all serve that odious god, Hades. You can be sure of this though: she meant you no good.”

“Why would she tell me you were dying?”

“She knew, perhaps, that you would come to me as fast as you could. But why would she want you to do that? What have you been doing?”

“Guarding a little girl named Delia—whom I love,” replied Cerberus.

“Perhaps they mean her some harm?”

As soon as he heard his mother’s words, Cerberus knew with dreadful certainty that they were true. Without a moment’s hesitation, he turned and shot away so fast he spun a hole in the water as he went. His wake was a whirling tunnel.

When Cerberus reached the village where Glaucus dwelt, he found everyone out searching for Delia. The dog raced to the tidal pool, because that, he knew, was where Delia had been when the Harpy came to trick him. A dead seal lay there, its head smashed. How strange! Had the Harpy killed it?

Cerberus lifted his three heads and snuffed the wind. Then he whirled and rushed off. The faint spoor grew stronger as he ran. He was following the exact course that Argus had taken. He scrambled up the cliff, braced himself at the edge, and looked down. The strange scent was quite strong now. And there was something else, something he did not want to accept.

The three heads howled softly in unison. The dog scrambled down the cliff to reach the body of the child upon the rocks. His six eyes were blinded by tears. His three throats were choked with sobbing howls. He couldn’t bear to look at her. In two days the gulls had done their work, and crabs had fed there too.

His grief was no soft, sad thing but a savage beast tearing at his entrails. He shivered with agony, but half-welcomed the pain because it blurs memory. But vivid images burned through—how she had looked—her scratched, ivory-brown legs, her black bell of hair, her glinting green eyes. He remembered the raucous challenge of her laugh—how it had been when she flung her slender arms about his neck.

He thought he would perish then. He wanted to. But grief turned to rage. The idea of vengeance filled his great body, making him tremble with a new rush of venomous energy. Not for nothing had he been given his strength; not for nothing such teeth, such claws, such fighting skills. He would find whoever had killed her, and rip and rend, tear flesh, crush bone. Yes ... he would live till then.

Cerberus scrambled back up the cliff to where the scent was strongest, and sniffed the grass. Faint waves of odor filtered through his great desire—became lines, took on shape, flushed with color. All his senses fused. Smell

became sight. Upon the visionary pan of his brain was printed the image of a red-furred, shambling thing—a creature more horrible than any he had ever seen. It would have to be that way to have done so horrible a deed.

But what was it? Who was it? Where could he find it? Cerberus ran back to Delia's hut and led her brothers to the rocks below the cliffs so that they might take her body and burn it decently upon a funeral pyre. Glaucus, he was told, had sailed off across the bay to a mountain range where he hoped to find the cave Avernus. He knew it led to the Kingdom of Death, and he wished only to follow his daughter and stay with her. He didn't want her to be lonely.

Cerberus leaped into the sea and drove another whirling tunnel back to the place where he had left his mother, hoping that she would know something about the enemy he had envisioned. He couldn't help surfacing once, and looking back. A fire burned on the headland. He knew that it was Delia's funeral pyre.

Conference in Hell

Hades sent for Hecate. She came to his throne room. “Well,” he said. “Has the little girl been taken?”

“Yes, your majesty,” replied Hecate.

“Is her shade where it should be?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“When can we expect Cerberus to come for her?”

“A complication has arisen.”

“Complication?” exclaimed Hades. “You are here to solve problems, not to create new ones.”

“And I shall solve this one, my lord. But it may take a bit longer than I anticipated.”

“You’d better tell me what’s happening.”

“This first part of our plan succeeded,” said Hecate. “The second part miscarried slightly. Argus managed to kill Delia, but Cerberus has not followed her, at least not yet. What he craves is vengeance. He is in the upper regions hunting for the girl’s murderer.”

Hades frowned. “When he catches Argus, Cerberus will force him to tell who ordered the assassination. So, instead of gaining a loyal employee, I shall have made an implacable enemy.”

“I assure your majesty that no one I dispatch upon sensitive business will ever bear witness against us. Anyone returning from such a mission must drink of Lethe’s fountain, whose waters wash away memory. And I made Argus drink a bellyful.”

“So he remembers nothing of his mission?”

“What passes for his mind, my lord, has been swept clean of the past.”

“But when Cerberus finally comes down here and learns that Argus is our employee, he will inevitably blame us for the girl’s death, no matter what

Argus remembers or forgets.”

“Argus is no longer here,” said Hecate. “He no longer works for us. I traded him to Hera, who has need of a hundred-eyed creature to spy upon the antics of footloose Zeus.”

“What is she giving us in return?” asked Hades.

“She has persuaded her son, Hephaestus, to make us two new instruments of torment—the Fire Flick and the Marrow Log.”

“I see ...” said Hades. “And when can we expect Cerberus? I can’t wait to start training that stubborn brute and, when he is well broken, to see him guarding the gates of my kingdom. One head will be cocked to keep the dead in, the other alert to keep the living out. And the middle head will always be poised for biting. How long must I wait, how long?”

“It will be soon, master, I promise you. Cerberus must be growing very weary of searching the world for someone he can’t find. Yearning so for the child he loves, he will inevitably be drawn to our depths for a glimpse of her.”

“Well, I’ll give you a bit longer, but if Cerberus has not appeared in a reasonable time, we shall have to reevaluate your own status.”

“I am certain I shall be able to restore your confidence in me, my lord,” replied Hecate as she bowed herself out of the throne room.

Hera and the Harpy

Argus, indeed, had been traded out of Hell as Hecate had said—but for more reasons than she had admitted. As usual, the Harpy Queen had several reasons for what she did, all of them evil.

By and large, the gods did not love one another; they were too busy loving themselves. They quarreled constantly. Quarrels festered into feuds. Zeus, King of the Gods, and brother, husband, or father to all of them, knew that he was feared and envied by the entire pantheon—with one exception, his son Hermes.

So Hermes, of course, was his favorite. Indeed, he was the favorite of all the gods. For, unlike the others, who were heavy with the sense of their own importance, Hermes took himself lightly—was joyous, playful, and hated the sight of suffering.

Nevertheless, Hermes had an enemy, a very powerful one—the Harpy Queen, Hecate. She was wildly jealous of the affection Hades showed for his silvery young nephew. For among Hermes' duties as messenger god was to usher the shades of the dead to Tartarus. He conducted this sad journey in so swift, tactful, and gentle a manner, delivering his shades in such good condition, that Hades admired him beyond all others. And Hecate couldn't bear it.

She was very much aware that Hermes was a general favorite and that it would be most difficult to destroy his position. But she also knew how suspicious and gloomy the other gods could be—how quick they were to take offense and how slow to forget a grudge. Since she was very patient and very cunning, she took care to show nothing but pleasure at the sight of Hermes as she secretly spun her plot.

As the first step in her long-range strategy, she went to Hera, Queen of the Gods, and told her what she had learned from one of her Harpy patrols

—that her husband Zeus was courting a beautiful river nymph named Io and, to escape Hera’s vigil, was turning himself into a bull for their meetings and Io into a cow.

When she heard this, Hera flew into a rage, not only at her husband but at the one who brought her bad news.

“Your Harpies are industrious,” she said coldly to Hecate. “Isn’t it a violation of the Great Charter for these creatures to leave the Underworld and fly spy missions up here?”

“I have transgressed, oh queen,” said Hecate. “I admit it. But only to serve you.”

“Why such zeal? We hardly know each other.”

“I have long admired you from afar, my lady, and my admiration has grown into something like worship.”

Hecate had always operated on one principle, a highly successful one. She knew that any god would lap up words of praise and never suspect the praiser to be motivated by anything but a passion for accuracy.

“Worship, eh?” said Hera. “Well, I suppose your feelings are natural. I must have hordes of unknown admirers, but I have always been too modest to realize it. How, precisely, do you propose to serve me?”

“His supreme majesty, Zeus, I have observed, is abetted in his adventures by Hermes, who curries favor with his father by acting as his go-between.”

“He doesn’t have to curry any favor,” remarked Hera. “Zeus dotes on him. Everyone seems to. I don’t quite understand why. I’ve always thought him a sly, conniving creature, for all his charm.”

“How wonderful you are, Hera,” said Hecate. “As perceptive as you are beautiful. Hermes *is* sly; he *is* conniving. And he helps Zeus do what you most detest. But I have a way to thwart his activities.”

“If so, I shall be grateful,” said Hera.

Then Hecate went on to tell Hera about Argus of the hundred eyes. How she was giving him to Hera as a gift, and how he could report every move of Zeus and his many amours without being observed himself.

“He sounds like a most admirable addition to my staff,” said Hera. “What can I do for you in return?”

“I do this entirely out of my love for you, oh sovereign goddess, without any thought of repayment. However, I must confess that even as you fear

Hermes' influence over Zeus, I fear his influence upon my master, Hades, and would appreciate any help you would care to offer.”

“I understand,” said Hera. “I shall see what I can do if and when the opportunity arises.”

“I'm a fair hand at providing such opportunities,” said Hecate. “Allow me to thank you in advance, dear queen.”

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Zeus Complains

Zeus was fretting. Hermes was away on Hades' business. Without the aid of his clever son, the King of the Gods was being outwitted by Hera at every turn. It was Hermes who had concocted the idea of changing Io into a cow so that Zeus, in the guise of a bull, could escape the vigilance of his wife's spies and meet the river nymph undetected.

But Hera was evidently being served now by more-skillful agents. She had learned of the transformations and, mistress of magic that she was, had cooked up a counterspell, so that Io could not be changed back from cow to nymph.

Io, who feared she might have to stay a cow forever, was miserable. And Zeus was utterly thwarted. With Hermes absent, he knew that his wife would continue to outmaneuver him, so he decided to send for Hades and settle the question of Hermes' priorities.

Zeus didn't like to be indoors with his brother. He fancied that Hades, for all his regal, immaculate appearance, smelled faintly of death. So he did not have him ushered into the throne room but met him outside in the Garden of the Gods, which lay on a sunny slope of Olympus beyond the blue and white and gold palace. This palace was made of cloud drift frozen into marble, windowed with snow crystals, and pillared by sunbeams.

"Greetings, brother," said Zeus. "You are gracious indeed to leave the cares of your dark domain and answer my summons so swiftly."

"My cares are many, and multiplying," said Hades. "But nothing is more urgent than a summons from my king."

"As it happens, I too find my duties multiplying," said Zeus. "And my domain, that is heaven and earth, although, perhaps, more cheerful than yours, also has many many problems. Now in all this, and much else besides, Hermes is my most skillful helper—indeed, he is the only one I

wholly trust. Yet his time is almost equally divided between us. Each day he gathers up the newly dead and herds them off to Tartarus to enlarge your kingdom. This arrangement is becoming increasingly unsatisfactory to me. I really must have his services full-time, brother. I'll give you someone else, or indeed as many replacements as you like, and of as high a station as you like, to escort your dead."

"Oh, Zeus," said Hades. "You simply do not know what you're asking. Hermes is not only an usher of the dead, although that in itself requires a multitude of skills that only he possesses; he is also arch-mediator between the realms of life and death and is required to perform miracles of diplomacy. Take my current problem, which Hermes is trying to solve at this very moment."

When human beings achieve great power, they tend to view their private needs as public requirements. In the case of a god, in particular the King of the Gods, his own desire immediately becomes a cosmic necessity, dwarfing all other considerations. But, as supreme ruler, Zeus owed courtesy not only to others but to the idea of himself. So, although boiling with impatience, he listened politely as Hades continued.

"The fact is, oh Zeus, your son Ares, God of War, has been busy in Phrygia, where many local chieftains vie for supremacy."

Zeus began to listen with more interest as Hades described what had been happening on the Dardanian plains. Ares had coursed that land and lingered longer than was his custom, planting his feuds deep, envenoming them at their roots. Thus, he sowed that rich black earth and reaped a terrible harvest. The battles had raged across the land and become an exercise in butchery. No surrender was offered; none taken. However, the men who were dying in such numbers had begun to rebel. Their souls were actually refusing to leave their bodies and were clinging instead to torn limbs and shattered heads in a thick, bloody, twittering mist.

"Why this sudden spirit of revolt?" asked Zeus. "I don't care how bloody the battles have been; fierce fighting is a warrior's business. And every real fighting man accepts the possibility of early death. I don't understand this at all."

"Well," said Hades. "I don't either. But the facts are as I describe, whatever the causes. The point is that in all the universe only Hermes can

persuade these stubborn ghosts to leave their ruined bodies and complete their honorable careers by enrolling themselves in my kingdom.”

“I do not underestimate the gravity of this development,” said Zeus. “But I must repeat, my affairs need attention, too, and I want Hermes with me.”

Hades was very clever. He knew that he would get nowhere by locking horns with Zeus. But he prided himself on his guile, which had never failed him, and on the fact that he knew his brother inside and out. Zeus loved youth and the spectacle of strong, beautiful bodies, and he loathed infirmity and disease and old age. He also couldn’t bear the sight of any kind of physical mutilation. Knowing this, Hades knew what tack to take with him.

“Very well,” he agreed. “What must be must be. Recall Hermes. Let these unhoused dead walk the earth. It will be a sight worth watching. For this sort of thing will spread, of course. Once anyone refuses to separate his soul from his body and gets away with it, everyone will want to do the same. This earth of ours, once the abode of beautiful, stalwart young people, will soon be overrun—*Run? Over-limped*, I should say—by legions of amputees, decrepit old folk, and gasping invalids.”

Zeus shuddered. “Please,” he muttered.

“Not to mention the others,” said Hades. “Those who could properly have expected to profit from the normal, wholesome progression of life into death. How about the hordes of disappointed heirs, denied the fortune they had based their hopes on? How about the young living soldiers denied promotions? Then, consider the housing shortage. The food shortage. Famine ... drought ... overcrowded cities crawling with vermin of all kinds, including human. Men and women clawing one another to bloody rags for a scrap of bread, a sip of wine. And, of course, in such circumstances there will be no one to show gratitude to the gods who made them ... no one to pray to us and heap our altars with flowers and jewels and tickle our nostrils with the savory smoke of their sacrifices. No, brother, no one to do all those pleasant things we call worship.”

“Enough!” said Zeus. “Enough. I get the picture. Don’t go nattering on about these damned rebels. Let Hermes clear up the mess as soon as possible. Then send him back to me immediately.”

“Thank you,” said Hades. “I knew that after a frank discussion, your wisdom would prevail.” He hurried away, not daring to smile to himself until he was out of sight.

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Revolt of the Dead

For many miles Cerberus pursued the scent he had picked up on the cliffs. But then the air became brisk, leaves began to rattle. The grass flattened. An autumn gale had pounced upon the coast, blowing the scent away. Cerberus slowed to a halt, confused.

He drank from a pond, bitter with fallen leaves, then lay down, trying to think. The only other clue he had to Delia's killer was the fact that a Harpy had decoyed him away from the girl. And Harpies, his mother had said, served Hades. Then, did the murderer serve Hades somehow? If so, how was he to find this underground realm?

Then Cerberus remembered something. Once, as a pup, swimming with his mother at sunset, he had seen an odd flare of silver against the drowning sun, trailed by shadows that looked like black paper cutouts against the red disk, or a tatter of crows. He had barked in wonder, and his mother had told him that what he saw was a draft of new ghosts following the quicksilver god, Hermes, to Tartarus.

"Of all who serve Hades," he remembered his mother saying, "Hermes is the best. In fact, he is the best of all the gods, high or low." How then to find him?

Cerberus barked at the sky. A gull dipped low. Gulls liked Cerberus. They followed him when he hunted, knowing that he would lead them to a kill where they could feed.

"Tell me, friend," asked Cerberus. "You who fly so high and far—have you seen the god Hermes anywhere?"

"I saw him yesterday," replied the gull. "He was heading toward Phrygia."

"Where's that?"

"Follow your noses—north by northeast. You can't miss it."

“Thank you,” said Cerberus. And he galloped off.

Some hours later, the three-headed dog crouched on a low hill overlooking a battlefield. It was littered with corpses. The silvery figure that was Hermes stood on an overturned chariot and spoke into the bloody, twittering mist.

“Unhappy shades of the early dead, wrenched too soon from your mortal frame, allow me to introduce myself. I am Hermes, the Messenger God, whose duty it is to usher you to the Land Beyond Death. From the beginning of things I have been familiar with shades. I have been guide, counselor, easer of transitions, smoother of the way. In all modesty, I have so conducted myself that I am trusted by the dead and by those who mourn them. And I come now to attend your present grievance. So, restless spirits, I understand your rebellion. You are loathe to leave the beautiful ruined bodies where you have so sweetly dwelt. Evicted too abruptly, you are not sufficiently weary of life to be ready for death. Nevertheless, you must come with me now.”

The twittering grew louder, became words. “No ... no ...”

“Shades, you cannot stay!” cried Hermes. “You must come away with me. You must leave these bodies lying here. Your flesh will nourish the birds of the air and the beasts of the field and the tunneling worm. Your bones, your hard bones, so straight and fine, will slowly fall to dust and become the rich essence of this earth. Your noble residue will be received into the womb of Mother Earth. It will be taken back and lent to new life. So you may not return to your own corpses; that way is barred. Nor can you, as some of you wish, enter another live body. Such bodies are not spacious; they are fit only for single occupancy; they will not accommodate another tenant. You may not enter or the dwelling will be destroyed. You’re young, I know, too young for death, but nevertheless you must come with me.”

The mist thickened in one spot and took the form of a youth wearing a battle-ax driven halfway into his skull. But he stood erect; the weapon that had killed him looked like a kind of crown. He had been a magnificent young warrior, it could be seen, and his shade was princely.

“Oh, Hermes,” he said. “You misunderstand us. We do not resent having died young. We know that it is a warrior’s privilege to fall in the glory of

his youth and never to suffer that dread ailment called old age.”

“Then you will come?” asked Hermes.

“We will not.”

“But why?”

“Hearken.... Most of us here are too young to have had children or even to have married. But all of us have something we love here on earth—our faithful, great-hearted companions in combat, our chariot horses. And you know that in fighting the deadly Scythian archers as we have been, the slaughter of horses was appalling. Almost all of them were killed. And yet, since the shades of animals are not allowed in Tartarus, we are asked to leave them on this bloody field forever. Dear god, whoever is in charge of final arrangements has made a grave error. The shades of horses, ready to be as steadfast in death as they were in life, should be permitted to follow their masters on this final journey. So, we say no; we won’t go. Not without our steeds.”

The gods seldom weep, except when they have been deeply moved by their own misfortunes. But Hermes, who was the happiest of the gods, was also the most tenderhearted, and he wept now. Cerberus, who when he had heard these words remembered Delia, wept also.

“Very well,” said Hermes. “You have pled your case so eloquently that I shall break all rules. You may take your steeds as you follow me to Tartarus. And I shall take all the consequences of this forbidden act upon myself.”

“Thank you, thank you,” sighed the mist.

“Whistle up your horses and follow me two by two when I give the word,” directed Hermes. He flew off the overturned chariot and alighted on the crest of a hill above the battlefield, where Cerberus crouched.

“Greetings, big dog,” he said. “You appear to be interested in these proceedings.”

“I am interested in anything to do with Tartarus and its ruler, Hades, employer of Harpies, who seem to have meddled fatally in my affairs.”

“Have you come to see me?” asked Hermes.

“My mother spoke of you as one familiar with the Underworld, also as the god most to be trusted.”

“Who is your mother?”

“Echidne. My father is Typhon. But I don’t stress that aspect of my parentage.”

“Then you are Cerberus?”

“I am.”

“Your name is not unknown to me,” said Hermes. “I have heard it mentioned in the halls of Hell.”

“Please help me. I value my life at nothing now that my beloved Delia is dead. But if every breath I take is not to be an agony, I must find whoever killed the little girl. Do you know anything about a creature who is huge, red, and hairy, with things crawling in its fur?”

“My good beast,” said Hermes. “You are describing one I have business with also. His name is Argus. He worked briefly in Tartarus, but he vanished suddenly and reappeared as a spy for Hera. He makes an admirable spy; the things crawling on him are eyes; he has a hundred. And he has become a great annoyance to my father, Zeus. As soon as I finish this mission, I shall try to attend to this panoptic pest.”

“Can you use some help?” asked Cerberus.

“Certainly. I understand he possesses fearful strength and absolute spite. I’d like very much to have you with me when I meet him.”

“Good,” growled Cerberus.

“But I’ll need your help before then. It’s not easy to herd so many shades from this world down through the gates of Tartarus. They tend to drift, you know, especially when the wind blows. And I have no experience at all with the shades of horses. Will you help me herd them?”

“Down to Tartarus?”

“Just to the mouth of the cave called Avernus. I can manage from there. When I come up again, we’ll go look for Argus together.”

The bloody mist paled as the shades of men and horses streamed out of the broken bodies and queued up behind Hermes. Cerberus roamed in the rear to chase stragglers back into line. Between god and dog they finally herded a vast seething mob of spirits southwest toward the cliffs of Troezen, where lay the chasm of Avernus, gateway to the Land Beyond Death.

Blood on the Meadow

For three days, Cerberus waited for Hermes to come out of the cave. Finally, he appeared, and god and dog began their hunt for Argus. It was a bright winter day, cold, as clear as crystal. The scent of Argus was strong, and Cerberus took up the search at a loping trot. Hermes followed, his ankle wings whirring. But then, as happens on such days, a wind stabbed out of the north and blew all traces of the scent away.

The dog turned and ran back to Hermes. “He can’t be far,” he said. “The scent was strong. You go this way and I’ll go that. We’ll circle this grove, and one of us should find him.”

“Good hunting,” said Hermes, and he flew off. Cerberus started in the other direction.

It was Hermes who entered a clearing and came upon the glossy black-and-white cow, Io, and her guardian. Argus lolled upon the grass, watching her as she browsed. His thick pelt kept him warm; he lay there as if on a summer day, half dozing—literally half, for fifty eyes were closed and fifty eyes were open, and nothing escaped his vigil.

Hermes landed lightly on the grass. “Good day,” he said. The cow raised her head and looked at him with great, glossy eyes, mooing sadly.

“Go away,” grunted Argus. “No one’s allowed near this cow.”

“Whatever you say,” said Hermes, unslinging his lyre. He touched a string as he sauntered toward Argus, who by now had opened all his eyes. Hermes sat on the sward next to him and began to play.

It was an afternoon song, a summer song, slow and windless, heavy with pollen, golden with peace. The drowse of cicadas was in his song, the lilt of waters, and all the multitudinous tiny sounds that mingle in the hush of such an hour.

One by one the eyelids of Argus sagged under the weight of that music. One by one, his eyes closed. And soon, for the first time in the watchful giant's life, all his eyes were closed at the same time, and he was completely asleep.

Hera, who had been watching all this, grew furious when she saw Hermes putting her sentinel to sleep. She whistled up a gadfly and sent it to earth—an enormous gadfly, bigger than a crow, with a needle-pointed sting as big as a spur. Its buzzing was louder than a wasp's nest being put to the torch. It dived at Io, stabbing her flanks, driving its sting deep, keeping it buried in her flesh as it slowly flew, dragging the vicious spur like a plow, making bloody furrows. The pain was so intense that it shredded a membrane of the cow's transformation, and her naiad voice mingled with the screams of the tormented animal.

Hermes was on his feet, dancing about, swinging his lyre, trying to swat the gadfly. He hit it lightly, and sent it spinning toward Argus. It landed on the giant's neck, and stung him repeatedly. But Argus could move quickly for all his size. His huge hand shot up and snatched the gadfly out of the air. He stuffed it in his mouth and calmly ate it, spitting out bits of shell and clots of hair.

The gadfly's attack had fully awakened the giant. All his eyes were open now, all glaring at Hermes. The slender god realized his peril. His ankle wings fluttered; he rose into the air. But the huge paw of Argus moved more swiftly and caught Hermes' ankle. Locked in the giant's grip, Hermes still tried to fly, but Argus now seized him with two hands. Then calmly, like a child snapping a twig, he broke Hermes' ankle. Then he took the other ankle and broke that too. He flung Hermes to the ground and put his great red foot on the god's chest, pinning him to the grass.

"You gods can't die, I'm told. So what I'm going to do is chop you up into little pieces and scatter them for the gulls. It'll take a while for someone to put you back together."

Argus reached down for Hermes' sword and tried its edge on his thumb. "I really need an ax," he said. "But this will have to do."

These were the last words Argus ever spoke. Cerberus had entered the clearing. Understanding the situation at a glance, he launched himself into the air and hurtled into Argus, hitting him between the shoulders with all his

great weight, knocking him over. Then, with a slashing, sideways lunge of his wolfish middle head, he tore out the giant's furred throat.

Bloody jowled, Cerberus gazed about. The cow who was Io had sunk to her knees and was mooing weakly. Her flanks were raw meat. Hermes had pulled himself up to a sitting position. He was smiling, but his face was wet with tears. When he tried to speak, his voice was laced with sobs.

"Pardon me, brave dog," he said. "But I don't seem to handle pain very well. You see, no one's ever hurt me before. I suppose there's a first time for everything."

"Well, he'll never hurt anyone again," growled Cerberus.

"He broke both my ankles, the brute. I suppose I'm lucky he didn't snap them quite off."

"Will they mend?"

"My cousin Asclepius, son of Apollo, can knit any bone like an old woman mending a woolen garment. But I can't fly, or walk, of course. If you take me on your back to Olympus, I'll be as good as new in three days."

"Then, will you show me the way to Tartarus so that I may visit Delia?"

"Indeed I will," promised Hermes. "But I must warn you: no shade has ever been retrieved from that domain and only those who are ushered there may enter."

"As you say, there's always a first time," said Cerberus. He crouched, and Hermes hobbled onto his back.

"What about that poor cow?" asked Cerberus. "She's suffering."

"Not for long," replied Hermes. "She's not quite what she seems. There's a river nymph locked inside that cow. Evil spells have been at work. But now that Argus is dead, my father, Zeus, will come down, unlock the transformation, and release her from that brute form. Let's go, my friend."

Cerberus loped off with Hermes on his back. The cow gazed forlornly after them.

The Gates of Hell

Charon's boat had many decks, and the ferryman was not beyond bribery. Survivors of the rich—too happy to be thrifty—put money under the corpse's tongue. Two gold coins bought a good spot on the upper deck, where passengers could view the iron-veined, coal- and ruby-studded dome of the Underworld as the ferry crossed the black waters of the River Styx. These upper decks were also half-cowled to shield the solvent dead from the vultures that hung like gulls above the water.

Much to Charon's disgust, the rules of Hades prevented him from selling all the best accommodations on board. Good places had to be reserved for heroes and for others who had somehow pleased the gods. Paupers swam.

But Charon knew how to get something from those who had nothing. He forced the paupers to strip before going into the water. Then he collected their tunics—always well washed and newly mended, because even those too poor to lay the smallest coin in their dead one's mouth would work the night through to provide decent grave clothes.

Cerberus crouched on the bank and watched the ferryboat pull away. Then he plunged into the black waters. They were icy, colder than any he had ever swum, colder even than the northern seas. But he was boiling with impatience and didn't feel the cold. He heard a rush of wings. A vulture dove at him. He bared three sets of teeth; the bird swerved in the air and flew away.

Twisted shapes glided past him, and foul gelatinous things. But Cerberus ignored them; he was intent only on the farther shore. He climbed out of the river, shook himself vigorously, and trotted off toward the tall iron Gates of Hell. To his surprise, they swung open.

Cerberus passed through. He couldn't help wanting to run, but slowed his pace when he realized he didn't know where he was going. He squinted

ahead, peering into the yellow dusk. For light was yellow in this place, not the daffodil yellow of sunlight but a brownish, yellowish, sulfurous murk, like a low ground fog. It was hard to breathe. A great plain lay ahead of him in a breathless hush.

All this time, Hades and Hecate had been following Cerberus at a distance. They couldn't be seen through the brown murk or smelled through the sulfurous vapors. The three-headed dog had no idea anyone was trailing him, anyone watching.

"Isn't he a magnificent brute?" whispered Hades. "Won't he make a matchless watchdog?"

"Most vicious-looking thing I've ever seen," whispered Hecate. "Do you think he can be broken to our service?"

"His training starts right now," said Hades. "Call your Harpies."

Hecate raised her voice in an owl-screech. Cerberus heard the sharp call cutting through the mist. Again he heard the rush of wings. His hackles rose as he recognized Harpies diving toward him. Several brass-winged young hags swooped over him like great hawks, brass claws gleaming, swinging whips whose lashes were the tails of stingrays edged with spines sharper than any thorns. Cerberus knew that one blow of these tails could strip flesh off bone.

The Harpies swooped lower. Cerberus did not wait for them to reach him. He leaped into the air to attack them. Hades and Hecate had studied his big frame and had some idea of his strength, but they did not know the power of his rage when he saw the Harpies. For he associated them with Delia's death. It had been a Harpy who had lured him away so that the murderer could strike the unguarded child. And, while he had known the enormous pleasure of tearing out Argus's throat, there were still Harpies to avenge himself upon.

His blood turned to particles of fire coursing through his veins. Rage was flame, and it filled him. He felt that he was breathing fire like a dragon. He leaped so high he seemed to be floating. The Harpies felt the heat of his great body; it was like a burning torch flung at them. But these savage young hags flinched at nothing. They flung themselves at him in the air, swinging their stingray whips. The lashes cut him. He bled. But the wetness of the blood was cool and pleasant on his burning body.

Three pairs of jaws closed upon three Harpies, dragging them to earth. Cerberus whirled, swinging the Harpies around and around him, using them as three clubs to beat off the others who were diving toward him. The heads of the Harpies he held shattered themselves against their sisters. Hard skulls broke bones, arms, legs, rib cages, as they smashed against each other. The dog kept whirling until six broken Harpies lay moaning on the ground.

Cerberus didn't stop to study them. He knew they were dead or dying. Nor was his battle done. He was in the grip of his greatest talent. He was in a fighting fever, in an ecstasy of combat. He knew there was something else coming at him, something big. He knew it before it happened and was ready when it did.

Two giant serpents loomed in the mist. Hades had whistled them up when he saw the Harpies fall. Hades and Hecate watched in disbelief. The dog seemed to be frisking like a puppy, almost dancing on his paws as the serpents came toward him. Indeed the sight of their huge, scaly bodies had reminded him of his mother, and how as a pup he had frisked with her as she cast her coils about him.

These were giant serpents, each thirty feet long, with jaws hinged in the middle of their bodies. Each, in fact, was a living gullet lined with teeth.

They slithered toward him. They were in no hurry. Nothing ever escaped them. Again, the dog did not wait. He charged toward one of them, which opened its jaws. Cerberus leaped. He hurtled over the serpent's head, landing at its tail. Seized the tail in his bull-dog jaws, braced his feet, and began to whirl the snake like a gigantic whip. Then he cracked that whip, breaking the serpent's spine. The creature went limp. Cerberus leaped again and landed on the other serpent's back. Three heads struck. They bit through polished, leathery scales, through flesh and sinew. The creature was too long and too thick to die all at once. But its head was dead and its jaws slack before the tail stopped lashing.

Cerberus leaped off, unfatigued. His rage was quenched. He did not linger among his fallen enemies; his most important task still lay before him. He trotted off.

The smell of sulfur faded; the fog still lingered, but it had turned gray and felt cooler. Cerberus didn't know it, but he was approaching the vast, changeless place called Limbo. He walked among tall, pale, scentless flowers. He had come upon the Field of Asphodel where floated the misty

forms of those who had been sent to Limbo. They were ghosts but not restless. Their fires banked, they had neither memory nor hope; their pale vitality was just enough to make them visible.

He didn't know where he was, but he knew Delia was there. He didn't see her through the fog. He couldn't smell her; he smelled only the mist. But somehow he knew she was there.

Delia was in that field, drifting in a kind of coma that was not pain, certainly not joy, but a nullity, tinged with longing. Cerberus walked slowly toward her. His six eyes fixed on her, trying to determine what she was now. Her own eyes were still green, he saw, but dulled, like pebbles taken out of the water. Her face was blurred. Her hair floated though there was no wind.

Cerberus licked her face. His tongue passed through it. He tasted only a faint salty dampness, like that of tears. A triple sob broke from him. He crouched, whimpering.

"She's dead," said a voice.

Cerberus whirled, snarling. He saw a tall, black-robed figure holding an ebony staff topped with an enormous ruby. He knew it was Hades.

"I've been waiting for a long time to welcome you to my realm," said Hades. "But I must say you're hardly an ideal guest. You have drastically reduced my staff: six prime Harpies and two splendid serpents, almost impossible to replace."

"Let her go," growled Cerberus.

"Not even a please?"

"Please let her go."

"The dead are not returned to life," said Hades. "That simply does not happen."

"She wasn't ready to die. You stole her from life. You sent Argus to kill her. Now I have killed six of your Harpies and two of your splendid, irreplaceable serpents. If you do not let this child return with me, I shall harrow Hell. I shall run rampant, killing, destroying every one of your creatures. Oh, I know that your legions of demons, your tamed monsters, your echelons of Harpies will finally prevail. But is it really worth it to you to keep a little girl who will cost you so much?"

"As you say, my creatures will prevail," said Hades.

"If you won't release her, I shall do you as much harm as I can," said Cerberus.

“Perhaps we can strike a bargain,” said Hades. “If you serve me for a certain time, serve me well, guarding my portals, allowing no shade to escape, or living creature to enter—then, when your stint is done, I’ll let the child go.”

“How long must I serve?”

“A thousand years ... which in our time is not too long, not at all.”

“But she’s human,” growled Cerberus. “It will seem long for her.”

“She *was* human; she’s a shade now,” answered Hades. “She exists beyond time. She will be the same in a thousand years as she is now. But this discussion has gone on long enough. Do you accept, or refuse?”

“I accept,” growled Cerberus. “And you, will you keep your promise?”

“By my honor as a god, by my dignity as a king, and by the waters of the Styx—which is an unbreakable oath—I swear to you that if you serve me for a thousand years, your Delia will be restored to you alive.”

“I’ll start right now,” said Cerberus. “I don’t want this to take a minute more than a thousand years.”

He turned to Delia, but she had vanished among the asphodel.

The Three-Headed Sentinel

Cerberus kept his pledge. For the next thousand years he served Hades, guarding the tall iron Gates of Hell, keeping the dead in and the living out. On only three occasions did he fail his duty: the first time to let a loving wife through.

She was Alcestis, a beautiful young queen, who had come to offer her own life to redeem that of her dead husband. At first Cerberus, for all her impassioned pleading, barred the way. But then at the sight of her lovely grief-wracked face and the sound of her voice throbbing with tears, he remembered his own grief at Delia's death and let her pass.

Upon the second occasion, it was a widower who trespassed. The young husband was Orpheus, the great minstrel who had invented the seven-stringed lyre and drew such ravishing melodies from it that trees would pull themselves out of the earth and hobble on their roots to follow him as he played. Wild beasts and gentle beasts would come out of the forest to stand in a circle listening, at peace with each other.

Orpheus had come to reclaim his young bride, Eurydice. "She was taken from me before we were married three days," he told Cerberus. "Abducted and foully murdered. I shall go in there and ask Hades to return her to me. If he does, I shall sing his praises from now until the day I die, sing them so eloquently that he, the most hated god, shall become the most beloved. Let me through, good dog."

Cerberus wanted to, but was afraid that if he did so, Hades would consider the pact broken and refuse to release Delia when the time came. All three heads snarled in warning, but gently.

Orpheus said nothing. He unslung his lyre and began to play, singing as he touched the strings. He sang not of his own grief but a happy song. A hound song, a hunting song. As he sang, Cerberus saw the iron gates

vanish; they melted into a misty meadow—and happy young hounds yapping with eagerness as the hunt began. He dreamed of being such a dog, a normal dog with one head, running through the dappled shade of the forest, chasing a stag as dogs are meant to do. And as the song wove the enchanted forest about him, he pictured Delia, a young huntress, running at his side shouting with joy.

Cerberus whimpered, twitched, and fell into a deep sleep.

“Thank you,” said Orpheus, and carefully skirting the great form, passed through the Gates of Hell.

Hercules was the third one to pass the three-headed dog. His whole life was spent doing things that others could not. But how he entered Tartarus belongs to another story—to be soon told—of the monster Geryon.

Some say that Hades kept his promise and released Delia’s spirit, which immediately started to grow a new body just like the one Argus had killed. Cerberus, of course, followed her out of Tartarus, lived with her, and guarded her until she grew up. Then he guarded her husband and her children, who were the safest children anywhere.

But others say that Hades, who lied as naturally as he breathed, never had any intention of keeping his promise, that Delia’s shade remained in Limbo. Cerberus waited and waited and waited, keeping his promise, watching over the Gates of Hell—waited so diligently, so hopelessly, that his heads became specialized, were no longer three complete heads but three crania that divided the senses. The middle head had eyes but no ears or nose. The right-hand head had ears but no eyes or nose. And the head on the left had neither eyes nor ears; it was a blind snout tipped with quivering nostrils. But each had kept its huge jaws and dagger teeth.

Which tale is true? Who can know the truth about what happened so long ago? Unless, perhaps, as some say, time runs in a circle, and what has happened keeps happening.

What is certain is that the heart still dances at the sight of dogs and children, and when they play at dusk, it’s hard to count heads.

THE CHIMAERA

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For our bonus grandson
JESSE CLINTON
and a handsome bonus he is.

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Characters

Monster

The Chimaera A dreadful creature composed of lion, goat, and
(ky MEE ruh) serpent, in the worst possible combination

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods
(ZOOS)

Poseidon Zeus's brother, God of the Sea
(poh SY duhn)

Demeter Goddess of the Harvest
(duh MEE tuhr)

Mortals

Bellerophon

(buh LAIR uh fuhn) A young hero; son of Poseidon

Eurymede

(yoo RIM uh dee) Bellerophon's mother; dead, but still active

Melicertes

(mehl uh SUR teez) King of Corinth

Anteia

(an TY yuh) Queen of Tiryns; Bellerophon's cousin

Iobates

(eye OB a teez) Anteia's father; king of Lycia

Proetus

(proh EE tuhs) Anteia's husband; king of Tiryns

Thallo

(THUH loh) A poet

Pirate Captain A sea-bandit of Lycia

The Oracle A blind seer

Animals

Sea Mist A great gray stallion

Pegasus
(PEG uh suhs) A winged white horse

**Other horses of
Corinth** Owned by Melicertes and trained to be lethal

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The Chimaera

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Monster and Monarch

It was a clear, hot morning, but the Lycians were frozen with horror. The Chimaera had appeared in their skies and was hovering overhead. One chieftain tried to hearten his people.

“It won’t land here,” he said. “It’s on its way to Corinth. For monsters are sent to punish wicked kings. And who is more wicked than Melicertes?”

While he was still insisting that the monster was going elsewhere, it swooped down on the village and devoured the entire population—men, women, and children; then it proceeded to the next village and ate everyone there, but more slowly. Whereupon, it flew heavily toward the mountains, and didn’t go to Corinth at all.

As for the hopeful chieftain, he had attacked the Chimaera as soon as it touched ground, struck one blow with his sword and disappeared down the smoky gullet before he had time to realize how little he knew about monsters.

Now, as the Chimaera flies eastward, we go west—to that bridge of land known as Corinth that connects the land masses of Arcadia and Boeotia. This rich kingdom was ruled by Melicertes the Malevolent, whose reputation for evil had spread to all the lands of the Middle Sea basin.

Melicertes bred horses; he fattened his coffers by betting vast sums on himself in chariot races. This kind of sport was the favorite pastime of ancient royalty, and Melicertes never lost a race. Nor did he depend on the speed of his horses; he had trained them to be killers.

Whenever a rival chariot threatened to pass his, Melicertes would whistle in a certain way; his steeds would swerve in their traces and attack the other team like a pack of wolves, throwing them into a panic, causing them to bolt frantically in the wrong direction. Then, bugling and snorting and

tossing their manes, the Corinthian team would gallop off again, pulling the royal chariot across the finish line.

Early in the history of these races, one defeated driver claimed a foul. But protests were cut short by the sudden death of the complainant. An arrow sticking out of his throat aroused certain suspicions, but no one was prepared to accuse the king of foul play, nor did anyone ever again protest a Melicertes victory.

The king had brought his horses to this pitch of viciousness by raising them on a diet of raw meat. As soon as the foals stopped drinking mare's milk, they were fed bloody hunks of beef and pork. When they became yearlings, they were introduced to forbidden food. Into the stalls of the gigantic colts were thrown those unfortunate enough to have offended the king, who was easily offended. This diet also saved the cost of jailers and hangmen. Every crime was punishable by death; a crime was whatever the king said it was; and there was a steady supply of human flesh for the royal stables.

So the king prospered as a charioteer; his only problem was keeping help. But he solved this in his own way. Since his particular administration of justice left many orphans, he formed them into a labor pool to be tapped whenever he needed a new groom or stable boy.

The Smallest Archer

Melicertes was about forty-five, and had already run through nine wives. No one knew what he did with them; they simply vanished. As soon as he discarded one, he would choose another—no older than eighteen and always the most beautiful maiden in the land. No girl dared refuse him, and if she were so inclined her parents would overrule her. For anyone who crossed the king became horse fodder.

Naturally, people wondered what happened to the ex-wives, but didn't dare discuss it. In fact, they hardly dared *think* about it. For they feared the king so much that they believed he could read minds at a distance—that anyone who entertained any critical opinion of royal behavior would soon find himself being fed to the horses.

For all the secrecy and terror that surrounded Melicertes, however, there was one rumor that stubbornly refused to fade away. It was said that some years before, after only five wives, the king had been refused by a girl whom he wished to make his sixth. She couldn't marry him, she had said, because she was already the bride of the sea. A year before, Poseidon had ridden in on a tidal wave, swept her up, and carried her away, then returned her to her village the next day. When the king refused to believe her, she produced an infant, who, she said, was Poseidon's son. Melicertes still refused to accept her story, and insisted that she be his. She fled. He pursued. She raced to the edge of a cliff and flung herself into the sea. The king, enraged, was about to throw the baby in after her, but something stopped him.

"I'm not quite sure there are such things as gods," he said to himself. "I've never seen any, and I dislike the idea that anything can be more powerful than I am. Nevertheless, I'm not certain that they don't exist, and there's no use taking unnecessary chances. If there should be a sea god

named Poseidon, he might be annoyed with me. And if this child is really his, as she said, I'll only make things worse by drowning it. My kingdom is an isthmus, after all, and a sea god, no doubt, can whistle up a storm whenever he pleases and bury this strip of land under fathoms of water. So I think I'll assume that Poseidon exists and try to appease him by raising his brat as my own."

So the king had the gray-eyed babe taken to the palace and dropped among a horde of other motherless princes and princesses who romped through the royal park, wild as bear cubs. The little boy was nameless at first. Then the other children began to call him Bellerophon.

He was as friendly and affectionate as a puppy. His one ambition was to grow big enough to join the violent play of the older children. They played outdoors from morning till night, and their favorite game was "War."

Each morning, the biggest and strongest appointed themselves chiefs and chose up sides. Armed with wooden swords and blunted javelins, the little warriors would then rage over the fields and into the woods in whatever form of the game they had picked that day—"Ambush," "Pitched Battle," or "Siege." They played rough. Any bruise or cut was a badge of honor, and no child ever complained. The king approved of these games. They were good training for the real thing. He chose his young officers from among his sons. He also watched for symptoms of dangerous ambition. A prince who showed signs of aspiring to kingship simply vanished, and no one asked why. The Corinthians had learned not to.

Now, little Bellerophon couldn't wait to be chosen in a game of "War." He hung about the outskirts of the battles, watching everything, picking favorites among the players, and studying their weapon play. Finally, one day, a boy slightly older than he sprained his ankle, leaving the sides uneven. Bellerophon's heart began to gallop as the chiefs counted their troops. He almost burst with joy when one of them beckoned to him and ordered: "You! Get out here!"

Bellerophon was prepared. Ever since he could toddle he had been getting himself ready for this glorious day. He had made himself a little bow and a quiver of arrows. The chief guffawed when he saw the tiny bow and the arrows no bigger than darts.

"What are you going to do with that?" he cried. "Shoot grasshoppers?"

Bellerophon grinned at him, and darted off, so swiftly that it seemed he had been swallowed by the meadow. He lay in the tall grass amid the buzz and click of insects. Notching his arrow to his bow, he pointed it straight up, and waited.

It was a drowsy place, full of sleepy sounds. Bellerophon was lying on his back, but he had never felt more awake. For the enemy's natural line of advance was across this meadow, and he knew that he was invisible. He waited. Then he heard someone yelling. He raised himself enough to take a quick peek, then sank back into the grass.

They were coming—in a long skirmish line. The grass trembled; insects departed. He drew back his arrow until the bow was bent double. And when the charging boy stumbled over him, stared down in astonishment, and then raised his wooden sword, Bellerophon released the bowstring. His arrow hit the attacker under the chin. Had it worn a sharp head it would have pierced the boy's throat. As it was, it knocked him to the ground, making him gasp for breath.

“You're dead!” cried Bellerophon. “Take yourself out.”

The fallen boy picked himself up and staggered away, dazed. Bellerophon snatched up his arrow and notched it again—just in time. Someone else was coming. He shot him too. Then another. And another. Nestling like an adder in the meadow grass, he stung fifteen of the enemy with his little arrows, knocking them out of the game, and sealing victory for his side.

It was upon this day that he earned his name, Bellerophon, which meant “archer.”

The Horse-Breaker

Poseidon, it is said, created the first horse as a gift for Demeter, and had always loved the animal. For himself he kept a string of white-maned stallions, which he rode at full gallop when the sea was rough. So it was that all his sons were ardent horsemen, could gentle the most vicious steed, and ride anything that moved. And now his smallest son was growing up among the mob of children sired by Melicertes.

Bellerophon was the youngest of this child swarm and different in other ways. They were not especially unkind to him, his adopted brothers and sisters, but they didn't completely accept him either. Bellerophon didn't let this bother him, though. While delighted when they played with him, he was nevertheless quite satisfied with his own company when left alone. In fact, he welcomed these hours of solitude, for he was making certain plans, which he preferred to keep to himself.

These schemes became the pivot of his lonely hours, and, finally, the theme of his young life. What happened was that he had become fascinated by the king's horses and had determined to ride them.

Paddock and stables had never been declared off limits to the royal children. No one ever dreamed of going anywhere near the man-eating horses if he could help it. This paddock was no small fenced area. It was an open range, acres of grassland girded by the great circular track where the chariot races were run. The stallions roamed as freely as a wild herd; actually, they were almost wild, broken only to chariot work and obeying only the king.

One big meadow held a stand of apple trees, however, and Bellerophon had chosen this place for his own. He could climb like a squirrel. In a flash, he was off the ground, up a trunk and balancing on a huge limb. Here he

would perch for hours, watching the horses—gazing rapturously as they ran free, studying them intently when the king came out to work them.

The boy was a natural mimic. He amused himself by imitating the call of lark and thrush and the hectoring crow. He also taught himself to whistle exactly as the king did when summoning the horses or ordering them to attack.

All this time, an intention was ripening within him—crowding his heart, following him into the night, and painting pictures on the walls of sleep. Finally, one day, the idea hatched.

He waited in his tree, trying to stifle his impatience until the king had finished his morning's work with the horses and departed. The boy filled his pouch with apples, waiting until he was sure the king was out of earshot. Then he whistled the piercing whistle that meant "Come!"

The nearest horse, a huge reddish brown colt, swiveled the keg of its head and rolled its eyes. The boy whistled again. The horse arched its neck, whisked its tail, and pranced sideways, then turned and trotted toward the sound.

The horse came under the apple tree. Lightly as a leaf, the boy dropped down onto its back. But the colt had never been ridden. It bolted through the orchard, brushing against tree trunks, trying to knock the boy off. But Bellerophon drew one leg up, then the other, and finally sat cross-legged, riding this awful power as comfortably as a petrel bobbing on a stormy sea.

The colt burst through the orchard and entered the open meadow—bucking, sunfishing, landing jarringly on stiff legs, trying to get rid of its weird little burden. The boy felt no fear. This was where he belonged. Not for a moment did he consider that he might be thrown, smashing his head against a rock; or that the great jaws might catch his leg and tear it off; or that the furious horse might roll over on him, crushing him beneath its enormous weight.

No, nothing bad would happen. They were bound in a dance. The boy's small body was adjusting itself to the huge one. They were connected by a secret bond, throbbing with life. The colt didn't know it yet. It was slower to know things. But it would learn. It had to. He loved the animal too much for it not to become aware.

He perched on the raging animal and laughed with joy. The colt bugled suddenly, as if answering his laughter, then reared on its hind legs, pawing

the air with its forehooves. Bellerophon clung to its mane. The horse came down with a jolt, stood on braced forelegs, and kicked out its back hooves in a terrific whiplash movement. But the boy was part of the horse now; he could not be thrown.

The colt's neck was satiny with sweat, wrapping the boy in its fragrance. The animal's strength was entering him, nourishing his courage, tuning his reflexes. He pulled an apple from his pouch, clasped the horse's neck with his legs, and slid around, hanging upside down with his face under the horse's mouth. He thrust the apple between its huge teeth, and twisted away, perching again on its wide back.

The beast ate the sweet fruit. It stood stock still, crunching. Bellerophon leaped off, stood before the animal and thrust another apple into its jaws, then another. The great, glossy wild eyes looked into his. The big head sank. The velvet lips began to nuzzle at him, searching for apples.

The boy turned his back and began to walk away. The colt reached again, seized the belt of his tunic between its teeth, swung the boy off the ground, and flipped him into the air. Bellerophon turned a backward somersault and landed on the horse's back. He stood there for a moment, laughing. When he slid to riding position, the colt trotted off.

The sun was sinking behind them now and cast a great humped shadow that swung before them as they moved toward the rest of the herd.

The Warning

For the next year, Bellerophon visited the horses every day, and, one by one, mastered them all. He was able to do all this without being observed, for everyone shunned the royal paddock except the king and whatever stable help had survived the month.

Finally, however, another craving began to gnaw at the boy. He found himself wanting everyone to know that he alone could manage these terrifying animals. He pictured himself riding toward the other children just as they were choosing up sides for the war game—riding in on one of the great stallions, vaulting on and off its back at a full gallop, doing handstands on its back, sliding around its neck and feeding it apples, performing all these marvelous tricks as the other children gaped in wonder.

How they would admire him! How they would fight among themselves for the privilege of being on his team. Why, he would be named a squadron of cavalry all by himself. His heart swelled with these visions of glory; it got so that he couldn't sleep.

One night he grew so excited that he sat bolt upright in bed, preparing to dash out into the moonlight, race to the stables, and ride one of the horses right up the palace steps and among the sleeping children.

"How wonderful," he whispered to himself. "They'll think they're dreaming, but then realize they're awake. I'll laugh and ride away, and in the morning they won't know whether I'm a dream or not."

Moonlight shifted through the arrow-slit that served as a window for his little chamber. The light curdled, thickened, lengthened itself—became a tall milky form. It lifted its arms and threw back its cowl. He saw a fall of dark hair and a pale sliver of face.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"I am your mother."

“She’s dead.”

“I am her ghost.”

“Why do you come?” he asked.

“I love you.”

“But you’re dead.”

“Love outlasts death. It is what troubles our repose and makes us walk the earth again.”

“Why haven’t you come before?” asked Bellerophon.

“I am permitted to appear to you only when you are to be warned,” said the ghost. “Hush now, and listen. I can stay only a brief time and must speak my message only once.”

I am your mother,
a bride of the sea.
You have no other,
only me.

“Who is my father, then?” asked the boy. “Is it Melicertes?”

Not Melicertes,
of a certainty.
Your father,
rather,
is Lord of the Sea.

“Poseidon?” cried the boy. “Master of Tides? Who created the horse?”

Indeed, ’twas he
who made the horse, and gave you mastery.
But that skill you must hide
oh Son of the Tide.
Let no one know
how well you ride.

“But why, mother? I’m proud of it.”

“That pride can be fatal, my boy,” said the ghost.

Hide, hide, hide your pride;
let no one know
how well you ride.
Or the killer king
will do again
what he loves to do,
And the royal ax will fall on you.

The boy sat silently.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Will you heed my words?”

“Yes ... yes. Why are you fading?”

“I am leaving,” said the ghost.

“No! Please! Stay!”

“Will you come again?”

“Perhaps. Farewell, my lovely boy. Farewell!”

She faded, vanished. The boy’s tear-stained face caught the last ghostly light. He had never cried before. He wiped his eyes angrily, and sat staring into the shadows.

The Tormented Land

Of those unfortunate enough to encounter the Chimaera, few lived to tell about it. And those who did manage to escape while it was devouring their neighbors were so stupefied by terror that they were unable to describe the monster.

Some said it was half dragon, half ram. Others said it was a flying lion, but with an eagle's head. Still others spoke of a winged serpent. All agreed, however, that it was a combination of at least two huge beasts, that it flew, that it spat flame, and that it was capable of devouring an entire village at a single meal.

Sifting through all these tales after some four thousand years, it is now thought that the monster which plagued Lycia had a lion's head and chest, a lion's teeth and claws, and the torso of a giant goat, with a tail that became a serpent, giving the beast jaws at both ends. It had leathery wings like a dragon, and a dragon's ability to spit fire. Of all the monsters spawned since the beginning of time, the Chimaera had perhaps the biggest appetite and the smallest intelligence.

No one knew why the Chimaera had chosen Lycia as its hunting ground. But during the years when Bellerophon was growing up in Corinth, the monster nested in the Lycian mountains and devastated the hillside villages. Then, when the hills were eaten bare, it flew out to ravage the coastal towns.

The king, Iobates, a kindly man, was so bewildered and grief-stricken by what was happening to his once happy people that he thought of offering his own life to appease whatever god was punishing his land. His wife and daughters pleaded with him not to sacrifice himself, but his decision grew stronger with each new report of a village destroyed. He was hesitating only because he couldn't decide which god would be the most likely to accept

the sacrifice. Iobates consulted seven priests. Each of them named a different god or goddess, which left him more confused than ever.

“Since it’s impossible to learn who’s punishing us,” he thought, “I’ll go right to the top, and put myself to the sword at the altar of the Almighty Zeus, who rules all the gods.”

He returned to the palace to bid farewell to his family, but his youngest daughter, Anteia, clutched him, crying, “No, father, you must not!”

“Indeed, I must,” he said.

“No, no, please listen. A dream visited me last night. No ordinary one but a vision from on high. I saw a monster in the sky breathing fire. The thatched roofs were burning. People ran, screaming. The beast came lower. Then the clouds broke, and light poured down. It turned to a spear of light and pierced the body of the monster like a fisherman gaffing a fish. The monster turned into black smoke and vanished, leaving the sky clear. A voice spoke, saying, ‘Tell your father not to despair. A hero is being prepared to slay the foul beast.’ Then I woke. But father, father, I believe that vision, I believe that voice. You must have faith, for help is on its way.”

“A hero is being prepared to save us, is that what your voice said?” asked the king.

“Yes.”

“Well,” said Iobates. “Whoever’s preparing him better do so quickly or there won’t be anything for him to save.”

“Please, father, please. Have faith.”

Now, the king had six daughters, some of them quite silly, and he was not prone to put much stock in anything they said. But this youngest daughter, Anteia, was far brighter than her sisters, as well as more beautiful, and the king loved her very much. While not quite believing in her dream, he was moved by her tears, and promised her he would not sacrifice himself, at least not immediately.

“I’m grateful for one thing,” he said to himself. “She is betrothed to the king of Tiryns, and while she’s much too good for him, will at least be safe at his court. I’ll hasten the marriage.”

The Blind Seer

During the years that the boy Bellerophon was ripening into manhood, King Melicertes was ripening into madness. He had always been cruel, had always been ruthless to his enemies, but such traits were not unusual among the rulers of that time, when the words *king* and *tyrant* were virtually synonymous. Melicertes, perhaps, was more cruel than other kings—more ruthless, certainly more dramatic; his man-eating horses were notorious throughout the Middle Sea basin. But, of late, his suspicions had grown into a frenzy.

He saw enemies everywhere and ordered so many executions that he couldn't use his horses on his prisoners; they would have grown too fat to race. So he kept his ax-men busy, cutting off heads. Nevertheless, this wholesale butchery did not ease his fears. He couldn't shake off the feeling that he was threatened—by what or whom he did not know, but he knew the threat was growing.

Finally, Melicertes consulted an oracle, although he had never believed in them. Word had come to him of a man who had gained a reputation for holiness by plucking out his own eyes, so that, as he said, he might listen without distraction to what the gods were trying to say. People flocked to this man, and were amazed at the accuracy of his predictions.

Melicertes did not send for this oracle; he wanted to test him. He doffed his crown, cast off his rich garments, ordered his royal guard to stay behind, and, in the guise of an ordinary horse breeder, visited the blind seer.

The old man turned the empty sockets of his eyes upon him, and said, "You are welcome, king. What do you want to know?"

It was not the king's nature to allow himself to be impressed; he tried hard now not to be. "Ah, bah," he thought to himself, "so he knows I'm a king, is that remarkable? I can change my clothes, but I cannot cast off my

royal bearing or muffle the impact of my regal personality. It is so powerful that even a blind man recognizes me.”

Aloud, he said, “I’ve heard great things about you. You read the future, I understand, as clearly as though it has already happened.”

“True,” said the blind man. “In fact, our future is embedded in our past. How could it not be? Time is circular. Or, more accurately, our lives spiral around the fixed point of what we are. We are our own fate. We lift ourselves out of the darkness of pre-birth into a brief light, making and unmaking ourselves as we travel toward the final darkness.”

“Very fine,” said the king. “Actually, I don’t have much of a head for philosophy. I prefer facts. Can you tell me who threatens me, and why?”

“There are so many ‘whys,’” said the seer. “You have created a multitude of corpses, O king. If you were to multiply each corpse by the number of those who had loved that person, alive, you might calculate the number of potential assassins you have made for yourself. But numbers don’t matter. Like all of us, you are allowed only one death, and should concern yourself only with the assassin who will succeed.”

“Then there is one!” roared the king. “Who is he? Tell me quickly, on pain of death.”

The blind man sighed and pointed to his empty sockets. “Do you really think I fear pain, O king? When I tore out my own eyes I freed myself from the fear of physical pain as I freed myself from the distractions of the visible world. You cannot threaten me.”

“Please,” whispered the king, “I implore you. I, who have never begged for anything in my life, am begging now. Tell me the name of my assassin.”

“I can tell you this,” said the oracle. “You have fashioned your own death. It waits for you. And will be presented to you by one who comes from the sea.”

After leaving the seer, Melicertes did some hard thinking. “Can I believe that pompous old charlatan? What did he say, after all? My death will come from the sea. What kind of prophecy is that? We’re all pirate-kings in this part of the world. Our death usually comes from the sea, even as our wealth does.”

So the king strode toward the stables, trying to reassure himself. But he wasn’t able to. He couldn’t shake off the memory of those empty sockets

fixed on him, and the deep quiet voice saying, “You have devised your own death, Melicertes.”

He entered the paddock and worked the horses for a while, but stopped sooner than was his custom. They were off their feed, sluggish and irritable. One stallion actually snapped at him. He did not return to the palace. He walked along the chariot course, trying to recall his greatest triumphs. But they would not come. All he saw were the puckered red sockets staring at him, the bony hand, gesturing.

“Let me approach this another way,” he told himself. “Let me examine the prophecy as if it contained some truth. My death will come from the sea. He couldn’t have meant that I was to perish in some ordinary sea battle or drown in a tidal wave. He must have meant something special. Some doom springing from one of my own actions. Accursed old wizard! I should have drawn my dagger and finished him off then and there. Why didn’t I? Actually, it’s tricky, killing oracles. Some of them claim to enjoy the special patronage of the gods.”

Then, suddenly, Melicertes was swept by the feeling that he had thought this same thought before—that he had decided to kill someone and had been stopped by the same fear of divine reprisal.

“Yes!” he cried. “I remember! It was when I was about to throw that babe off the cliff after his stubborn mother—but I held back because she had said he was the son of a god. Poseidon’s son! That’s it! Of course ... that brat that I took into my home and raised as my own, the one they call Bellerophon, is sea-spawned; it is he who plans my death. *He* is the death from the sea. Well, I’ll turn that prophecy upside down. I’ll be his death before he’s mine.”

And the king stumped off to find Bellerophon.

The Mad King

Bellerophon saw him approaching. The man's lips were writhing in a horrible way, and he realized that the king was trying to smile. The youth had had little acquaintance with fear. But now he felt something strange clutching at his windpipe. He knew that he was in mortal danger. Suspicion hardened to certainty as the smirking king came closer and dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Greetings, young fellow," said Melicertes.

"Greetings, majesty."

"We haven't had much conversation together, you and I. Royal business presses hard, you know. And I may have been neglecting my household a bit. But now I intend to pay more attention to my sons and heirs. Tell me something about yourself, lad—your likes and dislikes, your hopes and disappointments."

"It's very good of you, sir," stammered Bellerophon, "to take such an interest."

"Well, I'm a family man at heart. And there's something about you that attracts my special attention. Tell me, do you like horses?"

"No, your majesty, I do not. I'm fond of animals in general, but not of horses."

"I see.... Is it because of the unusual reputation my stock has gained?"

"Frankly, sire, I'm afraid of them. We all are."

"I'm sorry to hear that. For I have planned a series of chariot races, pitting me against each of my sons, beginning with you."

"With me?" asked Bellerophon.

"I have to start somewhere, and I have decided to start with the youngest, who happens to be you."

"Well ... I'm honored. But ..."

“In my kingdom, you see, the eldest son does not automatically inherit the throne. I intend to choose my own successor. To do it fairly I mean to test the mettle of my heirs one by one, starting, as I say, with you.”

“But sire, what kind of race could I put up? I’d be too frightened to harness those great savage beasts, let alone drive them.”

“My boy,” said Melicertes, “let me give you a little advice. The thing most to be feared in Corinth is displeasing the king. And it is my pleasure now, Bellerophon, to ask you to pick a team of horses out of my stock, and prepare to pit your chariot against mine. The race shall take place seven days hence, when the sun reaches midpoint between noon and dusk. Do you understand?”

“I understand. I shall do as you ask. But I can’t promise you an interesting race.”

“Just be there, and ready. I assure you I shall enjoy myself.”

“Thank you for the opportunity to demonstrate my mettle,” said Bellerophon.

“Thank me after the race,” said the king.

A Gathering Doom

Almost dusk, and the day was dying bloodily. The huge disk of the sun dipped into the sea, coloring it with drowned fires—crimson, fading to pink, turning to purple and gold. Bellerophon wandered along the beach, trying to think of a way to survive the king’s sudden attention.

“Through the years, I have become fairly familiar with the methods used by our murderous ruler,” he mused. “Now if I can only guess which one he means to use on me I may have a chance of staying alive. Let’s see, what’s the first victim I remember? The king of Arcadia, who protested being fouled in a race; why he was simply shot from ambush by one of the royal archers. That’s one way he might get rid of me. If so, though, why would Melicertes be proposing all this rigmarole of a chariot race? No, he probably won’t call on his archers. After all, for a prince of Corinth to be killed by an arrow shot from ambush might give the general public ideas about how to get rid of royalty. I should think he would want my death to appear an accident. And, of course, racing a chariot against him is a classic way for accidents to happen.

“There was the king of Thessaly, for example, whose wheel rolled off in mid-course, hurling him from his chariot and breaking his neck. If anyone suspected that Melicertes had arranged for an axle pin to be removed before the race ... well, such suspicions are not voiced in Corinth. I’ll make sure to examine my wheels very carefully before the race begins.

“Perhaps he plans a simpler way, though. For the horses to turn on me when I try to harness them. For my unfortunate demise to occur before the race is even underway. Yes, he may well choose that method. For, thanks to my mother’s wise ghost, I have kept my horsemanship a secret; the king, despite all his spies, knows nothing of it.

“But no! Something tells me it would be fatal to expect him to do the obvious. He may not know about me and the horses, but he has a brute cunning that has made him the most successful, most lethal tyrant of his time. I sense that he will try some other way. But what way? I feel a doom gathering about me, and I can’t seem to think my way out.”

Bellerophon kept pacing the water’s edge, mulling things over. “Perhaps,” he said to himself, “I’m doing too much thinking. This can be fatal. Here I stroll under a kindling sky, admiring the changing colors of the sea, trying to guess which unexpected thing the king plans for me when I should be preparing some unexpected things myself. That’s always the key to victory—to surprise the enemy, to move before he does. It’s more my style, anyway.” And before he could think better of it, Bellerophon ran off to find the king.

Hooves of Death

He found the king in his throne room, affixing a massive ruby to the end of his ivory scepter. Melicertes looked up as the youth approached and watched him out of eyes as cold and black as a lizard's.

"What a magnificent stone," murmured Bellerophon.

"It's just like the one used by Minos," said the king. "He was an early ruler of Crete, and the monarch I most admire. The knob of his scepter was a blood-red ruby so that he might bash in the skull of whoever displeased him without staining the gem."

"Excuse me for interrupting your statesmanlike labors, your majesty, but something has been weighing on my conscience."

"Conscience?" said Melicertes. "That's a luxury no king can afford. If you hope to rule, my boy, you had better get rid of yours."

"Thank you for your good counsel," said Bellerophon. "You are as wise as you are generous. But what has been bothering me is that in the matter of this chariot race, you are being unfair to yourself."

"Unfair to myself? That doesn't sound like me. What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, you are of—imposing physique. You must outweigh me by fifty pounds, sixty perhaps. That will give my horses less to pull, of course, and put you at a disadvantage in the race."

The king studied the lad silently. Finally he spoke: "You're a curious chap. How is it you are concerned about some weight advantage instead of worrying about being eaten by my horses? Everyone fears them; don't you?"

Bellerophon hesitated a moment, then said: "I do fear them, but I don't think they'll eat me. I'm of too salty a flavor."

"What do you mean too salty?" cried the king.

"I am sea-spawned, your majesty. My father is Poseidon."

“Who told you that?” roared the king. “I’ve ordered that no one tell you that.”

“No one did,” said Bellerophon. “No one alive, that is. The ghost of my mother appeared to me and informed me of the circumstances of my birth.”

“She did, did she? And did she inform you of the circumstances of her death?”

“No, sir, she did not.”

“Did she tell you she knew me?”

“I believe she mentioned that you had honored her with your friendship before her departure.”

Bellerophon watched the king closely. He balanced himself on the balls of his feet. His hand, hidden by his tunic, crept toward his dagger. For envenomed recognition was humming between them now. Hatred, like love, was enabling them to read each other’s minds.

“He knows that I know he killed my mother,” thought Bellerophon. “What will he do now—strike me with that scepter or take me to the stables and turn the horses on me?”

He saw the king’s knuckles whiten as he clutched the scepter, and his own fingers found the hilt of his dagger. He breathed a silent prayer: “Poseidon, father, help me now.”

Then Bellerophon spoke aloud, very quickly, almost gabbling. “Since I am no natural son of yours, I have no claim upon the throne, and there is no reason for you to consider me a candidate for kingship—therefore no reason to test my mettle. We may as well call off the race, don’t you think?”

“No,” said the king. “That’s not what I think, not at all. Actually I’m more eager for the race than ever. In fact, we shall go to the stables right now, you and I, and you will choose your horses. It’s not too early to make their acquaintance.”

More than ever inspired by hatred, seeing even more clearly now into the foul cave of the king’s mind, Bellerophon read the scene that was gathering there—man and youth approaching the stalls where the great beasts stood, the king holding a torch, making the shadows dance, his big hand shooting out and striking the lad between the shoulders, shoving him forward so that he stumbled and fell, as the horses raged out of their stalls, eyes rolling, foam flying, teeth glistening.

“You want us to go to the horses now, at night?” he asked, trying to make his voice tremble.

“Right now,” said the king. “Immediately.”

“But won’t they be more irritable, being awakened from sleep? More likely to attack someone they don’t know?”

“What do you care? You’re too salty, you say. They won’t eat you.”

“Well,” said Bellerophon, “they don’t have to accept me just because they find me inedible. They can still batter me to death with their hooves.”

“But I’ll be with you, my boy, introducing you to them. Recommending you to their special consideration. I assure you, they’ll know you well before you leave.”

Crossing the courtyard under a great brass gong of a moon, Bellerophon felt the king’s hand close on his upper arm with brutal force.

“Does he mean to kill me now?” thought the lad. “Bash out my brains with that scepter before we get to the stables? Can I reach my dagger before he strikes?”

But the king did not raise his scepter. He simply marched the slender lad toward the stables. There, it all became what Bellerophon had seen before, pictured in the king’s mind: the massive double doors swinging open, the huge rustling stable, the fragrance of horses, hulking man and slender youth standing silently, staring into the darkness. The only difference was that the king held no torch. Hot yellow moonlight poured through the doors, making the shadows dance.

Bellerophon knew what would happen next. He let his muscles go loose—let himself slip into a kind of alert drowse that cut off his ordinary responses and tuned him, every pore and fiber, to the pent wildness of *Horse*. He felt the king’s hand between his shoulder blades, felt himself being pushed violently.

He went with it, and did not stumble. But stood silently as a pair of stallions burst out of their stalls, rearing, pawing the air with their forehooves, eyes rolling, teeth gleaming.

The king smiled as the great horses obscured the boy. He waited for them to strike down with their forehooves, waited to hear Bellerophon scream.

What he heard was his own strangled voice, gasping “No!”

For the horses had come down gently. Their muzzles nudged the boy’s shoulders. They nuzzled him, whickering softly.

The king let out a piercing scream. For Bellerophon was pointing at him, and the horses had turned and were glaring with utter ferocity—with that bestial blankness as if he were some poor condemned wretch instead of himself, Melicertes, their master and master of Corinth, most feared of all kings.

The last sight the king saw was what so many of his victims had seen—huge teeth, glaring eyes, flying spittle, hooves like hatchets falling.

Melicertes, realizing how he had been tricked into devising his own death, felt his proud heart burst with vexation, saving him a few moments of final agony as the stallions trampled him to a pulp on the floor of the royal stable.

Anteia

After contriving the death of the king, Bellerophon found himself very weary and returned to his chambers to sleep. But he was awakened before dawn by the ghost of his mother who whispered certain instructions.

She departed, but sleep had fled. Bellerophon rushed back to the stables, saddled his favorite horse, and galloped eastward. When he reached the palace at Tiryns, he was met by a glittering official who told him coldly that the king was out hunting and the queen was in the garden, and that neither, in any case, was in the habit of receiving casual visitors.

“I’m not casual, I’m kin,” said Bellerophon. “And I suggest that you trundle your portly self out to the garden and inform the queen that her cousin, a prince of Corinth, seeks the honor of her acquaintance.”

Now, as Chief Steward, this official considered himself a particularly important personage. He drew himself up as tall as he could, swelling like a frog, preparing to summon the royal guard. But perhaps he would expel the fellow himself; he was a slender lad, and didn’t seem capable of much resistance.

As he looked into the keen young face, however, he detected a frigid gleam in those gray eyes, and felt an icy sliver of fear lodge in his gut. “After all,” he thought to himself, “if the lad is some sort of relative, perhaps I’d better show him a little courtesy.”

Aloud, he said, “Follow me, prince. I’ll lead you to her majesty.”

He strutted down a winding path, leading Bellerophon through a fringe of trees and onto another path that opened into a flower garden.

“Your majesty,” he boomed, “Bellerophon, prince of Corinth!”

He stepped back, and vanished.

Bellerophon saw no one. The massed roses distilled the light, half blinding him. A heavy fragrance enveloped him, making him half drunk. He

stood in a pink mist, feeling himself fill with delight. A figure swam out of the roses and stood before him. He shook his head, dazed. The title ‘queen’ had made him picture an elderly, imposing lady. But what he saw was a wand of a girl, with petal skin and enormous green eyes.

Bellerophon tried to say something but couldn’t. He sank to one knee, took her hand, and touched his lips to the palm—and understood how a bee felt burying itself into the heart of a rose. He did not let go her hand, nor did she pull it away, but pulled him to his feet.

“You’re a cousin, you say—from Corinth?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you come as an ambassador, bearing messages from your father to my husband?”

“Melicertes will send no more messages, my lady. He got himself killed by his horses.”

“Who is king, then?” asked the girl.

“It is undecided. There’s a struggle going on for the throne. He had lots of sons, you see, and most of them are ambitious.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Not in the same way. Besides, I have no claim to the crown. Melicertes wasn’t my real father; I was adopted.”

“That wouldn’t stop you from being ambitious. You have the look about you of a young man who might jump at an empty throne.”

“Do I? I guess that’s what my brothers think too. That’s why Corinth’s unhealthy for me right now, and that’s why I’m here.”

“Oh really?” said the girl. “I thought, perhaps, you were attracted to Tiryns by reports of my beauty.”

“Well, you are very beautiful, of course,” said Bellerophon, “but I didn’t hear about it there.”

The queen laughed.

“Oh, you’re just joking,” said Bellerophon. “Well, it was my mother who told me to come. I didn’t want to leave Corinth, even though several brothers were conspiring to kill me, but my mother insisted. ‘Go to Tiryns,’ she said. ‘You have cousins there.’”

“Did she not mention my name?” asked the queen.

“My mother’s dead, actually. It’s her ghost who visits me.”

“Often?”

“Just when I’m in danger of some kind. She doesn’t stay long—just appears and says ‘do this, do that.’ She wouldn’t have known about you, maybe, because you would have been only a child when she died. You look very young to be married and a queen.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place, my dear, sweet, new cousin. And the queen of Tiryns hereby officially welcomes you.”

She smiled mischievously, lightly kissed his lips, and glided back into the roses. He followed. He took the pruning knife from her hand, and bent to the flowers.

“Careful,” she murmured. “They have thorns.”

Returning from the hunt, Proetus, king of Tiryns, sent for his wife, and was informed that she was not in her chambers but in the garden, conversing with a young stranger. Instructing the captain of the royal guard to follow him at a distance, the king hurried to the garden.

Bellerophon and Anteia were standing amongst the roses, staring at each other. He was trying to think of something to say; she waited, smiling. Past the shining fall of her hair, the lad saw someone enter the garden—a man, tall and thin, with a face like a meat cleaver. He was in hunting clothes and wore no crown, but Bellerophon, raised in the court of a tyrant, knew immediately that here was another who demanded complete and instant obedience. Coming toward them in the green garments of the chase, the king looked like a weed, the kind that strangles roses. He came closer and stood over them, saying nothing, glaring from one face to the other.

“Greetings, my lord,” said Anteia. “May I present to you our cousin, Bellerophon, prince of Corinth.”

The king stood motionless for a moment, staring at the young man. Then he spoke in a dust-dry voice. “Are you here on official embassy, young sir? Do you bear messages from Melicertes?”

“No, your majesty, I bear no message.”

“But he brings important news!” cried Anteia. “Melicertes is dead, and there is strife in Corinth as his many sons contend for the throne.”

“That information has already reached me through other channels,” said the king. “Is that what brings you here, prince—to ask me to support your claim to the throne?”

“No, sir,” said Bellerophon. “I make no such claim.”

“Then why, may I ask, have you decided to honor us with your presence? A sudden impulse of kinship?”

“He’s just passing through, my lord,” said Anteia. “He’s on his way to Lycia.”

Now, Bellerophon, of course, had no such intention. He barely knew where Lycia was. But he realized that the girl was saying the first thing that came to her mind.

“Lycia, eh?” said Proetus. “To visit my esteemed father-in-law? He’s not doing much entertaining these days. Some indiscriminating monster seems to find the Lycians very appetizing. This lady’s father, the king of that land, is quite frantic with worry. He has been hoping, for some reason, that the gods will send a hero to slay the beast, but he’s beginning to realize that the gods are forgetful, and that monsters are more plentiful than heroes.”

Bellerophon turned to the girl. “Have you seen this creature?”

“It has a name,” said Anteia. “It’s called the Chimaera. Those who see it at close range are devoured. Those who glimpse it from afar and manage to escape are too frightened to see straight, and their descriptions vary. But we do know that it’s gigantic, it flies, it spits fire—and eats everything in sight.”

“Perhaps you’ll see for yourself when you get there,” said the king.

“Possibly,” said Bellerophon, who thought to himself: “This weasel-faced bully is worse than Melicertes. I am much inclined to strike him down where he stands and run away with his wife. But that hulking brute of a guard stands too close, and the rest of his troop is undoubtedly hiding in the underbrush. They’d be upon me before I could draw my sword.”

Aloud, he said: “Farewell, gracious queen. Do you have any message for your father?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Tell him I love him! Tell him not to despair. A hero will come one day and slay the Chimaera. I know he will.”

She burst into tears and ran out of sight behind the roses.

“Cousin,” said Proetus. “I think you had better be on your way without any more ceremony. I don’t like young men speaking to my wife, cousin or not. And my captain of the guard over there, that huge fellow standing in the shade of the tree, is quick to read my wish, even that which remains unspoken. His method is simple, bless him, a bowstring about the neck of the offender, inducing acute strangulation—and behold! Whoever has

displeased me will do so no more. You wouldn't want to fall into the hands of such a fellow, would you?"

"I thank you for your hospitality," said Bellerophon, and departed.

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The Hunt Begins

When Bellerophon had left Corinth, he had taken one of the horses that had killed the king, a huge gray stallion. He named it Sea Mist, and it became more than a mount to him. The horse was a fierce guardian, a loyal companion. During the long ride Bellerophon had fallen into the habit of speaking his thoughts to it.

Now, riding the great gray stallion out of Tiryns toward Lycia, Bellerophon suddenly wheeled the horse about and began to ride back. Then he stopped, and sat there on the horse's back, torn by indecision.

"I must go back and fetch her!" he cried. "No weedy tyrant will stop me, nor all his murderous bodyguard. Yes, we must return immediately.... But how do I know that she wants me to? A few soft words, a smile, a cousinly kiss—are they enough to build on? Why, she's the most beautiful girl in the world, and married to a very rich, very powerful king; could she really prefer me? Why do I think so? I do, but I'm not sure. When I asked if she had any message for her father, she cried, 'Tell him I love him!' and her throbbing voice seemed to say, 'Not only him, but you too.' Could she have meant that? Or did I hear what I wanted to hear? She has reason to be concerned about her father, of course, deviled as he is by that Chimaera, waiting for a hero that does not come."

Bellerophon had dismounted and was leaning against the horse. He cried out suddenly, startling the animal. Then he clasped its great neck, exclaiming, "That's it! Yes! Why didn't I think of it before? I'll go and kill the monster that's been tormenting her father. We'll start right now. We won't even stop at the royal palace in Lycia, but go to the hills immediately, and begin our Chimaera hunt. She'll have to love me if I kill it, won't she? Surely she will. And you'll enjoy the hunt, won't you, Sea Mist? You haven't had much action lately."

He leaped onto the stallion's back, drummed his heels, and they galloped away.

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Dangerous Passage

Last reports had placed the Chimaera among the Lycian hills, and it was there that Bellerophon rode. The track was easy to follow; the monster had left terrible traces. From village to devastated village, Bellerophon stalked the monster. Sometimes he came so close that houses were still burning when he arrived and the kill was so fresh that vultures had not yet come to strip the bones.

Eagerly, he searched the sky for smoke plumes. Sometimes, he thought he saw gray coils winding up in the sky, and his heart would leap, but it was only the mist or a wisp of cloud. Once, he was sure that he saw the monster as a speck on the horizon growing larger and larger. He drew his sword and shouted a battle cry. But it was only an eagle hunting goats.

“I don’t understand it,” he said to the horse. “Everyone else tries to avoid the monster, and dies in the process, while I, who want so desperately to find it, can’t even catch a glimpse of the damned thing. Perhaps some god is playing games with me.”

The next village Bellerophon came to had not yet been destroyed. When he questioned the villagers, he found them unwilling to answer, as if they feared that any mention of the Chimaera might make it appear. Finally, a child told him that he had seen the beast flying high, in the direction of the sea.

“Back to the coast, then!” cried Bellerophon. And the horse went into its tireless swinging trot.

On the way, Bellerophon devised a plan, which he confided to the horse. “I’ve heard that the Chimaera attacks fishing fleets, for then it can eat the catch as well as those who do the catching. What I shall do is leave you on shore, swim out to one of the boats, climb aboard, and wait for the monster to attack.”

When the youth had left Corinth, he had also taken the dead king's sword, a magnificent weapon, with a blade so sharp it could cut a floating feather in two. Its hand guard was made of beaten copper and its hilt was wrapped in tough, pliant calf's hide, stitched with gold wire. "I must have it," Bellerophon had said to himself, standing over his fallen foe. "I killed an enemy who was trying to kill me, and by the rules of battle I am entitled to his weapon. It's not theft, it's legitimate loot."

But this priceless sword was to plunge Bellerophon into an adventure that threatened to end his career before he encountered the Chimaera.

Riding along, he could smell a salt wind now, and glimpsed the sea like a tilted tin plate, reflecting the sunlight. He had decided not to ride all the way to the shore, afraid that the faithful horse might follow him into the water when he tried to swim out to the fishing vessels.

He stopped, dismounted, and instructed Sea Mist to roam the meadows and wait for him until he should return. The stallion laid back its ears, nudged him with its head, and whickered plaintively. But the lad said, "You can't come. Wait for me here." He set off on foot, trying to shut his ears to the lonely, trumpeting cry the horse sent after him.

The piers were empty. A large school of mullet had been sighted and the entire fleet had been put out to sea. They had sailed a good distance; Bellerophon saw only smudges on the horizon. He knew that the boats would not have bunched themselves, but would be strung out for miles, for fishermen of the same village gave one another generous room to cast their nets.

The shore was rocky here. Bellerophon began searching for a break in the boulder line where he might enter the water and begin his long swim. He heard someone shouting, and turned.

A huge, burly man was clambering over the rocks toward him. He was bearded and swarthy, with a look of subdued ferocity, but he spoke courteously: "Good day, stranger. You are a stranger, are you not?"

"I am," said Bellerophon. "My home is Corinth."

"I saw that you were gazing out to sea as if trying to identify some vessel out there. I know most of the folk hereabout. Is there someone special you're looking for?"

“No, sir,” replied Bellerophon. “But I mean to join a crew. My intention is to swim out and board one of the fishing boats.”

“You won’t make it,” said the man. “There are sharks in these waters; they tend to cluster around fishing boats when the catch is good.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your advice. Nevertheless, I mean to get out there, sharks or not.”

“I can save you a long dangerous swim,” said the stranger. “I was just about to join the fleet myself. My ship’s waiting in the next cove. I’ll be glad to give you passage.”

“You’re very kind. What is your fee?”

“No fee at all,” said the man. “We here on this coast have a reputation for hospitality.”

The man led Bellerophon along the rocky shore to a cove where a black vessel lay moored. The crew was as savage looking as the captain, but said nothing as Bellerophon boarded. He noticed that the ship carried no nets, but he forgot all about that in the excitement of setting sail.

The ship was fast. It scudded before the wind. Bellerophon searched the sky as they sailed, hoping to spot the Chimaera. He did not realize that there were other dangerous creatures prowling much closer. For fishing was not the sole occupation of the coast dwellers. Many of them found piracy more profitable. And the crew of this particular vessel happened to be the most viciously successful pirates in those waters.

Blinded to everything else by his desire to find the Chimaera, the lad did not realize his peril until a heavy hand clamped his shoulder and swung him around. It was the captain. His other hand held an ax.

“Farewell, stranger,” he said.

“Why farewell?” stammered Bellerophon.

“You are about to leave us, young sir. A final journey, in fact.”

“But why?”

“Because you’re too foolish to live.”

“What have I done that is so foolish?”

“You have come among us alone, wearing a treasure at your belt. Very unwise.”

“But why?”

“Because we’re pirates, of course. Pirates take what they want and throw the rest away.”

“You mean you want my sword?”

“Exactly. Indeed, I have considered it my sword ever since I first laid eyes on it. And the time has come to take possession.”

“But why must you kill me?” asked Bellerophon. “Just take the thing and let me go.”

“I can understand your point of view,” said the pirate. “But it just doesn’t work that way. We don’t like to leave witnesses; it’s not our policy. However, I can assure you, you’ll feel no pain. I’m a skilled axman, and this blade will shear through your neck so swiftly that you won’t feel a thing until you’re reunited with your head down in Hades.”

“I appreciate your compassion,” said the youth. “Please ... take my sword.” Bellerophon drew it from its sheath, and, with a lightning flexion of his arm, whisked the blade through the pirate’s thick neck like a cook cutting a celery stalk. The body fell to the deck, spouting blood. The head rolled into the scuppers.

“You’ll be reunited with it in Hades!” shouted Bellerophon, and jumped overboard as the other pirates rushed at him.

Remembering the sharks, he swam under the ship and clung to its keel—a position that tended to discourage sharks, who need space above them to turn and strike. He hung on to the keel, pondering what to do. He had no fear of drowning. As a son of Poseidon, he could breathe underwater. But his wet clothes clung to him, and after a while he began to feel cold. “No use,” he thought. “I’ll have to swim back to shore. If there are any sharks about, I’ll give them some distraction.”

Drawing his sword underwater, he stabbed it through the planking of the ship, stabbed again and again, until he knew it was taking on a weight of water. He swam out from under the sinking vessel, cleaving the water as swiftly as a seal, for he didn’t know how long the drowning pirates would occupy the sharks. He heard men screaming as he headed toward shore, and swam faster than ever.

The Ghost Returns

Upon reaching shore, Bellerophon immediately struck inland, and did not stop until he came to the meadow where he had left Sea Mist. He heard a rushing, a drumming of hooves; the stallion's eyes were pits of yellow light as it came thundering across the field to greet the lad.

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," Bellerophon said to the horse. "But let's sleep now. I'm weary."

Bellerophon awoke while it was still dark. He heard her voice before he saw her. The moon was half veiled by clouds, and the horse, bulking in the weak moonlight, looked like a bank of fog. She drifted closer as the moon swam clear, and Bellerophon was able to make out a faint shape.

"Welcome, mother," he said. "If ever I required good counsel, I do so now."

"That is why I have come to you, my son."

"I'm heartsick and weary, mother. I'm helpless against the Chimaera. Nothing I do alters the course of the beast. He's here, there, and everywhere, killing, destroying, and I can't even find him."

"I'm not aware that I ever counseled you to go monster hunting."

"No, mother, that was my own idea."

"Are you sure you want to be a hero? It doesn't leave much room in life for other things, you know."

"It's not the title I'm after. I don't want the name; I want the deed. I have a special reason for wishing to kill the Chimaera."

"Hearken, son," said the ghost.

To perform this deed
you need a steed
who's half your brother,

son of your father,
But not of your mother.

“Need a steed?” cried Bellerophon. “I have one, a marvellous one. He’s over there. Isn’t he a beauty?”

“Can he fly?”

“He runs like the wind. He seems to fly.”

“Seeming is not enough. To kill a monster demands all kinds of hard realities. To vanquish this one, which flies better than any bird, you will need a horse that flies as swiftly.”

“What kind of horse can do that?”

“One with wings.”

“Is there such a creature?” asked Bellerophon.

“There is. A great white stallion with golden wings—and many other unusual attributes. He is of divine stock, having been sired by Poseidon upon one of his earlier brides, the snake-haired Medusa.”

“She who was slain by the hero, Perseus?”

“The same. When Perseus cut off her head, two drops of blood fell to the ground. From one of them sprang the winged horse, Pegasus, whom, it is decreed, you must ride if you are to vanquish the Chimaera and claim Anteia.”

“You know about her then.”

“Of course. I know everything about you. It’s the only knowledge that reaches me in Hades.”

“But will Anteia have me if I slay the Chimaera?”

“Is it not this hope that has launched you on your perilous quest?” asked the ghost.

“Yes ... yes it is. But sometimes I think that it’s only my own fantasy. A wild dream.”

“Wild dreams can become wilder realities. But only if you make them so.”

“What shall I do, mother?”

“Seek the winged horse.”

“Where?”

“On the slopes of Mount Helicon, in the land of Boeotia. Godspeed, my lovely boy.”

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The Winged Horse

Traveling night and day, Bellerophon rode his great gray stallion out of Lycia back toward Boeotia. They reached Mount Helicon at mid-morning. It was a cloudless day; the hillside shimmered in a green haze. Searching the near slope, Bellerophon spotted a patch of whiteness, too large for sheep or goat. He rode uphill and saw gold flashing upon the whiteness. Coming closer, he gasped in wonder. A stallion of astounding beauty stood before him, snow-white and tall as a stag, with golden wings and mane, coral-red nostrils, and brass hooves.

“Pegasus!” he shouted. Dismounting, he ran toward the horse. The animal tossed its head and moved away. Bellerophon heard Sea Mist neighing in a tone he had never heard before. Turning, he saw the stallion’s great eyes brimming with tears.

“No!” cried Bellerophon, running toward Sea Mist. But the horse whirled and galloped away, racing down the slope and out of sight before Bellerophon could reach him.

“He’s jealous,” thought the lad. “The sight of me going after that magnificent winged horse was more than he could bear. Well, I can’t think about it now; I’ve got to catch Pegasus.”

Bellerophon was starting uphill again when a little man popped out from behind a rock as if he had been hiding there. “Greetings!” he cried. “My name is Thallo. What’s yours?”

“Bellerophon.”

The little man limped toward him, and Bellerophon saw that both his legs were twisted. He waited, quivering with impatience. Finally, Bellerophon said: “I don’t wish to seem discourteous, sir, but I’m in somewhat of a hurry.”

“No one’s in a hurry here,” the little man replied. “Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

“This is Mount Helicon, isn’t it?” asked the lad.

“Mount Helicon, indeed, where the Muses dwell, and where Pegasus finds pasture. To these slopes unpublished poets flock. For they believe that a short ride on the winged horse will endow them with the talent they lack. I know—I was among the first to try that flight. Pegasus let me mount him, and with one beat of his golden wings soared above the top of that cedar tree. I would have been dizzy with fear had I not been consumed by ecstasy. For, as we rose and the earth tilted beneath us, verses began to sing in my head. Oh, they were magical lines, sparkling with wit, brimming with melody. And just as I was beginning to savor my own worth, the damned brute bucked me off. I fell a long way, shattering both legs when I hit the ground.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?” asked Bellerophon.

“Certainly. I wasn’t going to drag myself back to Thrace. They’re a warlike breed there, splendid specimens every one, curse them. They didn’t show much regard for me when I had two good legs: just imagine what chance I’d stand with them as a cripple. So, here I dwell, trying to recapture the verses I composed during my brief flight, and which were knocked out of my head when I fell.”

“Is that all you do?”

“All? Did you say all?” groaned the little man. “It’s a lifetime occupation, my dear sir. It leaves no room for anything else. Of course, I spend some time observing other would-be poets trying to ride Pegasus, deriving a bitter pleasure from seeing them fall as I did.”

“Are they here too, all the others?”

“They are indeed. In that grove yonder you will find an encampment of gimpy versifiers. They cluster about a spring called Hippocrene, whose waters are said to possess healing powers, especially for those wounded in the service of the Muse. But I don’t associate with them. I keep to myself, working on a great ballad, which I just began this year and which I wouldn’t mind reciting to you if you can spare a few hours of utter attention.”

“Thank you,” replied Bellerophon, “but I can’t. I’m on an urgent mission.”

“Urgent? What could be more urgent than this? You shall be the first to hear verses that will be sung four thousand years hence.”

“I’m not much on poetry.”

“Oh, these verses will change all that. They’re not dreamy, moon-beamy stuff, but a story-song, full of violence and romance. Salted with reality. The story of Melicertes, king of Corinth, who was eaten by his own horses, all set in immortal quatrains.”

“They didn’t eat him,” muttered Bellerophon.

“What did you say?”

“Melicertes’s horses. They kicked him to death but didn’t eat him.”

“Please, my boy, I’m concerned with matters of meter and rhyme. I can’t be bothered with facts that don’t fit. How do you know so much about it, anyway?”

“I come from Corinth. And now I must be on my way. I appreciate your conversation, good sir, but I must bridle Pegasus and ride him to Lycia, where the Chimaera hunts.”

“Ride Pegasus? So you too are a would-be poet? No wonder you don’t want to hear anyone else’s work.”

“I want Pegasus, sir, to ride into battle with the Chimaera.”

“Into battle? On that treacherous beast? You won’t get past the top of the cedars.”

“Watch me,” said Bellerophon.

Pegasus was grazing on the slope somewhat above where the two men stood. Bellerophon moved toward the horse, calling softly, making the whickering sound that he used to call Sea Mist. Pegasus did not respond, did not raise his head. He was cropping grass and kept moving away as the young man approached.

Thallo had followed. “If you’re really mad enough to want to ride him,” he said, “stand on that spur of rock there. Hunch your shoulders, groan a little, tear your hair. He’ll think you’re a poet and come to you. There’s nothing he enjoys more than lifting us toward the heavens, then bucking us off, damn him.”

“Thanks,” said Bellerophon.

The youth clambered onto the long spur of rock that jutted from the mountainside and overlooked the valley. He hunched his shoulders,

groaned, and pulled his hair. He saw the great white stallion soaring toward him on golden wings.

Bellerophon leaped from the rock onto the horse's back. He had always loved the feeling that surged through him when astride a horse—as if the animal's wild power was entering him, turning him into something better than he was. But he had never felt anything as strong as the godlike force that was lifting him now into the blue, thin, intoxicating air.

Pegasus tilted his golden wings and, gull-like, caught a current of air, riding it up, up, past the cedar-tops. Bellerophon felt the weird power surging into his legs, turning bones into rods of iron, making them clamp the horse tighter. Pegasus bucked, but his rider was welded to him and holding fast.

The winged horse trumpeted furiously, and rolled over in the air. Bellerophon, hanging by his knees, saw the flowered slope spinning beneath him and shouted with glee as he spotted Thallo's amazed face lifted toward the sky.

Pegasus rolled over and over in the air. Bellerophon clung fast. With both hands, he stroked the horse that was trying to throw him, and kept talking to the enraged animal as earth and sky kept changing places, blue spinning into green, and back again. But the youth clung as the horse whirled—never stopped stroking, crooning, using all the gentle, powerful skills he had learned breaking the wild horses of Corinth.

Suddenly, Pegasus stopped whirling, spread his wings, and coasted down. Bellerophon guided him by the pressure of his knees until the horse landed near Thallo and stood there, trembling. Bellerophon slid off and stroked the wonderful, strong neck—white and silky as Egyptian cloth.

Pegasus did not drop his head to his rider's shoulder and nuzzle him as other horses had done. The winged stallion was docile now, but he had not lost a shred of dignity. Bellerophon looked into his eyes. They were brilliant but blank; they were not to be read.

Bellerophon did not wish to fly to Lycia until the next day; he wanted to practice some aerial maneuvers with Pegasus before challenging the Chimaera. He also wished to practice his archery, which had grown rusty.

The young man camped on Helicon that night. There his mother came to him.

“Awake, my son,” she called.

“Greetings, mother.”

“Listen closely.”

When you leave this place
go straight to Thrace.
Between two peaks
Man shall find
what boy but seeks.
At the last, I tell you this—
to win the battle,
make heads rattle.

Her voice stopped.

“No, stay!” he cried. But she had gone. Bellerophon felt confused; he had not understood her completely. She had told him that he would find the Chimaera in Thrace; that he knew. But he couldn’t figure out the last couplet.

“She’s sometimes mystifying, but never wrong,” he said to himself. “So I’d better find out what I can about Thrace.”

He went to where Thallo was sleeping nearby, curled like a fetus. He knelt and shook him gently. “What? Who?...” groaned the little man. He sat bolt upright. “It’s you! You’ve changed your mind! You want to hear my ballad after all. Very well. I know it by heart.”

“No, no,” said Bellerophon. “No ballad. I want to hear about Thrace. You come from there, you say.”

“Is that why you woke me?”

“Not because of an idle interest in geography, good Thallo. It’s something much more important. My mother’s ghost came to me tonight and told me that I would find the Chimaera in Thrace, so I go there in the morning.”

“Ghosts, monsters. You give me an idea for a short tale to frighten children with. Just wait while I put together a few verses.”

“Later, Thallo, please. This may be a matter of life and death. Tell me about Thrace.”

“Well, it’s not unlike Boeotia. Much larger; its plains are wider, its mountains higher. And, of course, it’s much colder in winter. Really cold in the highlands. Sometimes the mountain passes are choked with snow.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve never seen snow?”

“I don’t know what it is—how do I know whether I’ve seen it?”

“It’s a blossoming of frost,” said Thallo. “The freezing sky drops slow white flowers that cling to mountain slopes and trees and pile up on the ground. In a hard season snow fills the passes so no one can get through. That’s why Thrace’s neighbors feel safe from attack in winter.”

“It’s winter now; I guess I’ll see the snow, then,” said Bellerophon.

“Remember this, if you fly through a narrow pass, be careful not to make a loud noise. It can start an avalanche.”

“What’s that?”

“Snow, startled by noise, can come sliding down the mountain, growing larger and larger, tearing out pieces of mountain and carrying them along, until finally tons of snow and rock are falling, burying everything below.”

“I’ll be careful,” said Bellerophon. “By the way, my mother mentioned something that I didn’t understand. Perhaps you can. Something about a rattle.”

“I don’t know what she could have meant,” said Thallo. “The only special rattles I know of are those used by marsh dwellers to protect themselves against the spear birds. These terrible creatures are larger than eagles and have beaks like spears; hence their name. They settle upon the marsh in great numbers, and the folk there string together old pots and helmets and odd bits of metal that they shake, making a dreadful clamor. This alone makes the birds fly away. I don’t know how it might help you, though.”

“Again, my thanks, good Thallo. I’ll let you go back to sleep now. But I promise this: If I survive my encounter with the Chimaera, I shall return one day. I can give you some details about Corinth, and its mad king, and his man-eating horses, that may help you enrich your ballad.”

“And will you tell about vanquishing the Chimaera?”

“Unless he vanquishes me,” said Bellerophon.

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The Chimaera

Bellerophon finally caught sight of the Chimaera as he was flying over a barren reach of ground—the last of the great Thracian plains before the highlands began. All he saw was a far glimpse of the monster vanishing in the distance. But it was unmistakable. And what it had left behind was sheer carnage. Apparently, it had caught a troop of warriors in the open field and dived upon them like a hawk striking a flock of doves. It had killed them all and eaten them out of their armor as foxes flip turtles to eat them out of their shells.

Looking down, feeling himself grow dizzy with horror, Bellerophon saw breastplates, greaves, and helmets scattered about among the bones that wore only bloody tatters of flesh. Vultures coasted down to strip the corpses.

Pegasus needed no urging. He seemed to share Bellerophon's thoughts. Like a hound after a deer, he fastened on the scent of the Chimaera, and clove the air toward where the monster had disappeared.

“Did it see us?” the young man asked himself. “Is it trying to flee? Will it turn and fight? Father, Poseidon, make it turn!”

No sooner had he uttered this prayer, than he regretted it. For it was answered. There, hanging before him, was a grinning lion larger than an elephant—sulfur yellow, snarling, with claws poised. A winged lion with the body of a goat, but, most horrible, the tail of a serpent. When the beast curled its tail, a serpent's head appeared beside the lion head, both glaring at the tiny foolish midget of a mortal who dared to mount a horsefly and come monster hunting.

Pegasus had stopped in the air, and floated, facing the Chimaera. Bellerophon unslung his bow, notched an arrow, and let it fly, aiming at the beast's one vulnerable spot—the eye. The lion's jaws opened as if it were

about to roar, but what issued from its mouth was flame, burning the arrow to a cinder as it flew through the air. Then, slowly, as if savoring its enemy's fear, the Chimaera soared toward Bellerophon.

Obeying his rider's thoughts, Pegasus immediately dived toward the mountainside and dipped low over a pine tree freighted with snow, allowing Bellerophon to break off an armful of wet green boughs. Pegasus climbed again, soaring swiftly until he was directly above the monster, and Bellerophon dropped the compacted bundle of branches in front of the beast. When it spat flame again, it was enveloped in dense black smoke as the green branches burned.

While the Chimaera groped blindly through the smoke, Bellerophon fled—not back toward the plains where he knew he'd be visible, but northward where mountains loomed, because he thought that, winding among crags, he might be able to hide from his pursuer. His pursuer ... he was no longer hunting but being hunted. Bellerophon heard great leathery wings beating the air. He knew Pegasus could fly faster than the Chimaera, but he wasn't sure about the winged horse's endurance. At least for the moment, he could outrace the monster.

It grew colder as they flew. They were still angling upward. Snowy peaks towered above them. Bellerophon was searching for a cleft in the mountains, one too narrow for the Chimaera to follow him.

His mother's voice crooned in his head:

Between two peaks
Man shall find
what boy but seeks.

Man, he was no man; he was a puling coward. As a boy he had been brave, had mastered savage horses, had challenged an even more savage king. Where had that courage gone? Could one sight of the grinning lion freeze his marrow, turn his heart to pulp?

He was seized by such a spasm of disgust that he was tempted to let himself slip off the horse's back and plunge to his death on the rocks below.

"But if I'm going to smash myself in a shameful fall," he thought, "I might as well imitate manhood by dying in the monster's jaws."

With that thought, he turned Pegasus around. Like a golden arrow, Pegasus flew back toward the Chimaera. Bellerophon bent low, shielding his face in the horse's mane, for the wind was blowing cold.

But he was hatching a plan as they flew, and again Pegasus understood. He slanted upward again, soaring so high that the air was almost too thin to breathe. Bellerophon gasped for breath. He felt the horse go into a dive. Looking back, he saw that they had passed over the Chimaera. As he watched, the monster turned and flew toward them.

Now they were nearing the plain where the dead warriors lay. He saw the foul litter on the ground, heard a rush of other wings as vultures rose from their feast.

As soon as Pegasus touched ground, Bellerophon was off the horse's back and running over the field. From corpse to corpse he ran, plucking helmets off skulls, tearing bloody tunics into rags, tying the rags together and stringing the helmets from them. When he had as many as he could carry, he mounted Pegasus again. The horse spread his wings and climbed into the air—just in time, for the Chimaera was almost upon them. A tongue of flame licked the air about them. Bellerophon felt the back of his neck scorching, smelled burning hair, and saw that the tip of Pegasus's golden tail was on fire. But the horse calmly swished his tail, putting out the blaze.

They climbed swiftly again, heading back toward the mountains. But they were going more slowly, for now they wished the monster to follow—not close enough to singe them with its flaming breath, but close enough to keep them in sight. They were among the mountains again, taking the exact path they had taken before. Bellerophon turned and saw the lion's head, saw the lashing serpent tail as the beast curved in the air, making a tight turn around a crag.

They were high enough now. The mountain slopes were packed with snow. Neither rock nor tree could be seen. Then Bellerophon found what he was looking for—a valley, a very narrow one, hardly more than a large cleft between peaks. Pegasus swooped down into the pass, flying between two walls of snow—going more and more slowly, allowing the monster to catch up.

They reached the narrowest part of the pass. They were hemmed by walls of snow. Pegasus turned. The monster came toward them, spitting fire. In the thin mountain air its breath burned blue. Suddenly Pegasus folded his

golden wings and dropped straight down. The Chimaera folded its leathery wings and dropped after them. Down, down, fell horse and rider until they were just above the valley floor.

Then, Bellerophon unslung the string of helmets he had made into a great rattle. He swung it about his head, sending a clamor into the still air, a horrid clanging din that doubled and redoubled itself as it bounced off the mountain walls.

Pegasus spread his wings again, caught a swell of air, and rose swiftly as the Chimaera was still dropping into the canyon. The monster, seeing them rise again, spread its wings also. But it could not soar like a gull. It had to beat its great leathery vans, trying to climb. By this time, the snow had begun to slide.

First it sounded like an enormous whisper. The whisper became a roar, then a thunderous, crashing, overwhelming noise as the sliding snow tore rocks out of their sockets, and the mountain walls literally collapsed, burying the Chimaera. Pegasus was almost caught by the avalanche, but just managed to fly high enough to avoid the plunging rocks. Even so, horse and rider were rimed with snow by the time they reached the level of the peaks.

Looking down, Bellerophon saw that the valley held a great mound of snow, a fitting grave, he thought, for so dreadful a monster. Then, aghast, he realized that he was savoring victory too soon. For the mound was melting, melting fast; it became a great lake of water even as he watched. The Chimaera's flaming breath had melted the snow. And the creature, he knew, being born of sea monsters, was at home in the water.

Horse and rider hovered above the new lake until they saw the Chimaera's head poke out. It was trying to climb out of the water and fly after its enemy, but it had to float for a while, regaining its strength.

"We can't let it fly," Bellerophon told his steed. "Once in the air, it will catch us, for its endurance is greater than ours. But there's one last thing we can try."

Pegasus understood. He tilted in the air and dove toward the lake. As they plummeted, Bellerophon drew his sword, lay flat on his belly, and allowed himself to slide along the horse's neck, onto the horse's head.

The winged stallion dived toward the lion-headed monster like a great heron trying to spear a fish with its beak. But the beak was Bellerophon's sword. Headfirst, Pegasus dropped, straight toward the Chimaera, steering

himself so that the sword entered the monster's one vulnerable spot, its eye. Into that glaring jelly plunged the blade, deeper, deeper, until the horse's head skidded off the lion's head, and Bellerophon's fist was pressed against the bleeding socket.

The point of the sword found the dim clenched brain. The Chimaera died, thrashing in agony. Horse and rider were flung into the icy lake. They swam about for a moment, cleansing themselves of blood. But Pegasus quickly flew up again, or they would have frozen stiff.

The Chimaera lay still, all except the serpent tail, which was still twitching. Then that too stopped.

"Back to Helicon!" shouted Bellerophon. And the stallion bugled, his warm breath turning to mist.

They flew back to the mountain of the Muses, and there Bellerophon told Thallo two tales, as he had promised: one about his life in the court of Melicertes, the other about his battle with the Chimaera. And the little poet listened hungrily.

Bellerophon built a fire and sat as close to it as he could. He couldn't seem to get warm enough. Pegasus stood close too, sleeping on his feet, golden wings and mane gleaming in the firelight.

In the morning, Bellerophon bade Thallo farewell. "Where to now, my young hero?" asked Thallo.

"To Tiryns, to claim my reward—the fairest Anteia."

"Then you will have other adventures," said the poet, "for her husband will not yield easily. Will you come again, and tell me what happened?"

"I'll try," said Bellerophon. He mounted Pegasus and flew away.

Thallo never saw Bellerophon again but didn't much care. He had heard enough to fashion a new ballad. He knew that it was the best thing he had ever done, and grew so happy that he almost forgot the pain of his crippled legs. He had tried several endings to his poem before finding the right one. But he liked each of them in its own way and kept them all.

For in Thallo's song, Bellerophon, flying toward Tiryns, grew drunk with pride and joy and suddenly decided that he, as a son of Poseidon, should pay a visit to his high relatives—should fly up to Mount Olympus and tell his great deeds to his uncle Zeus and aunt Hera. Yes, he would meet the brawling Ares and the wing-footed Hermes, so that they might be proud of their kinsman from Corinth.

But Zeus, looking down from his great height and seeing a mortal flying toward heaven on the back of a magnificent golden-winged stallion, thought to himself, “This is what I’ve always feared—a mortal grown so arrogant that he wants to storm Olympus.”

But according to the song, the angry god did not hurl his thunderbolt. He dispatched a gadfly instead. It was as large as a crow, with a sting like a dagger. It flew down and stung Pegasus under the tail. The horse bucked violently, and Bellerophon, whose pride had made him slack in the saddle, was thrown.

Down, down, he fell. When he hit the ground, he, like Thallo, shattered both legs.

Knowing that he was crippled for life, he dragged himself toward a forest, hoping to be eaten by a wild beast. But the faithful Sea Mist, who for many weeks had roamed the plains, waiting for his beloved master to return, found Bellerophon before he reached the wood. Nickered softly, he knelt so that the broken hero could climb upon his back.

A strange tale began to spread among the shepherds and farmers of Thessaly—a tale of a great gray stallion with a rider who never dismounted. The tale swelled, as years passed, into the legend of a creature half human, half horse, with the head and chest of a man and the body and legs of a horse. This was the first Centaur—and the tale told that it galloped to Tiryns, caught Proetus out hunting, kicked him to death, and galloped off with the young widow, Anteia. And she became the mother of the Centaur tribe, and their queen.

THE CYCLOPES

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For my brave boy,
ELI BURBANK
who has met monsters and wants to meet more

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Characters

Monsters

The Cyclopes

(SY klahps) *sing.* Huge one-eyed smiths; the eldest children of Uranus
(SY kloh peez) and Gaia
plur.

Hundred- handed Giants

Born of Mother Earth and her serpent lover

Dragons

Gigantic leather-winged, fire-breathing lizards
grown from worms who fattened themselves upon
the blood of the murdered Uranus

Brontes

(BRAHN teez)

Cleverest of the Cyclopes; forged the first lightning
bolt for Zeus

Polyphemus

(pahl ih FEE
muhs)

A cannibalistic Cyclops encountered by Ulysses

The Elder Gods

Uranus
(u RAY nuhs) Lord of the Sky and All Beneath; the Rain-giver

Gaia
(GAY uh) Mother Earth; wife to Uranus and mother of the Cyclopes, the hundred-handed giants, the Titans, and Cronos

Cronos
(KROH nuhs) Youngest of the Titans and king after Uranus; father of the Gods

Rhea
(REE uh) Sister and wife of Cronos; mother of Hestia, Demeter, Hades, Poseidon, Hera, and Zeus

The Pantheon

Zeus
(ZOOS) King of the Gods after Cronos, and all powerful; wielder of thunder and lightning

Hera
(HEE ruh) Sister and wife of Zeus; mother of Hephaestus and Ares

Hestia
(HEHS tih uh) Elder sister of Zeus; Goddess of the Hearth

Demeter
(de MEE tuhr) Sister of Zeus; Goddess of the Harvest

Hades
(HAY deez) Brother of Zeus; King of the Land Beyond Death

Poseidon
(poh SY duhn) Brother of Zeus; God of the Sea

Hephaestus
(he FEHS tus) Eldest son of Zeus and Hera; the Smith God

Ares
(AIR eez) Second son of Zeus and Hera; God of War

Athena
(uh THEE nuh) Daughter of Zeus and the Titaness Metis; Goddess of Wisdom

Aphrodite
(af ruh DY tee) Goddess of Love and Beauty; her name means foam-born

Apollo
(uh PAHL oh) Son of Zeus and Leto; the sun God; also God of Music and Healing and Lord of the Golden Bow

Artemis Twin sister of Apollo; Goddess of the Moon and the
(AHR tuh mis) Chase and Maiden of the Silvern Bow

Hermes Son of Zeus and Maia; the Messenger God as well
(HUR meez) as God of Commerce; patron of liars, gamblers, and
thieves

Heroes

Ulysses King of Ithaca and leading strategist of the Greek
(u LIHS eez) forces in the war against Troy; he is the renowned
voyager who survives a series of dreadful ordeals
flung at him by the gods who sided with the Trojans

Others

Dione An oak dryad who aids Zeus
(dy OH nee)

Leuce A river nymph who serves Cronos and maddens
(LOO say) Polyphemus

Amalthea Enormous she-goat who suckles the infant Zeus
(am uhl THEE uh)

Dryads
(DRY uhdz)

Wood nymphs

Naiads
(NAY uhdz)

Nymphs of those waters that are not the sea. They inhabit rivers, lakes, streams, fountains, and springs

Nereids
(ne REE uhdz)

Sea nymphs, all of them beautiful

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Ulysses and the Cyclops

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The Maiming

Uranus, the First One, Lord of the Sky and Sender of Rain, married Gaia, whose name means Earth. He drew a golden cloud about them, and his rain started children in the cave of her womb.

“Oh, my Lord,” she cried, “these blessed babes of ours shall be the first born of love’s embrace—creatures so wondrously beautiful that all must worship them.”

“Beautiful, eh?” snarled Uranus to himself. “Then she may prefer them to me, me, me. Oh, no! Beautiful they shall not be, but so ugly that all will flee in horror.”

Thereupon he cursed the first fruits of her womb, fashioning this curse into the shape of a bat, which he sent flying into the cave where the unborn infants lay. The bat plucked an eye from each head and ate them like grapes.

Mother Earth went into labor. The plains quaked. Mountains gushed fire. The ocean floor shook, starting tidal waves. When the sea withdrew, two children loomed on the wet beach, a boy and a girl. Giants they were, born full-grown, tall as trees and magnificently muscled.

But their father, hiding behind a storm cloud, smiled when he saw them. For each had but one eye set right in the middle of the forehead.

“A fine pair of monsters,” chuckled Uranus to himself. “Not even their mother can love them.”

But his troubles with their mother were just starting. She looked upon the monsters she had borne and knew somehow that it was Uranus who had made them the way they were. To avenge herself she went dancing on the flickering edge of creation and entertained a giant serpent. Shortly thereafter she gave birth to a litter of hundred-handed giants, whom she hid from sight in one of her deepest caves.

Her rage grew. Spasms of anger shook the earth. She wept tears of lava. Tidal waves were her tantrum. And Uranus could not approach her—not until he had vowed that from then on their children would be as beautiful as she had dreamed.

Sure enough, after they stopped quarreling, Gaia produced one child a year. Her brood, the Titans, were godlike in their beauty but of savage temper.

Now Mother Earth had many children, but she was troubled, for they were unkind to each other, and cruelest of all to her firstborn, whom their father had robbed of an eye each.

The huge single eye of the Cyclopes, glowing like a weird gem in the middle of their foreheads, struck terror into everyone who looked at them. Even the serpent's spawn, the hundred-handed giants who looked like enormous centipedes—even these hideous creatures disliked the sight of the Cyclopes and tried to avoid them. And the entire Titan tribe, who were very proud of their beauty, loathed the Cyclopes and kept planning ways to get rid of them forever, but didn't dare come close enough to attack.

Only Gaia, their mother, pitied them. Still, even she did not really relish the sight of them and managed to see as little of her firstborn as possible.

So, feared and shunned by everyone, the Cyclopes twins had only each other in all the new-made world. To say that they loved each other is to say too little. From the first, they were like two halves of the same body. They craved each other with a need that could not be satisfied. As far as possible they tried to *become* each other. They were two-eyed at such times, and although the eyes were in different heads, their vision was single. Coming so close, merging so utterly, they were able to forget the pain of being maimed and hated and isolated.

Time passed. Mother Earth began roaming her caves. She was with child again and feeling very special about this pregnancy because she knew it would be her last. Now she was looking for a place to bear her child. She went deeper than she had ever gone before, cavern beneath cavern beneath cavern, right into the entrails of the earth. She heard a curious mewing sound and held her torch high.

Among the thronging shadows she saw a huge jewel catching the torchlight, and fracturing it. She searched the shadows and saw that the

jewel was an eye, the huge single eye of the girl Cyclops, brimming now with a great crystal tear. But the tear was of happiness. Crawling over her like kittens were four naked babes, each with a single eye in the middle of its forehead.

“Oh, horror, horror... They’re breeding true,” murmured Earth to herself. “My blighted children are giving me blighted grandchildren. If they spawn like this, they will be as numerous as the Titans, who hate them so. They will turn, finally, upon their brothers and sisters. Heaven and earth will be torn by war. I must find some work for these terrible hands to do, some tools they can use instead of weapons.”

She sank down upon the stone floor of the cave, took her daughter’s ugly jeweled head onto her lap, and kissed her face. She gathered her grandchildren about her.

“These are fine children,” she said. “They look just like you. You must lend them to me for a while. I shall teach them a skill that will keep them busy and happy all their days.”

The little Cyclopes grew with monstrous speed and were full-grown in two months. When they came into their strength, Gaia led them among the mountains to a certain chasm where veins of greenish iron streaked the rocks. There, she taught them to quarry and smelt the ore. She gave them an old crater for their smithy. The smoldering volcanic flames were their forge fire; an enormous table stone, their anvil.

First, she taught them toolmaking: how to uproot trees, trim the trunks, and fit the great wooden shafts into lumps of iron, making huge sledgehammers. She was pleased to see they could use their brutal baling-hook fingers as daintily as a spider spinning a web. Under her instruction they learned to heat the ingots red-hot, lay them on their stone anvil, and shape them with the earth-shaking blows of their sledgehammers. And finally, they learned to work the metal as delicately as lace.

The Cyclopes made tools and weapons of iron—hammers, hooks, shovels, swords, spears, and knives. They made ornaments of tin and copper, silver and crystal, as well as lovely baubles of gold, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires.

The Sickle

Gaia bore her child. He was called Cronos, and gave his name to Time.

Mother Earth favored her youngest son. She doted on him and he grew into a youth of blinding beauty. But she knew that her husband was growing jealous again.

She had Cronos meet her in a secret place and said, “Your father hates you, my boy.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you too much.”

“It is possible to love too much?”

“It is, and I do. And he hates you for it. And his hatred is a thing to dread. He robbed my first children of an eye each and made them so ugly they turned into monsters. Now he will rob you of your life.”

“I am a god, you have told me. I cannot die.”

“No, but you can be chopped into a hundred little pieces and buried in a hundred different places—and vanish from my sight as sure as death.”

“He would do that to me?”

“Unless you do it to him first.”

“You counsel me to chop my father into a hundred pieces?”

“As many as it takes, my son.”

“He is very big and very powerful. The flash of his eye is lightning. His footfall is thunder. He shakes hurricanes out of his beard. How can I overcome him?”

“I have made certain preparations. The Cyclopes are as skillful as they are ugly; they work in metal. And I have had them forge an iron sickle sharp enough to cut through the hardest rock as if it were rotten wood—sharp enough to shear through the mighty bones of Uranus.”

“What will he be doing while I’m swinging that sickle?”

“Trust me, Cronos. I have also had my smiths forge a chain of massive iron links. When you are ready to act—and it must be soon, soon—I’ll whistle up your half brothers, the hundred-handed giants, who will take that chain and bind Uranus to the root of a mountain. Shackled to this granite pillar, he will be ready for dismemberment.”

“Are you sure of this, mother?”

“Great enterprise requires great risk, my son. But I know your father, and, believe me, your peril is far greater if you don’t do this than if you do. Think, think—would you rather be king of the gods, ruler supreme of heaven and earth, or a hundred bleeding gobbets of flesh scattered so wide and buried so deep that even I, for all my love, will not be able to gather you up and put you back together?”

Earth’s children obeyed their mother. The Cyclopes forged and honed their iron sickle. Working furiously in the crater that was their smithy, they cast lumps of iron into the volcano’s flames, drew out the red-hot ingots with iron tongs, laid them on the enormous slab of basalt that was their anvil, and hammered out massive rings, which they bent into each other until they had a chain strong enough to hold a god in his agony.

When sickle and chain were ready, Mother Earth whistled up her secret children, the hundred-handed giants. They came to her and she told them what to do.

That night, Uranus wrapped himself in a fleecy cloud and lay down to sleep on a plateau atop Mount Olympus. He awoke from a dream of falling to find himself actually underground in a dungeon cave of Tartarus, later to become the home of the dead. His massive body was chained to a granite pillar, and for all his titanic strength he could not break the links. Giant shapes stood guard. He recognized the glowing single eyes of the Cyclopes and realized with a terrible pang of grief that his mutilated children had risen against him. What a surprise, then, to see that his youngest son, the beautiful Cronos, was the one stepping toward him now, swinging a huge blade.

“Why you?” cried Uranus. “I have never harmed you.”

“And never shall, dear father. My mother has taught me what to do.”

“Spare me!” cried Uranus.

“Farewell,” said Cronos. He swung his sickle, shearing the head of Uranus from his body.

As the head rolled in the dust, it spoke, saying: “You murder me now and take my throne. But a son of yours shall do the same to you. Live in fear, Cronos, for a severed head never lies.”

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The Betrayals

Now Cronos was king of the gods, Lord of the Sky and All Beneath, wielding awful power. Nevertheless, he could not forget those words uttered from the bloody dust and did indeed live in fear. The fear grew worse at night. He remembered it was at night that his father had been whisked from his mountain-top to the place of execution. So Cronos slept poorly and was tormented by nightmares. Finally, he complained to his mother.

“Get married,” she said.

“Why?”

“A good wife brings dreamless sleep.”

“My father thought he had a good wife, and look what happened to him.”

“Ungrateful wretch!” shouted Gaia. “Do you dare reproach me? Me, your mother, who saved you from your father’s deadly jealousy and showed you how to become king of the gods?”

“I’m sorry, mother. I know how much I owe to your loving care. Whom shall I marry?”

“There’s only one wife for you—my strongest, wisest, most beautiful daughter, the goddess Rhea, who will become Mother Earth after me.”

“Very well. Prepare the wedding.”

For a while after his marriage Cronos slept soundly and did not dream. But then a thought hit him.

“Was it really wise to get married?” he muttered to himself. “Rhea will surely give me sons, and it was a son my father warned me against. Or am I jumping at shadows? My mother loves me best. Had there been danger in wedlock, she would never have made me marry. Nevertheless, there are certain steps I can take. After all, I needed powerful allies to dispose of my father. I’ll see to it that no rebellious son of mine will have the same help.”

Whereupon Cronos performed his second great act of treachery. He visited the crater smithy where the Cyclopes wrought their marvelous tools and weapons and ornaments. He stood on the anvil and spoke to the giant figures whose single eyes were like pits of red light in the flickering forge fires. And he made his voice as sweet as the wind blowing off the mountain to sing among the pines and cedars.

“Brothers, sisters, dear Cyclopes clan, I owe you a debt of gratitude that can never be paid. In my youth you helped me against my savage sire, who was bent on my destruction. I remember ... I remember ... and have always loved you for what you did on that night long ago. Now, dearest kinfolk, I am in danger again. Enemies plot against me. Once again I need the help that only you can give. Matchless smiths that you are, use your skill, I pray, to fashion an iron cage with bars so massively wrought that no creature in heaven, on earth, or beneath it, no leviathan that prowls the depths of the sea shall be able to break out of that cage once its gate is bolted. Brothers, sisters, will you once again help your king in his hour of need?”

Cronos knew this was the way to handle the great, simple-hearted brutes. He knew that they were so parched for affection, so raw inside from being disliked by everyone, that they would believe anything he said if he praised them first and pretended to like them.

They did believe him and were eager to please him. They worked night and day until they had built an enormous cage, strong enough to hold a herd of wild elephants. The Cyclopes sent word to Cronos that the cage was finished and ready to receive his enemies.

Cronos came to the smithy, but not alone. He had instructed the hundred-handed giants to follow him to the crater and wait hidden on the slope until he called them. He entered the smithy and laughed with joy when he saw the huge cage. It was set on wheels, as he had asked, and its gate was bolted by an iron shackle whose link was as thick as the bars.

“Good work!” he cried. “But is it really as strong as it looks?”

“Stronger!” they shouted.

“Let’s test it,” he said. “It is very well known that you Cyclopes are the most powerful creatures in the entire world. If the cage can hold you, it can hold anyone. Please enter the cage, all of you. I’ll chain the gate and you must try to break out. It’s the only way to test what you have made.”

The Cyclopes yelled and clanged their tools; they were pleased with themselves. They filed into the cage laughing because they knew it was made so strong that even they, with all their volcanic force, could not escape. When the last one had entered, Cronos wrapped the chain around the sliding gate and stuck the great bolt through its links.

“Try to get out!” he called.

The Cyclopes flung themselves at the bars. They seized them with their enormous hands and tried to bend them. The bars held. Some of them had brought their sledgehammers inside. They swung the mallets, striking the bars, the gate and chain. Metal rang against metal in a hideous din. The very walls of the crater shook. But the cage held.

“It is strong, brother!” they called. “Stronger than strong! Now let us out. Open the gate and let us out.”

No one answered. They peered through the bars and saw only the forge fire and the dancing red shadows. Cronos had vanished.

“Cronos!” they cried. “Brother! King! Come open the gate!”

Thick shapes blotted the shadows. They saw the hundred-handed giants slithering into the smithy like giant centipedes. Silently, the invaders reached with their hundred hands. Silently, they seized the cage and rolled it out of the crater and down a chain of rocky passages—down, down to the deepest cavern that lies at the root of the mountain called Olympus. And there they left the cage and its cargo of leaping, howling, weeping Cyclopes.

Midway up the cavern chain, they met Cronos coming down. “Oh, best of giants,” he cried, “handiest of helpers! You have done me a great service this day. You have helped me rid myself of the monsters who dared plot against me. And now I shall reward you. Follow me down again and I shall lead you to my richest treasure vault, which is stacked high with bars of gold and chests of diamonds and rubies and emeralds. All shall be yours!”

Greedily, the giants followed him. They didn’t know that they, in turn, were being followed. They were so drunk with visions of treasure that they didn’t realize they were being trailed down the rocky tunnel by a band of Titans, those elder brothers of Cronos, who had become his court and served him in all ways.

Cronos led the giants down to a cave that had a narrow mouth but widened suddenly into a great chamber. It was just one level up from where

the Cyclopes were penned—close enough, indeed, so that the giants could hear a faint shrieking as it drifted up through the rock floor. But they paid no heed. They rushed into the dark chamber, which grew darker still as the Titans came racing down the tunnel and rolled an enormous boulder across the mouth of the cave.

The giants milled about in the vanishing light, stunned that Cronos, who had used them to imprison the Cyclopes, was now imprisoning them.

But the realization grew. They knew they were being sealed up in the bowels of the earth. They raged and frothed, leaped and shouted. They pounded at the rock until their many hands were lumps of bloody gristle. But the rock stood against their blows. The Titans trundled other boulders down the tunnel, wedging them against the first great rock that blocked the portal, until the whole corridor was choked with boulders and the only way to free the captives would be to tear the mountain up by its roots.

The Cannibal God

With the Cyclopes and the giants now buried beneath tons of earth, Cronos slept peacefully again. But after a while he began to hear a faint shrieking at night. It seemed to be seeping out of the earth and floating up to the top of Mount Olympus, and he realized that the caged Cyclopes and the sealed-up giants must be howling underground.

“Ridiculous,” he said to himself. “Why should I let these sounds bother me? They can’t get out no matter how they howl.”

After some time the howling stopped, or he stopped hearing it, and Cronos almost forgot his prisoners. But now mighty oaks had grown from certain patches of earth where pieces of Uranus were buried, and when the wind blew, the oak leaves seethed, murmuring: “Beware, Cronos, beware....”

In his sleep, Cronos heard the trees talking, and he was seized again by nightmare—which grew worse when Rhea told him she was pregnant.

“Will our firstborn be a son?” he whispered to himself. “Is this the one who will try to overthrow me as my father foretold? Hah! I’ll give the seditious brat no chance. If it’s a boy, I’ll drown him like a kitten. A daughter I may let live, for I am tender-hearted.”

But when his first child appeared, Cronos was in such a hurry to get rid of it that he didn’t wait to find out whether it was a boy or a girl, nor did he take the time to drown it. He simply swallowed it whole, as a cat swallows a grasshopper. It all happened so quickly that Rhea believed him when he told her that the infant had been born dead and that he had swiftly disposed of it so that she would not be saddened by the sight of the tiny corpse.

And she believed him the second time she gave birth and the babe vanished. She half believed him the third time. But by the fourth time she was growing mistrustful. She tried to fight against her suspicions. Her

husband was displaying greater grief at the loss of each child, and this confused her.

Then her fifth infant vanished before she could hold it in her arms. Cronos, weeping, told her that this one had also been born dead and that he had quickly burned the body to save her from distress. This time she found she could not believe him. He was sobbing loudly but his eyes were gleaming, and not with tears. Besides, she realized that he seemed a little fatter after each child vanished.

Rhea went to old Mother Earth and told her tale. "I have been wondering about this," said Gaia. "All the rest of my Titan brood is very fertile; they have given me hundreds of grandchildren—big, beautiful ones. You and Cronos alone have given me none."

"Oh, mother, what shall I do?"

"Send Cronos to me."

Cronos came to her and she said, "Have you been murdering your children?"

"They were born dead. Didn't Rhea tell you?"

"She told me much. Now you must tell what it means."

"Well, mother, your youngest daughter, the wife you chose for me, seems incapable of producing a live infant. But I'll pretend no grief. For you must know what my father foretold with his last breath: that a son of mine would do to me what I was doing to him."

"Then you *have* been killing them?"

"No need. They were born dead."

"You're a liar, my son."

"I am king. The truth is what I say it is."

"Cronos, I have loved you well, too well. For your sake I have committed crimes. I taught you to defend yourself against a murderous, evil father, thinking that your beauty was a sign of goodness and that you would reign justly and wisely over the boiling seas and the new-made earth and all the different kinds of things coming in to being. Now, alas, I see you turning into the very image of your bloody father. Stop, son. Stop, now! Don't devour your children. Let them live and grow. And I shall forgive you. Rhea will forgive you. The blessings of the earth and its fountains shall be upon you. And you shall reign happily and well."

"I am king, mother."

“So was your father.”

“I am king and intend to remain king. I am the one to forgive or condemn, to bless or curse, to bestow life or death, as I please.”

Gaia left him and went to Rhea. “You must be brave, my daughter,” she said. “There is a way to save your next child, but it will require a great deal of courage on your part.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“When you become pregnant again, pretend you’re not until you can no longer conceal your condition. Then lie to him about the date so that he won’t be expecting you to go into labor until some time after you actually do. No one will know the truth except you and me. I shall attend your labor and be your midwife, and when the child is born, I shall take it to a safe place. Afterward, you will tell your husband that you have miscarried.”

“But my child, my first live one, how can I bear not to have it with me?”

“You shall visit him every day. I promise.”

“Will it be a boy?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I can’t tell you, but I will tell you this: when I know something without knowing how, it always comes true. If we properly deceive your husband, you shall have a son and a mighty one—the next king of the gods, if all goes well.”

On the night that Rhea knew her baby was to be born, she crept out of the garden of Olympus and followed her mother down a moonlit slope to a grove of oaks. She saw light splintering among the hulking shadows; it was a golden cradle hanging from the tallest tree, glittering as it swung, as if the new moon itself had dropped from the sky and had been caught in the branches.

“That cradle is for the child you will bear tonight,” said Gaia.

“It’s lovely here,” said Rhea, “but quite close to Olympus. Suppose Cronos stumbles on this place while hunting?”

“I have chosen carefully,” said Gaia. “These oaks spring from the butchered body of your father. Their taproots drink of his vengeful blood. And so the trees have learned to hate Cronos, and will stand sentinel for us. Should he approach, every loud crow that nests in these branches will cry a

warning and I shall hide the child before he comes. Enough talk now. It is time for you to bear your son.”

Rhea squatted on the great white pillars of her thighs. Her hair was a net of moonlight. Her bare feet clutched the ground. Gaia pressed her belly and caught the child as it slid out.

Shouting with glee, she held him to the sky. A west wind arose, making the moon rock like a boat. Stars danced. Night birds rejoiced.

Gaia gazed at her daughter. “We’ll have to change our plan,” she said. “Cronos will never believe that you had a miscarriage. You look too happy.”

“I can’t help it, mother. I *am* too happy.”

“Yes, and as soon as as he sees you, he’ll understand what has happened and will begin to hunt for the child.”

“What shall we do?”

Gaia snatched up a rock and wrapped it in a white cloth. “Go to him, holding this to your breast as if you were suckling a babe.”

“First let me hold my son. Isn’t he the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

“Yes.”

“My marriage almost killed me mother. But I’m alive again. Alive! This babe is the breath of life to me. I name him Zeus.”

This meant breath in their language.

“Zeus he is and shall be. Go now daughter. Take up your rock and go. Trick your husband and save your child.”

Cronos awoke from a deep sleep to see Rhea approaching. Her face was radiant; she held a white bundle to her breast and was humming a lullaby. Cronos leaped from the great bed, snorting and bellowing. He snatched the bundle from her and swallowed it clothes and all.

The stone lay heavily upon him and he thought: “Curse it, this is one solid brat she dropped. He sits on my gut like a rock. Undoubtedly, he was the one destined to make trouble, and she tried to hide him from me, the treacherous bitch! Well, never again. I’ll find a way to get rid of her, too.”

Zeus

Rhea didn't dare inflame her husband's suspicions by going to the grove too often or staying long enough to suckle her babe. So Gaia employed wet nurses—two nymphs who had recently given birth. One of them was a wood nymph named Melissa who belonged to the bee clan; her breasts ran with honey. The other, Lacta, was a meadow nymph, and the baby god drank rich milk from her breasts. So huge was his appetite, though, that he had soon sucked the nymphs dry and his grandmother had to import a she-goat.

The goat's name was Amalthea. Larger than any cow, she had a pelt of tightly curled fur, white as cloud fleece. Her eyes were slanted pools of yellow light; her horns, silvery gold as the new moon. Three nipples ran with milk, three ran with honey, and she never went dry. She not only suckled the young Zeus but allowed him to ride her like a horse. She swam with him, stood under the trees when he climbed them, and guarded him while he slept. She was the first creature he ever loved, and there was no one he ever loved more.

Now the godling had a quality that not even his doting mother or his wise old grandmother could appreciate. He was born with a sense of kingship that gave each of his senses imperial power. He claimed everything that touched his awareness: tree, nymph, spider, fish, cat, raindrop, wind, star, mudhole. Nothing was too big, too small, too wet, too dry, too old, or too young. Everything fascinated him; nothing disgusted him or made him afraid.

Zeus learned that he could do more with his eyes than see. His gaze carried the essence of himself along the line of his sight and seized all that he looked upon. He could make pebbles dance. As he grew, he made rocks move. They wrenched themselves out of their sockets of earth to roll after

him. By simply looking at birds, he could make them motionless, then loose them again to fly in circles about his head.

All this time, Cronos, who was as patient as he was crafty, kept watching Rhea very closely. He also sent his Titan courtiers out daily, spying in all directions, until finally one came to him with a disturbing report. Cronos sent for Rhea and said: "I hear of a magical child roaming the woods—a boy, very handsome and supple as a sapling. Do you know anything about him?"

"No, my lord."

"You know, wife, I had a dream about this. I saw the lad running across a field and a boulder rolling after him like a pet dog. You were standing beside me, watching, and when I asked you about him, you said: 'Boy? What boy? There's no boy here.' See how you are? Always lying."

"I cannot help what you dream. I know nothing of such a lad. Are you sure he exists? Have you seen him when you were awake?"

"There are those who have."

"Perhaps he is of the Titan brood? A nephew of ours, then?"

"Nonsense! Any such child would have been introduced at court, you know that. Rhea, something is wrong. Something dwells in the forest and has become a menace to me. I shall go hunting tomorrow. I'll take my hounds, who can track down any game, and my spear that never misses its mark. I'll run him like a deer, whoever he is, and cut him down when he's brought to bay."

Rhea fled the garden of Olympus and sought her mother. "Hide my son!" she cried. "Do it now. His father comes a-hunting!"

And she sobbed out her tale.

"The boy will be hidden deep, deep ..." said Gaia. "But only long enough for Cronos to grow unwary. Then we must take action to end this terror."

She called Zeus to her and said, "You must leave this place and go underground."

"For how long?"

"Until your father decides that you don't exist."

"What shall I do underground?"

"Learn what lies beneath, for it is also part of your realm-to-be, and not the least part. Explore its caves, its buried rivers, the roots of mountains.

Observe the veins of iron and copper and tin. Study jewels that look like lumps of coal until the eyes grow wise. Look upon giant worms, wintering serpents, and twisted demons who reside in the clefts of rocks and shall serve you when you have founded death's domain. But, most importantly, you must visit your impounded kinsfolk—the Cyclopes, in their terrible cage, and the walled-up giants of a hundred hands. Go to them, learn their grief, judge the heat of their rage, and think how to befriend them. For it is these monsters who will help you establish your kingdom. Go, grandson, go under now. I shall send you word when it is safe to return.”

Cronos assembled a hunting party of Titans. He ordered out his pack of hounds. Specially bred to serve him on the chase, they were white as arctic wolves but with golden manes and plumed golden tails. They were swift enough to overtake a stag, powerful enough to pull it down in mid-stride, and had noses keen enough to follow a track three weeks old.

Horses had not yet been created, but Cronos and his Titans could run tirelessly all day long, and almost as swiftly as their hounds.

Indeed, this hunt lasted for a day and a night, and into a second day. Cronos made his party search every copse, every grove, every stand of river reed. They foraged up every slope of every hill on the Olympian range and entered every cave, but they found no trace of the boy. Cronos was in a savage mood when he returned to his palace.

He was very weary after the hunt, but he could not sleep. He tossed and turned, then finally realized what was keeping him awake. It was the silence. The howling had stopped. For the first time since he had caged the Cyclopes and trapped the giants, he did not hear their shrieking as it rose through layers of rock and drifted faintly on the wind to Olympus. It must be understood that screams of pain are a tyrant's lullaby.

“Why don't I hear them?” he muttered to himself. “Can they have broken out? No ... impossible! They must simply have grown so weak that they can utter no sound. Or, perhaps, since they are given no food, they have devoured each other and there is no one left.”

He kept trying to comfort himself. Nevertheless, he could not sleep. He arose and began to prowl the corridors of the cloud castle. He was boiling with unfocused rage. He needed to hurt someone and he knew who that someone was. This was the night to punish his wife for all the unwanted

infants she had borne, especially that last one who still lay like a stone in his belly.

He ran to the wall where his sickle hung. He lifted it down and swung it lightly, smiling. "A bit rusty," he said to himself, "but sharp enough to slice that pestiferous wife of mine into as many pieces as it did my father."

Holding the sickle, he strode toward the far wing of the castle where Rhea slept. But living with a murderous husband had taught her to be a light sleeper. She had trained herself to pick up the vibrations of his wrath even as she slept. Now, when she heard his heavy footsteps and the clank of iron, she knew it was time to leave.

She slipped out of her bed, ran into the garden, and slid like a shadow through the trees and down the slope. She listened for sounds of pursuit but heard nothing.

"Mother ... mother," she she called softly. She didn't dare raise her voice, nor did she have to. Gaia fledged herself out of the darkness. She came in the form of an enormous crone. Her hair hung like the vine called silver lace, and her eyes were slits of moonlight.

"Mother ... mother," whispered Rhea. "My husband has taken up his sickle. He means me terrible harm."

"Yes, daughter, it's time for you to vanish for a while."

"Where shall I go?"

"Follow your son underground."

"Nothing would give me more joy. But he is so fiery, so proud, the little love. Would he welcome a mother trailing after him on his first adventure?"

"He will be able to use your help. He has much to do down there. He will be freeing your maimed brothers and sisters. Yes, I mean the Cyclopes, blighted first by their father's jealousy, then imprisoned by their brother's fear."

"He buried them deep. How many times have I listened to him boast about locking the Cyclopes in their own cage? What can my son do? He's only half-grown."

"And will grow no older unless we get rid of his father."

"But can we? How?"

"The first step is to free the Cyclopes. They will serve us well in the dreadful war that is to come. Go down to your son now; stay with him until I recall you both."

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Underground

Not only prophetic oaks sprouted from the murdered Uranus, whose body had been chopped into small pieces and buried in many different places. Worms gathered too. They swarmed in a great, greedy tangle to drink his blood. They tunneled into the massive shards of his bones, fed on the rich marrow, and grew huge.

As they feasted on the god who had been cut up alive, they became filled with his unspent wrath. Envenomed through every cell of their bodies, they primed themselves for murder. Clothing themselves in leather scales as tough as armor plate, they grew teeth like ivory blades and spiked tails that could knock down trees. Finally, to become utterly destructive, they sprouted great leather wings and taught themselves to blow jets of flame out of their gullets.

So it was that a generation of dragons sprang out of the butchered god and grew into the very embodiment of spite. They became a breed of monster that was to form a taste for heroes and torment humankind for the next thousand years.

Now, young Zeus, while exploring a chain of caverns, came upon a dragon den. Separate dens, really. Except for one night a year, which was set aside for mating, no two dragons could meet without trying to kill each other. When the young were hatched out of the great green eggs, mother dragons kept them away from other adults, who liked to eat their young, just like Cronos.

Zeus wedged himself into a cleft of rock and hid there, observing his first dragon. He didn't know that these beasts had grown from the maggots that had fed themselves fat on the blood and bones of his buried grandfather. Though he felt no kinship to the scaly brutes, he studied them with great interest. He was especially struck by the way the dragons spouted flame.

For some reason, this fascinated him beyond its own uniqueness. He knew this deadly trait was important to him, but he didn't know why.

He made his way to the Cyclopes' cage. He slipped into the chamber silently. Now, these early gods were not easily moved to sympathy. They kept their compassion for themselves and did not really feel the sufferings of anyone else. But when young Zeus looked through the bars into the cage and saw those gigantic figures standing as still as trees, their eyes blazing into the darkness—when he saw them looming there, so huge and patient, like penned cattle—he felt a strange tugging in his chest that he didn't know was pity. Their single blazing eyes misted over and big tears welled up until they overflowed and fell hissing onto the cage floor. Zeus saw those lava-hot tears, smelled the salt steam of them, and realized that these kinfolk of his had been standing here in the darkness for many years. He felt his own eyes getting wet and realized that for the first time in his life he was weeping. Then and there he knew what he would try to do.

He turned away from the cage and entered a rocky corridor. There, he leaned against a wall and looked at the floor. He stared steadily at a pile of pebbles until they began to stir. The pile broke. Pebbles came rolling toward him. Faster and faster they rolled, leaping and turning in the air. He looked away and the pebbles dropped. He stared at a fist-sized stone. It did not move. He stared hard and saw the stone twitch. It rose into the air, fell, and came skipping toward him. He looked away and it stopped. He turned his gaze on a medium-sized rock that was half-buried. It sat there motionless. He glared at it, pouring his will along the line of his sight. He saw the rock rise from its bed of earth, tearing itself free, shedding clumps of dirt. He made it rise straight up and hang in the air, then blinked and let it fall back into its hole.

Now he was ready. Singing and shouting, he raced along the dark corridor until he came to a passageway that was blocked by boulders. He knew that beyond this place the hundred-handed giants had been trapped.

He saw that the rocks clogging the passageway were not socketed in earth, but were a kind of huge rubble; they had been wedged in together, leaning on each other. He studied the formation and selected a certain boulder—not the nearest one, not the largest one, but a rock that was central to the mass. He fixed his gaze on it and stared until he felt his eyes popping out of his head. It sat there, massive and motionless.

Zeus sent his mind back along the seedbed of ancestral memory, back to when the earth was a white-hot coal spinning on the edge of chaos, cooling into red-hot rock. In the deep fertile crags and valleys of the young god's mind, stone became liquid, and his gaze began to soften the rock he looked upon. It softened; it trembled like jelly. That ponderous boulder, central to the mass, quivered, shook, shifted—loosening the entire rock jam. Tons of rock came sliding out of the corridor, faster and faster, in a terrific cataract of stone.

Zeus leaped out of the way, or he would have been crushed like an insect. He watched the rocks clatter past. The passageway was clear; and the cave mouth was a black hole. Out of that hole slithered what looked like a gigantic centipede. It was one of the giants, crawling on his hands, blinking in the dusty light.

“Come out!” cried Zeus. “You are free!”

The other giants came crawling out of the cave and squatted in the passageway, blinking at the young god.

“You are free,” he said. “It is I who have ended your captivity. I, Zeus, your kinsman and your king-to-be, if you help me now.”

“Hail!” they shouted. “All hail to you, oh liberator! We shall serve you in any way you wish.”

“Come, then. A perilous task awaits. And I have need of your many strong hands.”

He led them at a run down the cavern chain. The giants were so big that they had to stoop, or their heads would have scraped the cave roofs. Startled bats wheeled in a cloud, chittering. He led the giants to the dragon den. Before entering, he gathered them about him and told them what they were to do.

They entered the den. It was littered with bones, for the dragons went up at night to hunt and dragged their kill back to their cave. A gust of blue lit the den as the dragon came to meet them, not yet spitting flame, but softly exhaling it. The many-handed ones were huge, and their wavering shadows even larger, but they looked small beside the looming beast—as small as ducks facing an alligator.

“Now!” cried Zeus.

The giants flung themselves on the dragon, which was frozen by surprise, for nothing ever attacks a dragon. Before it could recover, it was clamped

by hundreds of hands with fingers stronger than baling hooks.

The giants, obeying their instructions, lofted the dragon high over their heads and held it there as they raced along the corridor. It was spitting fire, but its head was tilted firmly upward and the flame of its breath was going straight up, singeing bats on the wing.

With a mighty shout that bounced off the cave walls and redoubled, echoing, Zeus led the giants and their living torch to the place where, so many years before, they had wheeled the Cyclopes' cage. And there in the cage towered the Cyclopes. Dragon fire lit up their great, single eyes.

The giants had their instructions. Swiftly and expertly, they handled the dragon, wielding it as a welder does his torch. Using the beast's fiery breath, they aimed his blue flame on the bolt of the chain that bound the gate.

The big shackle grew red-hot, then white-hot, then melted away. The chain clanged to the floor, the gate slid open. The Cyclopes streamed out of the cage; they fell on their knees before Zeus.

He raised his voice and said: "Good Cyclopes, worthy giants, I who have brought you freedom now promise you vengeance. Your enemy is my enemy, and we shall fight him together. Yes, we shall wage war upon the tyrant Cronos and his Titan court. But to fight is not enough; we must also win. So we must prepare for this war. I bid you remain underground for a time. You, Cyclopes, shall search the caverns until you find a live crater to be your smithy. Stoke the volcanic flames that will be your forge fire. Swing your hammers in my service. Make an armory of weapons. But to forge these weapons you will need metal. You will need iron and copper. And this the giants will provide. They will dig and delve with their many mighty hands and tear the raw metal from the very entrails of the earth. And when the war is over and I come into my kingship, no one, I vow, will stand closer to the throne than you, my brothers and sisters. Yes, so high shall be your estate that your blemishes will be viewed as marks of privilege and everyone will regret not having been born with a single eye or a hundred hands."

Family Reunion

While Zeus was underground, Gaia employed certain serpents to go down and tell her what was happening below. Upon the evening of the twenty-first day, one such serpent reported the liberation of the Cyclopes. Mother Earth shouted with joy and went to seek Cronos.

She said, “My mother’s instinct tells me that you are troubled by indigestion.”

“A feeble term for what I suffer,” said Cronos. “Something sits on my gut like a rock.”

“Something you ate, no doubt?”

“No doubt, mother. No doubt.”

“I can help you, son. A wood nymph of my acquaintance has found certain herbs that can cure the worst stomach ache.”

“Go fetch her. I’ll try anything.”

Far underground a topaz-eyed snake slithered toward Zeus, put its leathery head to the youth’s ear, and whispered dryly: “I am sent by your grandmother. Her message is: ‘We strike tomorrow!’”

All night Zeus climbed up through the cavern chain, and dawn found him with Gaia. She took him into her huge embrace and said, “Today is the day, if all goes well, that you lose a father and gain some brothers and sisters.”

“You’ve been busy,” said Zeus.

“So have you, my boy. You have done great deeds below, and now that you have provided us with such strong allies, we can open hostilities.”

“I’m ready,” said Zeus.

“Clothe yourself in these rags and put on this wig of straw. You are to transform yourself into a bumpkin who has fallen in love with a beautiful wood nymph—so violently, so helplessly in love that your poor wits are

quite addled. You have gone mute and can moan only ‘Dione ... Dione,’ which is her name, and follow her about, begging with your eyes.”

“An undignified role, grandmother.”

“You’ll be able to afford dignity after you gain your throne, grandson. Now hearken. Disguised as this love-sodden swain, you shall attend the nymph when I bring her to meet Cronos. You shall remain in the background, but stand ready to act when I give the word.”

“Instruct me, Earth.”

Clad in rags and wearing a wig of straw, the tall young god listened carefully as Gaia told him what to do.

Now it is known that those who are most careful about themselves are precisely those who will submit to the most brutal treatment as long as it is recommended by someone who supposedly knows something about health. This has been going on since the beginning of time, and started with Cronos and his bellyache. The king of the gods had a completely suspicious nature. He mistrusted everyone, especially his family. He also loathed strangers. He surrounded himself with Titan guards and never ate until a slave had tasted the food, lest it be poisoned. He imprisoned and executed anyone who looked at him the wrong way. And yet, he was ready to believe his mother, whom he mistrusted even more than he did his wife, when she told him that a wood nymph had mixed certain herbs that would cure the griping pain in his gut.

He stood now on a sunny meadow, waiting. He saw his enormous mother trundling toward him over the grass, followed by two figures. One was a wood nymph clad only in leaves. Behind her came a shambling, slack-mouthed fellow with a thatch of straw-colored hair. He carried a keg and a flagon, and Cronos took him for a servant.

“All hail, king of the gods!” cried Gaia. “This is the dryad, Dione, come to ease your pain.”

“Glory, glory,” murmured the nymph in a voice that was like the west wind sighing through the treetops. “If by my poor woodland skills I am privileged to serve our beloved king, I shall count myself the proudest, happiest dryad in the entire forest.”

And she smiled at him so sweetly, and looked so long-legged and lovely in her brief costume, that Cronos was charmed and quite forgot that he had

meant to have one of his Titans taste her potion first to make sure it wasn't poisoned.

"Come, pour!" said Gaia.

Whereupon the nymph's servant swung the keg from his shoulder and poured purple wine into the flagon. Cronos was amazed by the lad's strength. He handled the heavy keg one-handed, as if it were a pitcher. He passed the flagon to the dryad, who took a pouch from her girdle and dusted some powder into the wine. Kneeling, she offered the great flagon to Cronos, holding it out with both hands. He took it and lifted it to his lips.

Sun-ripened Attic grapes had been pressed for this wine, which was then aged in oak for a hundred years. Such a wine was always mixed with water, but this was undiluted. It was so strong that it quite hid the flavor of what the nymph had put into it—mustard and salt, mashed up with putrefying frogs' eggs.

Cronos drank down the entire flask in one gulp.

The earth tilted. Cronos braced himself between two trees and began to heave, a terrible, dry retching.

"The medicine is trying to work, my lord," said Dione. "It needs a bit of assistance."

"Now!" cried Gaia.

Zeus hiked his tunic, baring a long, sinewy thigh. He pivoted on his heel and, with all the terrific leverage of his immortally powerful young body, kicked his father in the belly.

Cronos doubled over and began to vomit. He spewed up first the stone he had swallowed, then each of his five children, who, being gods, were undigested and still alive. They came out in reverse order of the way they had been swallowed—the youngest first. This was a girl, Hera. Next came a boy, Poseidon. Then another girl, Demeter. Then another boy, Hades. And finally the eldest child, a daughter named Hestia.

Residing in the great belly, they had grown to child-size. Now, as they breathed the golden air, they immediately gained the full strength of their radiant youth and danced about their fallen father, shouting and singing.

"Brothers and sisters!" cried Zeus. "Welcome to the world!"

He had cast off rags and wig and stood revealed as himself. The young gods embraced him. Hera clung to him, kissing his face again and again.

“You saved us!” she cried. “You are the youngest of us all, but the bravest and the strongest and the wisest. You shall be our king!”

His two other sisters cried, “Yes, yes, you must be our king!”

Poseidon grinned falsely and nodded. Black-browed Hades, the eldest brother, looked very somber, but said nothing.

“You shall be our king now,” cried Hera. “And my husband later!”

“I shall serve as your war chief now,” said Zeus, “and king later, if we win. Brothers, sisters, you are under orders. Catch the old king! Bind him fast!”

But when they turned to obey, they gaped in astonishment. For Cronos, who had been sprawled unconscious on the meadow, was no longer there. Only Zeus understood what must have happened. From the depths of his swoon Cronos had realized his peril, and with his matchless talent for survival had summoned a last desperate magic and made himself vanish.

The Magic Weapons

Zeus visited the smithy where the Cyclopes were making weapons. With him was his sister Hera. When they entered the crater, they knew something was wrong. The iron music of the anvils had fallen silent. They heard angry shouts and the sound of scuffling. A party of Cyclopes came to Zeus dragging a young smith, bound hand and foot.

“He has gone mad, oh Lord,” said the head smith. “He refuses to work at his appointed task and, when questioned, will answer only in the wildest fashion about his hammer telling him something, and about something else he saw in the flames.”

“Question him yourself,” whispered Hera to Zeus.

Zeus spoke directly to the captive. “What is your name?”

“I am Brontes.”

“Why are you acting this way?”

“I am doing what I must.”

Zeus spoke softly to Hera. “It’s the dreadful heat and the incessant din. It’s a wonder more of them don’t go crazy.”

“I don’t think he’s crazy,” said Hera. “Make him talk.”

Zeus said, “Brontes, tell me exactly what happened.”

“Exactly this,” said Brontes. “When I started work this morning, my sledgehammer jumped in my hands and danced on the anvil, beating out a song:

Light above,
Dark beneath.
To vanquish the sire
Staff with three teeth,
And spear of fire.

“Does it have a meaning?” asked Zeus.

“I looked into the forge fire,” said Brontes. “In the core of the flame I saw pictures form. A brass helmet like an overturned bowl, spilling darkness. A three-tined staff, or trident. Your brother Hades held the helmet. Your brother Poseidon wielded the trident.”

“How about the spear of fire?”

“A thunderbolt!” shouted Brontes. “For you, oh Zeus. Weapon now, scepter to be.”

Zeus turned to Hera, “What do you think?”

“Helmet of darkness,” she murmured. “Trident. Thunderbolt. Could these be the weapons to defeat Cronos? Perhaps this one-eyed fellow has been granted special insight. Perhaps he has been chosen to receive a message from the very center of mystery.”

“Perhaps,” said Zeus. “That crazed song has the ring of truth. I thank you, Brontes, and commission you to make this magical gear: a helmet of darkness, a trident, and a thunderbolt. Above all, my thunderbolt! Do that first.”

Cronos, whose spies were everywhere, soon learned that the Cyclopes were forging magical weapons to ensure his defeat.

“This must not be,” he said to himself. “I’ll have to think of a way to stop production.”

When Cronos was threatened, he thought quickly. He stood on a riverbank and whistled in a certain way. From the depths rose a lovely water nymph, naked and dripping. She climbed onto the bank and listened, smiling, as he told her what he wanted.

“What will you give me if I do?” she said.

“The question that should concern you,” growled Cronos, “is what you’ll get if you don’t.”

The crater was so smoky that no one saw the naiad come in. She glided to the center of the great chamber and jumped on an anvil. Standing there, clad only in her long hair, she glimmered like a white birch. And like a tree casting a shadow, she spread a riverine coolness through the sweltering crater. A low, hungry moaning arose from the male Cyclopes as they moved slowly toward her.

Now the female Cyclopes always worked alongside the males, handling the same hot ingots and swinging the same heavy sledgehammers. They

were as large and powerful as the males, and as dangerous in any kind of fight.

Shrieking with rage, they attacked the males with swinging mallets. Many of the males had dropped their hammers and were helpless against the savage assault. They fled. Some of them were caught and brutally beaten. Others were thrown into the fire pit and were badly charred before they could climb out.

Two of the females charged the anvil where the naiad stood, meaning to do such dreadful things to her that no nymph would ever again try to steal their mates. But it is almost impossible to catch a naiad—or any kind of nymph who doesn't want to be caught. This one simply melted into the shadows and vanished.

It was upon this day that Brontes proved himself for all time. He had been working hard, concentrating so fiercely that he didn't even see the naiad. When the fighting started, he simply built himself a wall of anvils. Sheltered behind his iron ramparts, he continued to shape the white-hot lump of metal, completely ignoring the wild scuffle that raged about him.

The disappearance of the naiad refueled the wrath of the she-Cyclopes. They boiled out of the crater, rushed to the river, and began to hurl huge boulders into it, hoping to crush whatever naiads might dwell there. They threw in so many rocks that they quite choked the river. But they were still not appeased because they felt that the naiads had slipped away.

Roaming the riverbank, they knocked down trees with their mallets, piled up the fallen trunks and set them afire. They wanted to raze the countryside, but, luckily, it had rained the day before and the flames did not spread. Finally, they straggled back toward the crater, still simmering with rage.

Cronos, hovering above, was very pleased by all this. He knew how badly he had disrupted the work of the smiths and hoped now that they would never be able to complete the weapons destined to defeat him. He was unaware that Brontes, ignoring the whole affair, was working stubbornly, and by this time had finished the helmet of darkness and had begun work on the trident.

Before the Battle

Cronos met with the elder Titans that formed his war council.

“I have disrupted the work of the weapon foundry,” he said. “We must now take the offensive before these accursed rebels gain strength.”

“Are you perhaps not overestimating them, my lord?” said one elder. “Can they really be considered dangerous? They’re only a rabble of young malcontents, aren’t they, with no real support?”

“Very real support,” said Cronos. “The Cyclopes are peerless smiths and savage brawlers, and the hundred-handed giants would be sufficiently dangerous one-handed. Both tribes were delivered from captivity by Zeus and would follow him through fire.”

“They may have to,” said a Titan named Atlas.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that your son’s expedition underground was not wholly a triumph. He freed the Cyclopes and the giants, true, and they are strong allies. But in freeing them, he managed to offend those who are even more deadly. I speak of dragon-kind. Zeus humiliated the entire breed by seizing one of their chieftains and using him as a tool, a torch—a *thing*, in fact. Dragon-kind, I say, has declared itself an enemy to Zeus and his brothers and sisters. And a legion of these armor-plated, spike-tailed, fire-breathing monsters stand ready to fight on our side. I can vouch for them. I have been underground myself, getting to know the beasts.”

“That settles it!” shouted Cronos. “We attack immediately. You, my good Atlas, shall be our battle chief.”

“Thank you,” said Atlas. “My dragons will make a living bonfire of your enemies.”

Zeus went to the smithy. “Lord,” said Brontes, “we have finished the helmet of darkness and the three-tined staff. But we have not been able to finish your thunderbolt, for we lack the most important ingredient.”

He held up a marvelously wrought zigzag lance of polished iron, volt-blue, radiant. Held aloft in the Cyclops’s huge hand, it seemed aflame with energy, and branded the shadows just as a lightning bolt brands the sky.

“It’s beautiful,” cried Zeus. “Give it to me!”

“Not yet,” growled Brontes. “It’s not finished.”

“What does it lack?”

“The magic fire. A spoke of the First Fire, which must be taken from the sun wheel itself.”

“There’s plenty of fire right here,” said Zeus. “Your forge fires, the smoldering volcano flames that spring from the white-hot core of the earth.”

“Not hot enough, not hot enough!” roared Brontes. “We have tried tempering your bolt in these fires, and they are not hot enough. We need a spoke of the sun’s fire, I say. To that primal blaze our volcanic fires are only embers, feeble embers.”

“Impossible,” said Zeus. “It is the Titan Helios who drives the chariot of the sun. The flaming disk we see in the sky is its near wheel. To steal a spoke of that wheel we must stop the chariot in its journey across the sky. And that journey has never been interrupted since the beginning of Time.”

“You must do it, my lord, or we cannot finish your thunderbolt.”

“And without that bolt, I cannot vanquish my father,” said Zeus. “Brontes, we’ll need a net strong enough to snare the sun chariot as it races across the sky, yet light enough to float slowly down when cast off a mountaintop.”

“My lord,” said Brontes, “I can draw out strands of copper into wire so fine that it will be transparent.”

“But will a mesh spun from such a wire be strong enough to hold the plunging, bucking sun steeds?”

“How long must they be held?”

“Long enough for someone to steal a spoke of the First Fire from the wheel of the sun chariot. As long, say, as it would take you to chew the roasted flesh off the thigh bone of an ox.”

“I get very hungry working like this. I eat fast. Can anyone steal the fire that quickly?”

“Can you make such a mesh—so light and strong?”

“As a spider spins a web to hold a hornet.”

“Start spinning,” said Zeus. And he strode out of the smithy. Hera hurried after him.

“What is your plan?” she said.

“Helios is a very good charioteer. Once he has begun his journey across the blue meadow of the sky, he never reins up his horses, no matter what. But he also has a strong taste for nymphs. I have seen him chasing them at night, once his horses are stabled. My idea is to get a beautiful naiad or dryad up there somehow, distract him long enough to cast the net over the chariot, and hold it still until I can steal a spoke from the sun wheel.”

“I know who’s perfect for the job,” said Hera. “That leafy vixen who mixed the vomitous drink for our father.”

“My dear Hera,” said Zeus. “Your beauty is matched only by your intelligence. I’ll go find her immediately.”

“It is I who will go find her not you, oh fiancé. For I know well that your own partiality for nymphs is at least as strong as the charioteer’s.”

Different Fires

In those first days before man was planted on earth and the gods had only each other to play with, four Titans managed the winds. Since there were no people yet, there were no ships to capsize, no walls to blow down or roofs to blow off, and no fishing villages to sweep into the sea. When the wind Titans raced each other across the sky, tunics fluttering, looking for mischief, they had to be content with smashing trees or piling up waters and hurling them at the empty shores. Once in a while, they charged each other, colliding, darkening the sky, then whirling in a wild dance called the hurricane, trying to catch their brothers and sisters out in the open and blow them away.

Cronos, who disapproved of trouble he did not make himself, forbade the wind Titans to dance the hurricane too often, and they had to live more harmless lives than they preferred. So they were delighted when Cronos prepared for battle and gave each of them work to do.

Boreas, a big blustering brute, flew over the arctic wastelands, filled his lungs with icy breath, and hovered in the sky north of Olympus.

Eurus flew over the swamplands, drew in a great chestful of malarial airs, then flew back to his station east of Olympus.

Zephyrus, the best-tempered of the wind brothers, did not like to harm anyone but did like to bowl swiftly over the sky and whirl and dance. Hovering west of Olympus, he looked for fine sport in the coming battle.

Notus, who seemed the sleekest and mildest of the four, was perhaps the most dangerous. Striped with strange changeable airs, he would blow a hot sirocco at one moment and a freezing blast the next, making it impossible to live in his domain when his mood turned ugly. He lurked south of Olympus.

While the wind Titans waited in their battle positions, Zeus gathered the young gods about him on a section of slope that was studded with boulders.

“Brothers, sisters,” he said, “we must fight before we are ready. We face an army of Titans, skilled warriors every one, and enormously strong, while we command only a small band of giants and those few Cyclopes who can be spared from weapon making. Cronos knows about our magical weapons; he knows that they are unfinished yet and that without them we cannot win. That is why he is attacking now.”

“Why fight before we’re ready?” said Hades. “Why not avoid battle until we are?”

“We cannot avoid battle,” said Zeus. “We are trapped in this valley. The Titans will charge down the slope of Olympus and the surrounding hills. But let us not be downhearted. The Cyclopes are working furiously. If we attack first and drive the Titans back, we may receive our new weapons before nightfall. And now, let the battle begin!”

He whistled three notes. Each of the twenty giants seized a boulder in each of his hundred hands. Whirling their long arms, the giants hurled the rocks uphill toward the brass armor of the Titans, which glittered in the sunlight. The Titans were amazed when rocks began to rain down on them as if dropping from the sky. The heavy boulders fell, squashing them like beetles in their brass armor. The young gods yelled exultantly and followed the giants uphill. The Titans broke ranks and fled.

Cronos, who was standing on the very crest of the hill, holding the great scythe that he had used to butcher his father, stood motionless under the shower of rocks. He raised one hand and waved it in a circle.

It was the signal the winds had been waiting for. They bowled terrifically across the sky from the north, east, south, and west, caught the arching rocks, clenching them in mighty fists of air, and blew them downhill, right back at those who had thrown them.

The giants had to stop throwing because they could not stand up under the deadly hail. They were forced to crouch among what rocks were left.

As soon as the last rock had been blown downhill, Zeus sprang to his feet and shouted: “Clubs! Clubs!”

The giants rushed to a grove of trees, uprooted them, and charged uphill. Holding their terrible cudgels, they raced toward the Titans.

Cronos could not call upon his winds to blow the giants away, because the Titans were going downhill and they would have blown away, too.

Cronos signaled. A trumpet sounded. The Titans halted and stood fast halfway down the slope.

Now Atlas, who had been held in reserve, came slowly down the hill. The young gods gaped at him. He was the largest of the Titans, taller than a cedar, which is the tallest tree in the forest. Behind him he seemed to be dragging a train of mossy logs. As he came closer, the young gods saw not logs but green, scaly dragons slithering after him, blowing blue puffs of flame.

Atlas stopped and the stream of dragons parted around him. The puff-balls of flame became jets of flame. The dragons crawled downhill spitting red fire at the giants. The fire hit the trees, and they became torches in the giants' hands. The giants hurled the blazing trees at the dragons. The young gods cheered, but the trees bounced harmlessly off the armor-plated beasts, who kept coming, their gaping jaws like open furnaces sending out gusts of flame.

Hera groaned as she saw a giant catch fire. One hand was aflame, then another, then his arms. He was a wheel of fire. He screamed in agony. Two more giants turned into blazing wheels—whirling, screaming. The giants broke ranks and ran downhill pursued by flame. The coldhearted young gods who so rarely wept felt their cheeks strangely wet as they watched one dragon pause to eat a roasted giant.

“Where is Zeus?” whispered Hades to Poseidon.

“I don't see him,” said Poseidon. “Can he have left the field?”

“He's not here,” said Hades, “I don't see him anywhere. The coward has fled.”

“Never!” said Hera.

“Where is he, then?”

“It's too late in any case,” said gentle Hestia. “We seem to be surrounded.”

Indeed, they were. A brass wave of Titans was rolling down the hill. When they turned to flee, the young gods saw that dragons had cut in back of them, blocking all retreat.

“Halt!” yelled a great, clanging voice.

The Titans halted. Atlas waved back his dragons. The young gods stood motionless, frozen in horror. Striding downhill was the awful figure of the father who had once devoured them. Coming toward them, holding his

sickle high so that the deadly blade flashed in the sun, he seemed like the arch-destroyer of the world, ready to dismember and swallow them again.

A hush had fallen on the field. Not a sound was heard but the faint crackling of a tree set ablaze by a dragon's breath. Cronos came closer and closer yet, smiling a ghastly smile. His blade whisked out and sheared off a lock of Demeter's wheaten hair. She was brave, the tall young goddess. She stood there, chin lifted, her eyes trying to look steadily into those of her father, but when she met the blankness of his eyes, she had to look away.

Poseidon backed away slowly, until he felt the scorching breath of a dragon and had to stop. Hades sank to his knees, gibbering with fear.

"Please, father," said Hestia. But when she heard the softness of her own voice, she realized how useless it was to plead and fell silent.

Hera, the youngest daughter—the youngest of all there now that Zeus was gone—said nothing and did not stir. She felt her fingers curving into talons. "Let him try to swallow me," she said to herself. "I'll claw out his gizzard on the way down."

Cronos must have felt a gust of her hatred. He stopped smiling. An arctic light of pure gray murder glimmered in his eyes. Towering above his children, he raised his sickle.

A strange sound was heard. And those on the slope of Olympus that day saw a marvelous thing. The sound they heard was the wild, eerie mirth of a goat cry, but loud enough to fill the heavens. And what they saw was a goat leaping toward them—a goat bigger than a stag, white as cloud fleece, and with horns silver-gold as the crescent moon. More wonderful still, Zeus was riding her.

He was shouting, laughing, and holding something high. Hera saw that it was a shaft of polished metal, zigzag, radiant with energy. She realized that the Cyclopes, laboring in their crater, had finished the magic weapons.

Climbing up the hill were a horde of Cyclopes coming to join the battle. The goat leaped high, clearing the wall of dragons, and landed among the young gods. Cronos retreated slowly, his sickle still poised.

"Titans, charge!" he shouted. "Atlas, send the dragons!"

The Titans leveled their huge spears and charged downhill toward the young gods. The dragons slithered uphill, jaws agape, teeth wet.

But Zeus had handed Hades a helmet and Poseidon a three-pronged staff. When Hades put on his helmet, he spilled darkness the way a squid spreads

its inky blackness through the waters. Darkness washed over the slope of the mountain, covering everything. No one could see anyone, friend or foe. But suddenly, the darkness was pierced by flame as the dragons spat fire. Red flame scattered the shadows. The Titans could see the young gods and resumed their advance. The dragons came at them from behind.

Poseidon raised his trident. He didn't know what it could do, but knew it was his, profoundly his own. He felt a weird power arching from each of its three prongs, streaming toward the sea, pulling at the tides—pulling at him, exerting an enormous claim, attaching him to the sea forever and making him glory in the attachment. He twirled his staff now, pulling the tides up to him as a fisherman gathers his nets. The sea that washed the shore beneath the Olympian cliffs piled up now, higher and higher, its taut waters shining like silk with a pent force, curling into a giant breaker. The wave broke, washing over the slope and dousing the dragon fires. Poseidon lowered his staff.

The waters withdrew, rolling off the mountain. The fires were quenched, but the dragons were still huge beasts whose teeth were like ivory knives, with tails that could flail down stone walls. And now Atlas was charging toward the young gods, followed by the great lizards.

Zeus shouted; his voice was thunder. He raised his zigzag bolt; it became a spear of fire—white-hot, blue-hot, primal flame. It was a spoke of the First Fire, the very fire that brands the sky in a thunderstorm. The flame streamed out of his spearpoint, impaling Cronos and nailing him to the rocky hillside.

When this happened, everything changed. The Titans felt themselves dwindling, felt privilege ebbing from their pores. The dragons turned and scuttled away like little lizards, trying to burrow under the rocks. Atlas tried to hide, but he was too big. The Cyclopes leaped upon him, wrapping him in chains.

Other Cyclopes came to where Cronos was nailed to the hillside. Brontes held the net he had made—that wonderful net that had snared the sun chariot. He cast it over Cronos, who struggled helpless as a fly in a spider's web. For the power had passed from him, passed to his youngest son, Zeus, now king of the gods.

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To Death and Back

Zeus celebrated his victory by conferring powers. He named Hades Prince of Darkness, King of the Land Beyond Death. Poseidon he made God of the Sea and all therein.

Demeter, whose name means barley mother, he made Goddess of the Harvest, holding domain over all growing things.

Hera appointed herself. Insisting on immediate marriage with Zeus, she took her place as queen of the gods.

It was a puzzle what to do with the eldest sister, Hestia, who disliked court life and conspiracies and battles. Then Hera had an idea that she made Zeus think was his. He made Hestia Goddess of the Hearth and bid her prepare for the coming of a new breed calling themselves humans, who would worship her through marriage.

Zeus, of course, reigned over all. Lord of the Sky, Sender of Rain, he was permanently endowed with a voice of thunder and a lightning shaft.

After he had rewarded the victors, he punished the losers.

Cronos was locked away in a corner of Hades' realm called Tartarus. The Cyclopes were instructed to cast walls of iron to pen him in. The hundred-handed giants were ordered to patrol these walls and make sure he did not escape.

Atlas was punished most severely. As big as a mountain, he was given a mountain's task. He was condemned to stand on the western rim of the world holding a corner of the sky on his shoulders and to bear that unbearable weight through eternity.

Zeus stripped the wind Titans of their powers and gave the management of the four winds to the youngest of the Titans, who, he knew, was too lazy ever to rebel. The name of this new Keeper of the Winds was Aeolus.

He punished only those Titans who had been leaders in the war against him. He pardoned the others and invited them to become part of the glittering court at Olympus.

As for the Cyclopes, although Zeus honored them for their mighty services, they knew they would never fit into the society of gods and Titans. They were too ugly. Even those who respected them couldn't bear to look at them. So they returned to their smithy to make tools and weapons and ornaments, and everyone was glad they were elsewhere.

There was another reason for the Cyclopes' unpopularity. Although Zeus was no bloodthirsty tyrant like his father and his grandfather, he did wield absolute power and his power resided in his thunderbolt. With that volt-blue zigzag shaft he could gaff anyone like a fish—god, demigod, or mortal—and there was no way to hide from or defend oneself against that spear of fire. His subjects, gods and Titans alike, feared him too much to permit themselves to feel even secret resentment. But they had to blame someone for their fear, so they chose to hate the Cyclopes, who had forged the dreaded thunderbolt for Zeus.

This smoldering hatred brought the Cyclopes into myth again centuries later, after humankind was planted on earth. Apollo, the Sun God, Lord of Music and Healing, loved a princess of Lapith who would not accept his love. Nevertheless, he paid her ardent attention, wooed her with sunstroke, and melted her resistance. When the princess, whose name was Coronis, found she was pregnant, she rebelled and returned to her first love, an Arcadian youth with cool hands.

Apollo's sister, Artemis, always watchful of his honor, was enraged by this and killed the girl with one of her silver arrows. Asclepius was born during the princess's death throes. It is said that the infant, who was to become the father of medicine, watched the details of his own birth with profound attention, displaying a precocious talent for anatomy.

Indeed, he became such a marvelous doctor that he could bring the dead back to life. Hades, ruler of the underworld, complained to Zeus that the young physician, by robbing him, was attacking the dignity of all gods, and, like an experienced plaintiff, he reinforced his complaint with a huge bribe. Zeus nodded, took up a thunderbolt, and hurled it at Asclepius, killing him. Apollo mourned his son. He was maddened by grief, but not mad enough to attack Zeus. Instead, he stormed down to the crater and shot off a quiverful

of his golden arrows, killing every Cyclopes who labored there, making thunderbolts.

Then Apollo went to Zeus and pleaded his son's case so eloquently, in so musical a voice, that Zeus recalled the young physician to life. In return, Asclepius patched up the Cyclopes, who returned to their anvils.

But some of them had learned to hate the gods.

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Ulysses and the Cyclops

The seeds of Ulysses' most terrible adventure were planted long before he was born—in fact, before the first man was put on earth. It began on that day when Cronos sent the naiad to start a riot in the smithy and disrupt the Cyclopes' weapon making.

This trick of Cronos' was to bear other consequences—to destroy shiploads of men as yet unborn, and to darken the name of the Cyclopes forever. For among the smiths was a youth named Polyphemus, the biggest and most powerful of all, who fell violently in love with the naiad. He couldn't work. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't think of anything but that nymph, white as a birch on the anvil, casting a riverine fragrance upon the sooty air. He fought his way through the riot in the smithy and rushed to the river. Hiding himself in the reeds when the female Cyclopes came raging down, he waited until they had trooped back to the crater. Then he began to search for the naiad. In his madness he actually began to clear the riverbed, hurling aside the heavy boulders as if they were pebbles.

Now, as it happened, all the naiads had escaped the attack of the she-Cyclopes by simply gliding underwater into a side-stream. But our naiad, whose name was Leuce, came back to the spot on the riverbank where she had first met Cronos, hoping to meet him again and claim a reward. She came in the hour before dawn when it was still dark. In fact, it was darker than it had ever been before because Cronos, who was preparing for battle, had decided to quench the moon that night. The naiad couldn't see anything, so she listened very hard. She heard odd sounds: the grating of boulder being lifted from boulder, and the thump when it fell. She turned to flee, but then caught a scent that reassured her—the scent of a male.

“What are you doing?” she called.

“Looking for you,” said a deep rumbling voice.

“For me? Do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

“But you can’t see me.”

“I know you in the dark.”

“How sweet. Why are you looking for me under there?”

“Don’t you live in this river?”

“Not now. You have such a nice voice. I wish I could see you. I wish the moon would come out. Wait. I’ll do like a blind person.”

She reached out and ran her hands over his chest and shoulders. She could reach no higher than his chin. “Oh my,” she murmured, “you’re very big and strong, aren’t you?”

“I guess so.”

“Are you a Titan? You must be.”

“Not exactly. A kind of relative.”

“I know you’re gorgeous. I can’t wait to get a look at you. But it’ll soon be dawn.”

“Yes.”

“Chilly here. Couldn’t you hug me or something?”

He took her into his arms and, despite his wild hunger, was so stunned by love, so confused by joy, that he cradled her in his mighty embrace as though she were an infant. He didn’t dare kiss her. He didn’t want her to know his face, not until she had seen him for what he was.

The sky curdled, seeping pink light. It fell upon the riverbed, painted the giant figure on the bank holding the birch-white nymph. Her scream split the air. She slid from his arms.

“Your eye!” she cried. “What happened to your eye?”

“Nothing.”

“Where’s the other one?”

“This is all I have.”

“And look where it is! It’s in the wrong place!”

“I’m a Cyclops,” he muttered. And he reached for her.

She shuddered away. His arms dropped. She vanished into the mist.

Utter pain took him. He raised his hand to pluck out the offending eye and crush it under his foot like a snail. But with the impulse to violent action, his grief mixed with rage. He decided to fling himself outward into

the world, never to return to the hated forge. He strode away from the crater, through a forest to the sea.

It is told that other young Cyclopes joined him and insisted on going wherever he went, for he had always been a leader among them. They knocked down trees and lashed them together to make a great raft. Using their mallets as paddles, they stroked so powerfully that the clumsy raft skimmed over the water like a canoe.

They finally came to an island that suited Polyphemus. Hilly and heavily wooded, it was inhabited only by wild boars, wild goats, and fleet red deer. "This is it!" cried Polyphemus. "We'll hunt and fish and never touch an anvil again."

They did indeed live that way and, as time passed, became very different from what they had been. Without their own work to do, their talents rusting, they sank into bestiality. Polyphemus, their leader, led them there also. With the most to lose, he lost the most. For, lurking behind all thoughts and memories was the image of the nymph who had touched him in the dark and fled at dawn. His companions fished for sea nymphs and occasionally caught one, but he couldn't bear to. He never again wanted to see that look of horror upon a nymph's face. Instead, he cultivated only his appetite for food until he became one gross hunger. Worst of all, he developed a taste for human flesh.

It happened one stormy day that a ship was driven onto shore and split upon a rock. The Cyclopes, who had become magnificently strong swimmers, dived in and hauled out the drowning sailors. But the swim had made the Cyclopes very hungry, and the day was still too stormy for hunting.

"They'd have drowned anyway," said Polyphemus. "Look at 'em. They're half-dead. We'll just finish them off and have us a hot meal."

He took a sailor in his huge hand and twisted his neck like a chicken. The others did the same, and grilled the sailors over an open flame.

Now this ship's crew had come from an eastern land where olives grew, and dates and figs. They were young and plump and had a delicate, oily flavor. Polyphemus ate greedily and waited for the next shipwreck.

But the wind stayed fair; no ships were driven onto the rocks. His hunger grew and his temper became so savage that the other Cyclopes began to avoid him. He squatted on the headland and waited for a sail ... and waited

... and thought to himself: "Can't wait forever. I'll have to push things along."

The next time he saw a sail in the distance, he swam to the ship, capsized it, and swam back to the island with his pockets full of sailors. This happened again and again until word spread around the ports, and ships began to avoid those waters altogether. Polyphemus had to go without human flesh for a year and a day.

By this time, men had grown civilized enough to fight wars, an activity that the gods found immensely entertaining. They took sides, bet with each other on who would win, arranged ambushes and hand-to-hand duels, and pulled every trick possible to help their favorites, puzzling the warriors, who in their ignorance gave the name luck to this god play.

Now the biggest and bloodiest of these wars had just ended, leaving the gods very bored. One goddess in particular was not only bored, but angry. She was Artemis, twin sister to Apollo and Goddess of the Moon. She and her brother had wagered heavily on the losers. One moonlit night, flying over the Middle Sea in her swan chariot, she spotted a ship that looked familiar. She flew down closer.

"It's Ulysses!" she said to herself. "It's that slimy trickster who did more to defeat my Trojans than anyone else."

She immediately began to plan a disaster, something she could do well, for it was she who swung the tides. "What shall I do?" she said to herself. "Guide them into a riptide and sink their ship? No, drowning's too easy and there are no sharks in the area. I want something slow and painful for Ulysses. I want him to suffer just as he made me suffer watching my Trojans being tricked by that accursed wooden horse, watching that beautiful city being sacked and burned. Let me think of something really foul."

Her hair and bare shoulders were one color, silver brown, moon-brown, as she leaned out of her chariot to swing the tide on a silver leash and guide Ulysses to the island where the Cyclopes dwelt.

Now during the time when Polyphemus was happily capsizing ships and eating their crews, he had dug a fire pit in his cave and hung a turnspit over it, for he liked his meat browned evenly on all sides. Crouched at the pit was a curly-haired cabin boy whom Polyphemus had not eaten because he needed someone to tend the fire and turn the spit. He also liked to wipe his

greasy hands on the boy's curls. But by this time, he so hungered for human flesh that he had decided to have the boy for dinner this very night.

He lifted him by the nape of his neck and held him in front of his face. The terrified lad saw the huge round red eye glaring at him, and tried not to look at the great wet mouth with its yellow fangs. "Only skin and bones," snarled Polyphemus. "Can't roast you; there won't be anything left. Well, bones make soup. Go ahead, useless, fill the pot with water."

He put the boy on the floor and went to the door of the cave—and couldn't believe his eyes when he saw meaty-looking men climbing the hill. It was almost evening; the light was fading. He pivoted the door of the cave, which was an enormous slab of stone, casting a faint glow of firelight upon the dusk. Then he went back inside.

He didn't have long to wait. The men were cold and hungry; they broke into a run when they saw the inviting glow. Ulysses tried to stop them, but they paid no heed. They raced up the hillside and into the cave. Ulysses drew his sword and followed.

His heart sank as he saw the great fireplace and the enormous soup pot, for he realized that whoever lived in this cave was very, very big. He heard a rumbling sound and raced back to the door of the cave, only to find it blocked by a boulder. There was no way to get out.

The end of the cave was dark. Far above him he saw what looked like a huge red lantern, and then he heard a loud, grating voice. "Welcome. Welcome. You're invited to dinner, all of you." Something splayed out of the darkness toward him. Fingers! As big as baling hooks. He felt them clamp around his waist, felt himself rising toward the great lantern.

The lantern was a huge, bloodshot eye. Under it was a great, grinning mouth with yellow fangs. Ulysses shuddered in the stinking gale of the monster's breath. But he never panicked. The greater the peril, the better his mind worked.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "We are honored to accept your invitation."

"Good. Good. You understand who will be the main course, don't you?"

"I do," said Ulysses. "But you know, my men and I have just finished ten years of war and faced death more times than I can count. So we are not easily frightened."

"Glad to hear it, captain. Brave men taste better. Cowards don't have much flavor."

“All I ask, good sir, is that you put me down again. I will explain things to my men, and we shall prepare our souls for the journey to Hades.”

“You’re a tough old buzzard, aren’t you?” asked the Cyclops. “Too tough for roasting, probably. You’ll do for the soup pot, though. Meant to use the turnspit boy, but he has to go to work again. I’m starved! I need an appetizer.”

He stooped suddenly, snatched at the floor with his other hand, and hauled up a sailor. Ulysses watched, horrified, as the struggling man was lifted to the great wet mouth. He had to keep watching as the monster ate the man raw, clothes and all.

“Don’t really like ’em that way,” said the Cyclops. He belched and spat buttons. “Like ’em well seasoned and browned on all sides. Down you go, captain. Speak to your men. I’m going to pick herbs: rosemary and sage, garlic and thyme. We’ll do things right tonight, we will. And if you make your men cooperate—not try to hide and make me chase ’em all over the cave—why, I’ll be considerate, too. I’ll wring their necks nice and gentle first and not roast them alive, even though that improves the flavor.”

“I agree,” said Ulysses.

Polyphemus set him down, went to the cave door, slid the slab aside, then back, and Ulysses was alone with his men, who were on their knees, whimpering like frightened children.

“Up!” cried Ulysses. “Stand up like men or you’ll be devoured like chickens. Up now, up! He’ll be back soon. Get yourselves out of sight and stay hidden until I call.”

The men vanished into the shadows. Ulysses waited, thinking hard. Something nagged at his mind—a splinter of a tale heard long ago. He began to search the vast, cluttered attic of his memory. As a boy, he had devoured the legends of heroes, gods, and monsters. Ambushing every traveling minstrel who had come to his father’s castle at Ithaca, he had demanded more stories, and more, and more. No minstrel could resist the fox-faced, redheaded lad who seemed to listen with his eyes.

Like a tree fledging itself out of the mist, a tale began to take form—an old, old tale told by a green-clad bard—of a river nymph and her monstrous lover. He remembered! The old tale became a new idea, urgent, giving off

light and heat as it turned into action. Swiftly shuffling options, he began to work out his plan.

Too soon, he heard the slab grating open and shut. The Cyclops appeared, carrying an armful of greenery. “Where’s that boy?” he roared. “C’mon, runt, start chopping.” He hurled the herbs at the lad. “Where are your men?” he said to Ulysses.

“Saying their prayers.”

“They’d better say ’em fast. Now you, captain—what’s your name, by the way?”

“I’m called ... Nobody.”

“Well, Captain Nobody, why don’t you strip? You’re going into the soup pot.”

“I have something very important to tell you, Polyphemus. I am a surgeon.”

“What’s so important about that?”

“It’s what I can do for you.”

“For me?”

“I fix bodies. Cut off arms and legs when they go bad. Sew up wounds. Mend broken bones. Battlefield repairs, you know. Useful in a war. You have anything that needs fixing?”

“I have this feeling of hunger, doctor. But I know you have a cure for that.”

“Wait!”

“I’ve waited long enough. Hop into the pot.”

“In your own interest, my friend, you really ought to save me for later. Give me a chance to fix that eye of yours.”

The Cyclops’s bellow of rage blew the turnspit boy off his stool. Before he could rise, Polyphemus drew back his foot and swung his leg in a mighty kick, lifting the boy off the ground and sending him into the rock wall. He fell and lay still.

“What do you mean *fix* my eye?” roared the Cyclops. “Something wrong with it?”

Ulysses knew the monster might kill him on the spot if he answered directly. “Oh, well,” he thought. “I’d just as soon go quickly as be soupmeat.”

“I asked you a question.” growled Polyphemus. “Is something wrong with my eye?”

“Well, to start with, you have only half the usual number. And the one you have is in the wrong place.”

“Wrong place?”

“Haven’t you noticed?”

Ulysses saw the monster stalking toward him, opening and closing his huge hands; he tried to retreat but his back was against the wall.

“Wait! Wait!” he cried. “What I’m trying to tell you is that I can fix that eye.”

“Shut up!”

“Ever hear of Asclepius?”

“No.”

“You should have. He’s an important part of Cyclopes history.”

“I hate history.”

“Listen ... listen. Asclepius was a son of Apollo, and the best doctor who ever lived. He was the one who brought the Cyclopes back to life after Apollo killed them.”

“What history does is make me hungry. And I was hungry to start with.”

He looked down at the sprawled body of the boy and turned it over with his foot. “Is he dead, doc? Don’t bother looking; he is. So I won’t be able to roast anybody because I have no one to turn the spit. Question is: am I hungry enough to eat you raw? Answer is: yes.”

“Wait!” shouted Ulysses. “Let me make my point. I am a cousin of Asclepius. Apollo’s half brother, Hermes, is my great-great-grandfather. And this is the point: I have inherited the great doctor’s skill. I can give you a new face.”

“Nobody can do that.”

“You’ll be absolutely gorgeous.”

“Gorgeous. Someone called me gorgeous once in the dark.”

“When I get through with you, they’ll say it by daylight or moonlight. No nymph in the world will be able to resist you.”

“Won’t they?”

“With your physique? Without that inflamed hole in the middle of your forehead? With two glowing, tragic eyes right where they should be? Naiads and dryads will swarm like flies.”

“What exactly can you do?”

“Divide that one gross eye in two and put them in the right place.”

“Will it hurt?”

“You’ll be asleep. You’ll feel no pain. I’ll fill you full of unwatered wine.”

“I’ve never drunk wine. We drink only ox blood and buttermilk here.”

“All the better. It’ll knock you out faster if you’re not used to it.”

Ulysses unslung a flask of wine from his belt and passed it to Polyphemus, who poured it down his gullet in one gulp. Ulysses watched him closely. He saw the great red eye misting over, as when a furnace is banked and gray ash sifts over the coals. But the eye did not close. The Cyclops was awake—blurred but awake.

“Tastes good,” he muttered. “Still awake, though. Sure’d feel it if you started cutting.”

“You require stronger medication,” said Ulysses.

He stepped in back of the seated giant, grasped the haft of his great hammer and tried to lift it. It was too heavy. But his life was at stake, and the lives of his men. Calling up every ounce of his strength, the last tatter of his will, all his desire to get home, all his wish to live—and thinking, “Hermes, grandfather, help me now”—he lifted the mallet, raised it high above his head, and smashed it down on the Cyclops’s skull.

Polyphemus fell heavily.

Reports of what happened next in the Cyclops’s cave differ widely. Some say that Ulysses kept feeding the monster unwatered wine until he passed out, then heated his sword in the cook fire, took the red-hot blade and stabbed it into the monster’s eye.

Another tale says that Ulysses, convincing himself that he really was a surgeon, borrowed needle and thread from his sail-maker and sewed the eye shut as the Cyclops lay in a drunken sleep.

Still another story says that he did indeed practice surgery, that he took a knife and cut the eye out of the Cyclops’s head and tossed it into the soup pot.

Of all these tales, it is the sword version that seems most likely, for we have the exact words that Ulysses spoke to his crew: “Six of you stand at one ear, six of you at the other—and hold his head still so I can strike true. I shall try to stab right through his eye into his brain and finish him off. But if

I don't, if I only blind him, be aware that he'll arise in agony and thresh about the cave trying to kill us all. If that happens, get yourselves among the goats as fast as you can."

The men took up their positions at each ear. Ulysses pulled a rock to the giant's head, climbed up on it, and looked down at the huge eye, which stared glassily up at him. Ulysses raised his sword in both hands and, murmuring "Hermes, give me strength," stabbed down, driving the red-hot spike into the eye.

The great head rose from the floor as if it were a separate living thing, tearing its ears from the men's grasp. They fell to the floor and scrambled away. Polyphemus was on his feet, screeching, bellowing, and clutching at the bloody hole that had been his eye. He began to stamp around the cave, trying to crush people under his feet. He slapped the walls with great blows of his hand, unfortunately for one man who had chosen to hide in a niche of rock. The fingers found him and tore him to pieces. Ulysses couldn't even hear the sailor's screams because the monster was bellowing so.

Ulysses crawled toward the goat pen at the far end of the cave, motioning his men to follow. They crawled after him and slid among the giant goats just in time, for the Cyclops had stopped bellowing and was listening. He would certainly have heard the men panting and the thumping of their hearts had not the snuffling of the goats hidden smaller sounds.

Then Ulysses saw him go to the door of the cave and swing the great slab aside. He realized what this meant. With the cave open the goats would rush out to crop the grass, leaving the area clear so that the monster could search it thoroughly.

"Quickly!" whispered Ulysses. "Swing under the bellies of the goats."

The men swung themselves under the huge rams, clutching at their wiry wool. The herd moved toward the mouth of the cave and tried to crowd through. Ulysses was horrified to see an enormous hand descending upon his goat, but the hand only brushed over the animal's back and did not search underneath. The herd passed through, still carrying the men.

The giant rushed to the back of the cave and began to stamp and scabble around the goat pen, bellowing with fury when he found no one. The herd grazed on the slope. Ulysses was dismayed to see a big yellow moon floating in the sky. It was almost as bright as day.

“Stay low!” he whispered. He saw tall shadows moving toward the cave and knew the other Cyclopes must be coming to see what was happening.

“What happened?” they called to Polyphemus.

“I’m blind, blind.”

“Who did it?”

“Nobody.”

“Oh, an accident! How unlucky.”

“Hurry, catch him!” Polyphemus shouted.

“Catch who?”

“Nobody! Hurry!”

“He’s gone mad,” they told each other.

Polyphemus tried to push through them to catch the men, who he knew would be fleeing toward the sea. But the others packed around him, trying to help him, to stop him, because they thought he had been driven mad by pain.

“Now!” shouted Ulysses. “Follow me!”

They raced toward the beach. Looking back, Ulysses saw Polyphemus break through the crowd and come bounding toward them.

“Faster!” cried Ulysses. “He’s coming!”

The men had a head start, but the giant could cover twenty yards at a stride. The Cyclops, who had developed a nose like a wild beast, could smell fear and knew that he was coming nearer. He uttered a shattering roar.

“This way!” shouted Ulysses, as he angled off through a grove of trees. It wasn’t a straight line to the skiff, but he knew that Polyphemus would follow them wherever they ran. The plan worked. The Cyclops followed them through the grove; they could hear him crashing into trees and bellowing with fury. Even so, they were only a few yards ahead when they reached their skiff.

They pushed it into the surf, leaped in, and rowed with all their might. Polyphemus stood on the shore, listening. He heard the oars splashing and the men panting. He scooped up a large rock and hurled it after them. It struck just astern.

They reached the ship, which was riding at anchor—a beautiful sight on the moon-spangled water. They scrambled aboard. Ulysses turned and shouted: “Goodbye, monster, goodbye, fool—drunken, gluttonous fool! If

anyone asks you again, it was not Nobody but Ulysses who put out your ugly eye.”

Artemis, riding in her swan chariot, heard this taunt. She saw that Polyphemus was hurling a last rock, and she guided it so that it landed amidships, smashing the deck and crushing five of the crew.

She dipped low and listened to Polyphemus, who had lifted his sightless face to the moon and was howling like a wolf.

“Poor brute,” she whispered. “I promise that Ulysses shall be punished for what he has done. He shall be visited with storm, shipwreck, and sorcery. And if he ever reaches home, it shall be as a beggar, a stranger, one man alone among enemies.”

Artemis, like all gods and goddesses, made more promises than she kept. But she kept this one—and made it all happen to Ulysses just that way.

As for the Cyclopes, there are those that believe that they still labor in the mountains and can be heard there to this day, rumbling and shaking the earth. What we do know is that the earth still quakes and mountains still explode in fire, and nobody really knows why.

THE DRAGON OF BOEOTIA

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For my grandson
LUKE BURBANK
whose eyes, fathom-blue, draw us deep.

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Characters

Monster

The Dragon of Boeotia A self-made monster; also known as Abas the Abominable

Gods

Zeus
(ZOOS) King of the Gods

Hermes
(HUR meez) Zeus's son; the Messenger God

Hades
(HAY deez) God of the Underworld

Poseidon
(poh SY duhn) God of the Sea

Demeter
(DEM it tuhr) Goddess of the Harvest

Hephaestus
(hee FEHS tus) The Smith God

Prometheus
(proh MEE thee uhs) The Titan; born of the gods; a friend of mankind

Atropos
(AT roh pohs) Eldest of the Fates; Lady of the Shears; she cuts the thread of life

Lachesis
(LAK ee sihs) The second Fate; she measures the thread of life

Clotho
(KLOH thoh) Youngest of the Fates; she spins the thread of life

Ikelos
(IHK uh luhs) Son of Hypnos, God of Sleep

Mortals

Celeus King of Eleusis

(SEL ee uhs)

Abas
(AH buhs) Celeus's eldest son; crown prince of Eleusis

Triptolemus
(trihp TAHL uh muhs) Abas's younger brother

Agenor
(AG uh nor) King of Phoenicia; father of Cyllix, Phoenix, Cadmus, and Europa

Cyllix
(SY lihx) Agenor's eldest son

Phoenix
(FEE nihx) Agenor's second son

Cadmus
(KAD muhs) Agenor's youngest son

Europa
(yoo ROH puh) Agenor's only daughter

Others

Arachne
(uh RAK nee) Formerly a maid of Lydia; then the first spider

Two vultures Employed by Zeus to torture Prometheus

The black goat Foster sister of Zeus; companion of Cadmus

A brown heifer Also helpful to Cadmus

The dragon-men Born from the dragon's buried teeth

Sileni
(sy LAY nee) Minor gods of wood and glade

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The Curse

Abas, crown prince of Eleusis, was a cold, sly youth who liked to hurt people but wasn't allowed to because his father, King Celeus, was a kindly man. "All that will change when I take the throne," said Abas to himself. "I mean to be feared, not loved. And I *will* be king one day, and do what I like to those I dislike. I can't wait."

But expectations, even princely ones, sometimes turn sour. And this eldest son never did become king.

One day, while riding through the fields, Abas saw a figure in the distance. He heard a voice calling, "Persephone! Persephone!" It was a woman's voice, but unusually loud. Then he saw a tall figure striding toward him. He looked up in amazement. Even on horseback he came only to her waist. "I seek my daughter, little man," she said. "Have you seen her?"

Abas did not relish being called "little man," but she was much too big to get angry at.

"I am Demeter," she said. "Barley-mother. Goddess of Growing Things. My daughter is Persephone. She was out with her paintbox to tint the flowers, as she does every spring. She's a rosebud herself, the little beauty, but she's gone ... gone. Please, have you seen her?"

"I regret to say I have not," replied Abas. "Perhaps you should look in the meadow yonder, where wild flowers grow."

"Thank you," said Demeter, and went off with long strides, but so gracefully she seemed to float. Her voice came trailing back: "Persephone ... Persephone."

But now that the goddess had left, Abas allowed his spite to boil over. "Persephone! Persephone!" he yelled jeeringly. "Come home; your mother wants you!"

Suddenly a huge screaming filled the meadow and glade—a savage gust of sound that made the horse buck and sent Abas flying off its back. He scrambled up and saw Demeter looming over him. Her hair was loose, her eyes blazing.

“Do you mock me?” she gasped. “Do you mock a mother in her grief? Do you jeer at me, Demeter, Mistress of Crops, who decrees famine or plenty, as I will? Do you dare?”

Her great hands gripped each other, and Abas shrank away, thinking she was about to pluck him off the ground and squeeze the life out of him. But she only pointed her hands at him, mumbling.

He felt her voice enter him. He felt his body tighten. It was a weird constriction, as if, indeed, a great pair of hands had seized him. But the goddess still had not touched him; she just pointed at him and mumbled. Abas felt himself dwindling. His chin hit something. It was his foot. A different kind—three-toed.

It had rained that morning, then cleared. Abas was beside a furrow that had caught some water, and he saw himself mirrored. He was tiny, green, jointed, polished—tapering to a whip of tail at one end and a head, very narrow, at the other. He stared at himself through popping eyes as his tongue flicked with marvelous speed. He watched that tongue wrap around a fly and draw it into his mouth. And he, who had always loathed the uncleanness of flies, felt himself devour one with gusto.

He looked up. Demeter was looking down at him. He was pressed against the earth by the wind of her voice.

Lizard you are,
lizard shall be
Scuttle away,
and remember me.

From that terrible day on, Abas lived as a tiny green reptile. This was particularly hateful to him, for while he had a lizard’s body, he still had a human brain ticking inside his little leathery skull, and all his memories were intact. This is exactly what Demeter had intended, for it made his punishment infinitely more painful.

The lizard who had been a prince didn't know what to do. He thought of trying to find Demeter, to plead for her forgiveness. But, remembering her grief and rage, he knew that the goddess would never forgive him, that he was locked in his horrid little reptile form forever.

"No," he thought, "I don't want to live this way. I'll starve myself to death; I'll catch no more flies."

Nevertheless, as soon as he got hungry, Abas found himself waiting in the dappled shade where he was hard to see, his tongue flicking, catching insects and eating them until he was hungry no longer. He couldn't help it; hunger made him forget everything except getting something to eat. But as soon as his belly was full, life became intolerable again.

"I don't seem to be able to starve myself," he thought. "So I'll try another way. I'll let one of the things that hunt me eat its fill too. I won't scuttle away. I won't climb a tree or dive down a hole. I'll just stay where I am and be eaten. One moment of dreadful pain and I'll be gone, saving myself years of suffering."

So the next time the shadow of wings fell upon him he held his ground and let the hedge-hawk stoop. But just before the great claws struck, his animal nature took over. Flight possessed him. And he was gone, gone in a flash, whipping away from the hawk's claws, and disappearing into the long grass.

All this time, without being aware of it, Abas had been making his way back toward the palace grounds. Finally, he found himself in the royal garden. It was pleasant among the roses and there were beetles and bees to eat. On the third day of his stay, he overheard a conversation between two gardeners that sent him into a frothing green fit. His father, he learned, had been badly wounded in battle and was now lying in the palace on the verge of death.

"Just exactly what I've been waiting for all this time," Abas moaned to himself. "Why couldn't the old fool have gotten himself knocked on the head a little sooner? Then I'd have been hanging over his bed, pretending grief, instead of riding out in the damned fields, meeting that accursed goddess, and being changed into this loathsome thing that I am. But no ... father had to wait until I was a lizard, and then get his stupid head beaten in. Now that brother of mine will inherit the throne. That simpering, goody-goody Triptolemus will be king!"

Raging to himself, he slipped into the castle, slithered up the wall, and crawled out among the rafters. He crouched on a beam above the royal bedstead and watched his father dying. His brother was beside the king, weeping.

“Look at him, squeezing out those tears,” muttered the lizard to himself. “What a hypocrite! As if he could be anything but ecstatic at the idea of being king in a few days. I hate him.”

Hunting was good among the beams of the old palace. Spiders had been busy there, and the lizard robbed their webs and ate their flies; any spider who came to object was also eaten.

And he who had waited so impatiently for his father to die now wanted him to linger on because he could not bear the thought of his younger brother becoming king.

Our story now crosses the Middle Sea to its eastern rim, where flourished the rich and powerful kingdom of Phoenicia. Agenor, its king, had three sons: two of them were splendid young warriors, royally lethal. The eldest prince captained the war fleet; the second one commanded the army. But the third son, Cadmus, seemed unfit for war or peace. Runty, clownish, of barbed speech and odd tastes, he was a grief to his mother, a political liability to his father, and a source of rage to his brothers. Only his younger sister, Europa, cared for him, and she was the only one he had ever loved.

Cadmus knew that he would lose her soon. For princesses were married off early in those days, and since her father was very rich and she was very beautiful, the suitors had already begun to swarm about the royal palace.

“No, I shall not lose her!” Cadmus vowed to himself. “Her husband is bound to be a warrior, always out conquering someone. I’ll keep her company when he goes off—gossip with her and tell her stories. And make myself useful to him, perhaps, by doing some of the clerkly things that kings hate to be bothered with.”

But as this third son of the Phoenician king sat in the garden planning his tame future, he had no way of knowing that matters were being decided in high places that would plunge him into wild adventure, subject him to dreadful ordeal, and win him a place in legend forever.

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The High Council

Zeus met with the high council in his throne room on Mt. Olympus. This council was composed of the three most powerful gods—Zeus himself, Poseidon, and Hades. There was a fourth member, Atropos, the eldest Fate. The withered little Scissors Hag sat wrapped in her fur cloak, for she was chilly even on the hottest days. She listened silently, never speaking unless spoken to. And she was never spoken to except in the form of a question, such questions being always about some twist of destiny, which the Fates alone understood. Her answers were always short, sharp, and precise. Everyone hated the Hag, but no one dared to cross her.

There was mighty business before the council this day, nothing less than the future of mankind. The gods had grown weary of the human race and wished to visit the earth with catastrophe—quake or flood or fire storm—to cleanse it of all life. Then, in time to come, they would permit the primal energies to express themselves anew in unobnoxious forms—as grass and trees, birds and beasts.

“We are beginning to repeat ourselves,” said Poseidon. “We have punished humankind before, wiping them out even to the last verminous specimen, only to find them returning, crawling back into the life chain, disguised as fish, birds, monkeys, or whatever, then casting off fur and feathers to stride forth in all their pestiferous presumption.”

“It is true,” said Hades. “This has happened on two separate occasions. But I, for one, do not find such annihilation useless. My own kingdom has been considerably enlarged by these episodes.”

“It’s fine for you, brother,” said Poseidon. “You simply sat there on your ebony throne waiting for them to join your realm, but I went to a great deal of trouble tearing the seas from their beds and hurling them upon earth. Now, only a few eons later, we’re again having the same old discussion.”

“On those other occasions,” said Zeus mildly, “we acted without consulting our venerable cousin, and may unwittingly have run counter to the Master Design. She is with us today, however. Speak, Atropos. What do you say about our intention to exterminate the race of man utterly and for all time?”

“It is not written,” said Atropos.

“Indeed?” growled Zeus, brows knotting.

The others watched uneasily as his huge hands fiddled with the lightning shaft that was his scepter. For they all knew that while Zeus spoke diplomatically about Destiny and Providence, which even the gods had to obey, he did not really recognize anything that did not serve his own intention.

“I pray you,” he said, “clarify your objection, good Atropos.”

“It is clearly stated in our Great Scroll that humankind enjoys a choice,” she replied. “Man is to be destroyed only if he destroys himself. It is further written that such impulse for destruction shall arise from a humanoid race spawned by a dragon-to-be on a certain riverbank in Boeotia.”

“Are you telling me that such dragon spawn will be more mischievous, more warlike than the present breeds of man? I find that difficult to believe.”

“The mandates I serve, great Zeus, do not require your belief, only our performance. Know this, cousin. Man is warlike today in an innocent bestial way. He fights as lions do, or wolves, or stags in spring—for a piece of territory, a haunch of meat, first choice of mate. And when the purpose has been accomplished, the hunger fed, then the fighting ceases. But the future breed of man, the sons of the dragon, shall depart from such innocent animal ways and attach their killing instincts to ideas of virtue. A simple but profound change will occur in the way people think; by a lethal twist, murder will be viewed as a solution for all problems—and quite legal, if done properly.”

“Imitating us again,” muttered Poseidon. “And in our most godlike activity. Intolerable.”

“May I continue?” asked Atropos. “Or ought I yield the floor to your moist majesty?”

“Your pardon, cousin. Pray continue.”

“Thus, impelled by such ideas,” said Atropos, “and having armed themselves with the primal fire, the nations of man will proceed to incinerate their enemies, that is, everyone else. But despite all their knowledge, they will not have learned the simplest lesson of fire—that it spreads—and so it will consume them as well.”

“Most encouraging,” said Zeus. “And all stemming from some future dragon, who will be a remarkable specimen, I presume?”

“Yes, indeed,” said the Hag, “to be called Abas the Abominable.”

“Aren’t all dragons abominable?” asked Hades.

“This one more so,” said Atropos. “But hearken, Zeus. There is something you must do before the dragon can play its role.”

“Only you, dear cousin, may say ‘must’ to me,” said Zeus.

“Be not wroth, my lord,” murmured Atropos. “All important events must bear your royal imprimature; how else could they become important? And in the intricate designs of Destiny one event is linked to another.”

“What must I do, my lady?”

“Something you will very much want to do—abduct the princess of Phoenicia, named Europa.”

“And all this dragonish activity, the spawning of an even more warlike breed of man, and the destruction of humanity shall be the result of my coupling with this Europa—is that what you’re telling me, oh Sister of the Shears?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“Even the Fates, my lord, do not dare present you with an unattractive partner.”

This was closer to levity than Destiny’s crone had ever come, and Zeus knew that mighty changes must indeed be afoot. He adjourned the council and sent for Hermes.

When the messenger god reported to his father, they discussed plans for abducting Europa without arousing the suspicions of Hera, who was Zeus’s wife, and savagely jealous.

“In these matters,” said Zeus, “I have most successfully avoided detection through simple impersonations—as an eagle, a swan, a shower of gold, and so on ...”

“What do you fancy this time?” asked Hermes.

“Well, according to Atropos, this will be a fateful abduction, heavy with consequence, so it would seem to call for something imposing.”

“Imposing? Well, how about a bull, a huge white one with golden horns and hooves, and eyes like pools of molten gold?”

“Sounds good,” said Zeus.

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The Abduction of Europa

Prince Cadmus had wandered out of the royal garden and was walking along the edge of an orchard. He sat on a tree stump and let himself sink into the rustling silence. A bird called. He whistled. The bird replied. He saw something moving and chirped. A field mouse popped out of the grass near his feet, peering at him with bright beady eyes. Cadmus made a chittering sound; the mouse chattered back, and vanished.

“They whistle, they chirp,” he thought. “Bark, roar, growl, howl, hiss, and sing. It’s all speech of a sort, and can be learned.”

A wind struck, rattling the leaves. It tore a piece of bark off a tree and sailed it toward Cadmus. It landed at his feet, and he picked it up. It was hard and wrinkled on one side, smooth on the other. He took a pointed twig and tried to draw on the smooth side of the bark. The marks were too faint to see. He drew his dagger and carefully pricked the ball of his thumb. It bled slightly. Dipping the point of the twig into the blood he started to make marks on the bark.

He drew an oval with two prongs coming out of it. “An ox,” he said to himself. The word for “ox” in early Phoenician was *aleph*. “Aaaahh-lef,” he muttered to himself. “The sign of the ox shall be the sound *ahhhh*, which should flash into memory every time this sign is seen. But there are so many sounds. Will I have to find a sign for each? Can I think of so many? And who will remember them if I do? Oh well.”

Cadmus then drew a box standing on its end, with a figure inside. “That’s a house, *Bet*. By the sign of the house, one shall hear *b-b-b-b*. So I have two—Aleph, Bet ... not much, but it’s a start.”

Cadmus rose from the stump and wandered back through the royal gardens to the palace. The courtyard was in great tumult. But his mind was such a whirl of signs and sounds that he ignored the excitement and was

passing through the crowd. His father's bellow shattered the air. "Ah, there he is, the little nitwit!" roared Agenor. "Dreaming his life away as the enemy comes ashore and steals his sister!"

"What, father? Who stole whom?" asked Cadmus.

The old man grew so red in the face that Cadmus thought he must burst like overripe fruit. The king clutched at his tunic and pulled it away from his neck so he could breathe. Cadmus had often enraged his father, but never like this. His brothers rushed to Agenor.

"Take him away!" gasped Agenor. "Take him off somewhere before I kill him. 'Who stole whom?' ... Aggh!"

"Someone please tell me what happened," said Cadmus.

"Everybody knows but you," replied Cyllix, the eldest brother. "While Europa and her maidens were playing on the beach, someone or something came out of the sea and carried her off."

"What do you mean, 'someone or something'?" cried Cadmus. "I don't understand."

"Nobody does," said Phoenix, the second brother. "Those silly girls tell a confused story. They speak of a bull coming out of the sea, a big white bull. They say that Europa jumped on its back. That it rushed into the sea and swam away."

"Obviously, no bull," said Cyllix. "It must have been one of those northern pirates who wear horns on their helmets. One of them must have slipped ashore and carried her off. And the girls were too frightened to tell the difference."

"Very strange," said Cadmus. "Shall I go question the girls? Perhaps you frightened them."

"Yes, let him question the girls," said his father. "What else is he good for? You two, gather your men and go search for your sister. Cyllix, sail westward with the fleet. Phoenix, take the army and march east. The abductors may have circled the headland and struck inland. And let this nincompoop stay here and question the girls and whistle at birds and chirp at field mice and chase his crazy dream of capturing speech in a tangle of magic marks—like a forester snaring birds with a net. Go, my brave sons, go. Pursue the abductor; save your sister."

"Father," said Cadmus.

“Get out of my sight!” muttered Agenor. “Oh, why couldn’t someone have stolen you instead?”

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The Lizard's Ambition

The king of Eleusis finally died, as the lizard who had been his son watched from the rafters. Then Abas decided to leave the palace.

“I’m *not* going to crouch under a rose bush in the royal garden and watch my brother accept the crown that should have been mine,” he declared to himself. “I’ll go out into the fields again and try to work up courage enough to let a hawk eat me, or go swimming and be caught by a carp.”

Abas left the palace grounds and made his way to a nearby wood. It was a hot, brilliant day. A lion was feeding upon a fallen deer, growling over the raw bones. Abas balanced himself on a twig of an olive tree and watched.

“It’s not that I mind being unhuman,” he thought. “There’s much about animals that’s appealing. It’s being a *lizard* that I loathe. I’d gladly put in time as a lion, for example—all blood and gold, roaring and springing, crunching bones, terrifying man and beast. Not a bad life at all.”

Something blotted the sun. Abas looked up. His senses spun like a top. He thought he must be asleep, dreaming. Hovering above, shadowing the entire glade, was *himself*, but magnified, exalted—a giant lizard, armored in leather, with a ridged back, spiked tail, enormous jaws, and—to make it totally fearsome—a pair of huge, ribbed, leathery wings.

It swooped low, the leaves flattened. Abas was almost blown off his twig by the down draft. The monster opened its jaws, spitting flame, striking the ground near the lion, who sprang thirty feet in one leap and cowered at the other end of the glade. The giant lizard swept up the carcass of the deer, then flew up above the treeline, devouring the carcass in midair. It was gone in three swallows. The monster hovered, blood dripping from its jaws.

The lion trotted back into the middle of the glade and stared up at the beast who had dared steal his meal. He roared. To Abas, watching, it seemed that the huge flying lizard responded as swiftly as a hawk spotting a

field mouse. Its great body tilted toward earth and lanced down. It fell like a lightning bolt. The great hooks that were its claws struck the lion, grappling him tight. The leather wings beat the air, and the monster soared away, bearing the lion into the sky, like a hawk seizing a field mouse, or an eagle stealing a lamb.

Abas gazed after it into the blinding blue sky, not believing what he had seen. The glade was empty. But where the deer had been was a circle of scorched grass, so Abas knew that what he had seen was real.

He was in a swoon of adoration and wild hope. He felt almost as if he were human again, but a boy. Then he realized that he was remembering, and that the memory was of himself at the age of five, seeing his father riding into the courtyard in full battle gear. A big man, standing upright in a gilded bronze chariot, clad in gleaming bronze—breastplate, greaves, and eagle-plumed helmet, a sword at his side, a spear in his hand. The child watching him had thrilled in every fiber, promising himself that he would grow up to be a glittering bronze warrior king just like his father.

And now the little lizard was swept by the same feeling, but with greater fury. The magnificent creature that had snatched up the lion as if it were a mouse was a lizard also—shaped just like himself. Then, from the depth of his debased transformation, he would find a way to rise to the same splendor. Magnifying himself, growing wings, letting the flame in his heart kindle his breath. And so enlarged, so armed, he would avenge himself on the world that had humiliated him.

“That was a dragon,” Abas said to himself. “Then there are such things; they’re not just nursery tales. Very well, then, I aspire to be a dragon. Perhaps I’m a young one now, who can tell? After all, a butterfly begins as a caterpillar and grows wings later. Maybe a dragon starts small too. By the goddess who punished me, I welcome this transformation, and I shall not rest until I achieve dragonhood. Then, world, beware!”

Aflame with his vision, drunk with the power that was not yet his, the little lizard decided to go back to the palace and kill the newly crowned young king who was his brother. “I’ll find a way,” he thought. “Small as I am I’ll finish him off, the lout, and show whoever needs showing that I’m dragon material.”

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The Titan

Now, there were two among the Immortals who loved mankind: an elder Titan named Prometheus and the young god Hermes. Hermes, however, was unable to help the human race; he was the messenger god, the favorite son of Zeus, and he had always obeyed his father in all things. While he was shocked and grieved when the High Council decided on the eventual destruction of the human race, he felt unable to do anything about it.

But Prometheus owed no obedience to Zeus. He had rebelled against one of the great god's edicts once, by giving man the gift of fire, and he was being terribly punished for it. Zeus had ordered him chained to a mountain crag and had sent two vultures to hover about him perpetually, driving their beaks into his belly and pulling out his great guts. Being of divine stock, Prometheus could not die, but he could suffer—and his suffering was meant to be eternal.

Despite his torment, however, he kept his courage high, and his intellect remained unclouded. He kept his love for mankind and his loathing for those who entertained themselves with the spectacle of human misery.

Such was the power of the Promethean personality that, condemned and helpless as he was, there were still those who venerated him and sought to serve him, despite terrible risk to themselves. Particularly attracted to Prometheus were some of the lesser gods, who were more intimate with human beings and didn't want to see them destroyed. One of the most fervent of these was Ikelos, a son of Hypnos, God of Sleep. He would change himself into a different animal every night. The most restless of Sleep's brood, he became a furry dream, the kind that prowls the margins of sleep. When visiting Prometheus he became a giant bat so that he could chase the vultures away for a while. But the big, bald birds would simply

hover, wait until the godling was gone, then swoop down again, and tear at the entrails of the chained Prometheus.

This time, when Ikelos came, the Titan beckoned him closer so that he might speak to him. "I have an errand for you, Ikelos."

"Anything you wish, my lord, I shall seek to perform."

"Go to Phoenicia," said Prometheus. "Visit the sleep of Cadmus, third son to the king. Ask him to come to me."

"Yes, my lord."

"He won't know where to find me," said Prometheus. "Instruct him through vision, then lead him here."

"I shall go to Phoenicia this very night," said Ikelos.

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On the Peak

Cadmus, asleep in the palace, saw a white bull swimming in a dark blue sea. Europa rode the bull, her hair swinging. Her face was hidden; he couldn't tell if she were happy or frightened. Now he was swimming after them. But this bull swam faster and became a tiny speck on the horizon.

Now Cadmus was swimming up a hill of water, not a wave or a swell, for it did not move, but a great cliff of water. Up, up, he swam; he was following a white fox; it was scampering up the hill before him. The wall of water became a dry hill, earth and rock; the foam on top became snow. Two ugly birds hung above, huge and foul. And when had it stopped being a dream?

The fox's tail was a plume of white fire; the animal turned and looked back at him. Its eyes were blue as the core of flame. Then it vanished, darting suddenly off the path among a welter of rocks, where Cadmus could not follow. He kept to the path, kept climbing. Far above a voice was thundering: "Cadmus ... Cadmus ..."

When he reached the top of the hill, he couldn't believe what he saw. A naked giant was slung between crags, chained to the rocks. His hair and beard were like drifts of snow. The birds had torn his belly open; it was a pit of raw meat, faintly steaming in the cold air.

The vultures hovered above. They were under attack. A goat, perched on a table rock, was leaping straight up at the birds, trying to butt them in midair. The vultures swerved away, and the goat fell back on the rock, balancing itself perfectly on its hooves, ready for another leap. It was a black goat, a she-goat, the most beautiful animal Cadmus had ever seen. She was large as a stag, had ivory horns and ivory hooves, and eyes that were slits of yellow fire. But Cadmus did not stop to admire her. He had moved closer to the giant's snowy head.

“Hail, great Titan!” he said.

“Seeker, hail!”

“What did you call me, my lord?”

“Seeker.”

“My name is Cadmus. Perhaps you think I’m someone else?”

“I think you’re you; I speak to your condition, not your name. A seeker is one who seeks. You seek a sister. You seek a system. And you come to ask me how to find them.”

“O wise one, you read my innermost hopes. The urgent task is to find my sister. Can you tell me of her?”

“She lives,” replied the Titan. “She is unharmed.”

“Where is she?”

“Out of your reach. In another mode.”

“I don’t understand,” said Cadmus.

“She is lost to you. She has been placed beyond your grasp, or that of any other mortal.”

“Then she is dead.”

“She lives. There are those who would say that she has been magnified, glorified.”

“Is she happy?”

“She is replete.”

“Shall I see her again?”

“Only if you accomplish your task.”

“And if I do, shall I?”

“When your task is done.”

“What must I do first?”

“Begin,” said Prometheus.

“Where?” asked Cadmus. “My eldest brother, Cyllix, who captains the war fleet of Phoenicia, has sailed westward with all his ships. My second brother, Phoenix, has marched his army eastward. But I, I have no fleet, no army. I am unfit to command, or even to serve in the ranks. I am alone, unarmed; which way do I go?”

“Your words reek of self-pity, my boy, which is no way to start a quest, or anything else. What has sapped your confidence? Do people esteem your brothers over yourself? And do you share this opinion?”

“I do, I do. I envy my brothers—their raw animal magnetism, their meaty force.”

“Do you really envy that single-minded ferocity, their gluttonous satisfaction in breaking an enemy’s body in their own hands?”

“I have been taught that this is a royal aptitude,” Cadmus said. “Lacking it, I cannot lead other men or win their respect. I simply have no impact on men or events. I think people only half hear me, half see me.”

“Perhaps I detect something in you that your brothers lack,” said Prometheus. “Something that can generate a force beyond crude muscular strength. However, that hidden talent must remain hidden if you continue to consult your doubts.”

“I have dreamed of glory,” said Cadmus. “Of mighty blows taken without flinching and mightier blows returned. Of foes falling, men shouting, women smiling. I have dreamed of slaying my sister’s abductor. But such dreams are the wrack of a weakling’s sleep. Real warriors sleep like hogs and dream with their swords.”

“You are bitter for one so young. But such bitterness can become a strength if it is cleansed of self-pity. I have chosen you, Cadmus, but you must endorse my choice.”

Cadmus didn’t hear these last words. He had never before been where it was cold enough to make breath visible, and the puffs of white vapor coming out of the Titan’s mouth as he spoke fascinated him. He was so deep in his reverie that he didn’t catch the meaning of what was said.

“Why, I can *see* the words coming out of his mouth,” he was saying to himself. “Just what I always wanted—to *see* sound and make others see it. Now I wonder if that steam is making different shapes for different sounds? No ... this needs further study.”

“Did you hear me?” boomed Prometheus, so loudly that he startled Cadmus out of his thoughts.

But the boy was used to hearing this from his father. “I just missed the last few words, my lord. The birds were screaming.”

“You had better listen closely,” said Prometheus. “I was saying that you must focus on what you can do, not what you can’t.”

“Well, I know what I *must* do. I must search for my sister. Somehow, I know that my brothers, for all their splendid virtues, won’t find her.”

“Neither will you, not yet. Why don’t you ask me about your other quest?”

“What other?”

“Your quest for the magic code, for the word-signs.”

“All that will have to wait.”

“Two quests, yes, but you are one person, and your quests will merge. One will serve the other. Cadmus, Prince of the East, hearken to me. For all your diminutive stature and shrunken self-esteem, you are being ripened for mighty deeds.”

“Again I ask: Where do I start?”

“You have already started. Go forth from this place. Ask questions. Cleave your way among the swarms of the indifferent, and the actively evil, and the few of accidental good will. A quest is not only a search; it is also a route that forms itself as it goes, striking a vein through circumstance. Go, Cadmus. Ask questions, test the answers, look, see, and understand so that wisdom and experience may irradiate the legacy you will leave mankind.”

“What legacy?”

“I, Prometheus, gave the human race its first great gift—fire. You, Cadmus, shall give humanity the second great gift—a magic code to catch language on the wind and utter it anew for those who have learned the code. You have already begun with Aleph and Bet, the Ox and the House, and you shall go on to find a picture for every sound. That will be your gift.”

“But you are being punished for your gift,” said Cadmus. “Shall I be punished for mine?”

“In a different way, if you succeed. But they will try their best to see that you fail.”

“Who are *they*?”

“They will make themselves known. They will send a dragon.”

“After me?”

“None other.”

“And what shall I do?”

“Fight him, of course.”

“Fight a dragon? Me?!”

“You will not be alone. The black goat will go with you. She’s no ordinary beast. She was born to Amalthea, the she-goat who was foster mother to the infant Zeus. Zeus became jealous when this kid was born, and

he tried to kill her. Therefore, does she hate Zeus, and now that she is grown, attempts to help me, whom Zeus considers his enemy.”

“She’s splendid, I can see that,” said Cadmus. “But how can she help me against a dragon? I’m terrified at the very thought.”

“Forget about fear. Look at those vultures up there, waiting until I’m alone so that they may feed again upon my liver; look at those cruel birds, my lad, and tell me you can’t endure what must be endured.”

“The spectacle of your suffering makes me ashamed of my cowardice. Yet, I’m still afraid.”

“My dear boy, anyone who doesn’t fear a dragon is a fool. But fight him you must, fear or not. When you leave here, you will make your way to the Great Smithy. There you must try to persuade Hephaestus to give you the weapons you’ll need.”

“How do I find the Great Smithy?”

“The goat knows the way.”

“Master, I obey. I don’t really know what I’m doing, but I know that I must do it.”

“Go then, and my blessing go with you.”

Cadmus touched the giant’s beard timidly, then turned and walked away down the path. The goat cast a last blazing look at the birds above and trotted after Cadmus.

As soon as the goat left her rock, the vultures dived, their screams mingling with the Titan’s groans. But Cadmus didn’t notice. He was thinking too hard.

“I wonder whether breathing becomes more visible the colder it gets? Do different sounds freeze into different shapes? I’ll have to go where it’s really cold—behind the North Wind. When I have time perhaps—after the dragon and Europa and so forth. *Is* there any ‘after’ when meeting a dragon? Maybe I’d better do what I want first; save the monster and sister till later? Would that be ignoble? Am I heartless? Is my father right about me? Or is Prometheus?”

Something nudged him hard. He whirled about. The goat was looking at him with her yellow eyes. He stroked the harsh wool of her neck. She knelt and he mounted her. He held her horns as she trotted off. The wind smelled of snow and pine.

“I’m setting off on an awful journey, by any calculations,” he said to himself. “Why then am I so happy?”

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The Spider

The little lizard had returned to the palace in Eleusis and was now perched upon the beam over the royal bed, the very same spot from which he had watched his father die. “The new king sleeps here now,” Abas said to himself. “I shall wait until nightfall, and when he is deep asleep shall simply drop upon his exposed throat and sink my teeth into it. I know where the great vein is that runs from heart to brain. Yes. I shall drain his body of its lifeblood. I need the taste of it to cool my rage. But many hours must pass before nightfall, and the thought of killing him has sharpened my appetite. I think I’ll do a bit of hunting.”

Creeping along the beam, he came upon a spiderweb whose strands were much thicker than usual, but he was so excited by the memory of the dragon and the idea of becoming one himself—and of killing his brother that night—that he ignored what he knew: that a big, thick web means an outside spider, one big enough to eat a lizard, perhaps.

Catching sight of a moth caught in the strands, Abas climbed onto the web and was pleased to find that it was strong enough to hold him.

But nothing moves faster than a spider in its web. This spider appeared so suddenly it was as if a piece of the web itself had clotted and come alive. Abas found himself confronting not the moth, but a spider bigger than any he had ever seen. To the little lizard it looked as big as a chariot wheel. In fact, it was about as big as a dinner plate.

Between two flicks of his tongue, the spider had already cast a loop of silk about him and pulled it tight, then cast another. Abas couldn’t move. The spider pulled him closer and looked down at him with her multi-paned eyes. She spoke in a rustling voice.

“Were you about to steal my moth?”

“I beg your pardon,” said Abas. “I thought this web was vacant. That you had gone off somewhere and that it didn’t matter if I trespassed.”

“Gone off, and left the larder full? You know more about spiders than that. I know you do, little thief. You’ve been robbing webs for a long time.”

“Are you going to eat me?”

“You would certainly represent a change in diet,” said the spider. “Actually you look quite edible under all that leather.”

“How is it you speak so well?” asked Abas, stalling for time. He had puffed himself out when she cast the loops about him and was now slowly letting his breath out, trying to shrink away from her grasp. He was trying to keep the conversation going until he could manage to slip out of her loops. “Your command of the language is not only fluent, it’s eloquent.”

“You’re pretty articulate yourself for a miserable little gecko,” said the spider. “I speak for the same reason you do. I was not always a spider, as you were not always a lizard. Oh, my goodness, you’re not trying to get away, are you? When we’re conversing so nicely? That’s not polite.”

Swiftly, she cast three more loops about him, and drew them very tight. “If you’re going to eat me, eat me now,” cried Abas. “Get it over with!”

“Gently, little friend,” replied the spider. “Don’t you want to hear my tale? Well, you will, whether you want to or not. You’re a captive audience, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” murmured the lizard.

“I was once a maiden in the land of Lydia,” said the spider. “Perhaps the most skillful spinner and weaver amongst mortals since the world began. I made garments that were lighter than silk but warmer than fur. And when I wove counterpanes, each square became a picture of some happy hour, making a quilt of joyous dreams. Well, I was on the threshold of a good life, anyone might think. I was honored in the countryside, well paid for my work, and several young men were eager to marry me. But, I made a fatal error. Carried away by pride, I boasted one day that I could spin and weave better than the goddess Athena.”

“Are you Arachne, by any chance?” asked the lizard.

“By an evil chance, yes. I am Arachne.”

“I’ve heard of you. Every child in the Middle Sea basin has heard nursery tales of you. How Athena grew angry at your boast and challenged you to a

contest, which she won. And, as the price of losing, you were changed into a spider. You are the first of all spiders, mother of spiders.”

“Is that what children are told?” asked Arachne.

“That’s what I was told. Isn’t it true?”

“Up to a point. Then it becomes a lie. Athena was indeed angered when she heard my boast. But she fell into a more murderous fury *after* the contest, which *I* won.”

“You won?”

“I certainly did. And she had a big head start, you know. She set up her loom on top of a mountain. She didn’t need a spindle; she didn’t have to draw thread from flax. All she had to do up there was gather handfuls of cloud-wool and dye them in the colors of sunset and the colors of dawn. Then she wove the stuff on her loom and flung great colored tapestries across the sky. Oh, they were beautiful, all right. And the people stopped to look up and admire them. Then they hurried on their way to my door where the whole countryside had queued up, eagerly waiting for the cloaks and tunics and quilts that I was turning out so fast that I had clothed an entire village before Athena had flung out her first tapestry. The people were so happy they danced for joy in the meadow where my cottage stood, for it was threatening to be a hard winter. Oh, I won all right. And Athena knew it. She came striding down the mountain and stood there, taller than my cottage. She spoke in a voice that rattled the eaves:

“‘Stand forth, Arachne! Receive your award.’

“I came out and knelt before her. She glared down at me. Her gray eyes were like marsh water when the first scum of ice forms. She spoke again:

“‘Since you spin so well, and are so happy doing it, hereafter you shall be relieved of all other duties and can spend your life doing what you do best. Nor shall you need to concern yourself with heavy equipment—with spindle and distaff and loom. Out of your own body shall you draw all that you need.’

“I was dwindling as she spoke—shrinking, sprouting legs, antennae, becoming what you see before you now. When she had finished speaking I hung by a thread from my own lintel and was spinning a web.

“‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Spin, my friend, spin.’

Spread your web

so light and fine
for that upon
which you will dine.

“With those words, she took up my spindle and struck my loom, knocking it to splinters. Then she broke the spindle over her knee, and strode off. From then on, I was a spider.”

“Have you lived here all this time, in the rafters of this palace?” asked the lizard.

“Not at all,” said the spider. “I just arrived.”

“And to what do we owe the honor of this visit, ma’am?”

“I was sent here—for you.”

“For me? Who sent you?”

“Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. Did you not hear of them in your nursery tales?”

“No ma’am. I don’t think so.”

“You should have. Some consider them more important than the gods themselves. They are the three crones who call themselves the Fates, and claim that they control destiny.”

“Do they?”

“Who can tell? Everyone’s afraid of them, so they probably do. They live in a hovel on a crag beyond Mount Olympus. There they sit, gnawing at pork bones and crusts of wheaten loaves, and swigging barley beer by the pail—and working as they eat. For they never stop doing either, except to sleep. And they don’t sleep much. The youngest sister, Clotho, sits with comb and spindle, carding the flax and drawing the thread. The second sister, Lachesis, holds her notched rod, measuring out the thread. And the eldest sister, the most fatal crone, Atropos, the Scissors Hag, wields her shears, deciding where to cut the thread of each life—deciding, in other words, who lives and who dies. Then at midnight they leave their seats and go into a wild coven dance, tangling the threads, and calling the tangle a design. They have two pets, a cat and a spider. I am the spider. I was the first of my kind, and they liked my style and took me to live with them. The cat is my enemy, of course, but he can’t catch me, no matter how he tries.”

“Very interesting,” said Abas. “But what, pray, do they want with me?”

“I have no idea,” said the spider. “But they have decided, apparently, that you will play some role in the Master Design. So they have sent me for you, and where they send me, I go. What they bid me, I do. Come along then. I’ll wrap you up just a bit more so you won’t fall, and carry you there. We’ll travel faster that way.”

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The Three Fates

Lachesis, the second Fate, held the little lizard on her lap and stroked his polished head with her fore finger.

“Atropos,” she said, “the cat belongs to you. And Clotho, you have the spider. Neither loves me best, you have to admit. So I’m claiming this lizard for my own.”

“He won’t be staying with us,” said Atropos. “He’s here to receive instruction. Then out into the world he goes to play his role in our Master Design. You know that.”

“But he’s here now!” cried Lachesis. “And he’s mine! And later, when he’s out in the world, doing what he must do, perhaps he’ll remember me now and then, and even visit me sometimes.”

“Very well,” said Atropos. “If you mean to adopt him you must be the one to instruct him.”

“Oh, lizard mine,” said Lachesis. “When you leave us you will go down the mountain, then eastward into the forest. You will search until you find a grove where the oaks grow to giant size. The birds there are larger too, and the insects. For there, buried deep, abides a fragment of the body of Uranus, the First One, the Rain God, butchered by his son Cronos at the dawn of time. The taproots of the trees in this place have drunk of his rich blood and grown large. And insects that eat the buds off the branches grow huge. The birds eat the insects, and wrens become as big as owls. But most wonderful of all, a greedy swarm of worms ate of the flesh, drank the blood of the butchered god, and grew enormous. They were filled with the boiling spite of that vengeful blood and put on armor, leather armor; they grew teeth, claws, and vicious spiked tails. And taught themselves the deadly trick of spitting fire.

“Now, my little green beauty,” continued Lachesis, “you shall dig yourself a tunnel and burrow your way to the shoulder bone of Uranus. You shall eat your fill, and become a dragon also—a king among dragons, much larger than the ordinary kind, as you are now larger than a worm.”

“I shall do all that you bid me, madam, and I thank you and your sisters for this your instruction. To become a dragon has been my fondest hope.”

“It won’t be all basking in the sun and gobbling cattle,” said Atropos. “There are difficult tasks before you, risky ones, bloody ones.”

“But that’s what dragons are for!” cried Abas. “The opportunity to rend, crunch, destroy. Exactly why I have wanted to be one. Know this, venerable dame, there is a rage festering inside me that can be laved only by rivers of human blood.”

“After you sharpen your skills on a few minor heroes,” said Atropos, “and wipe out a village or two, you will go to Boeotia and await the coming of one Cadmus, a prince of Phoenicia. And that is your prime mission, to destroy him, leaving not a trace, not a morsel of flesh nor splinter of bone.”

“Cadmus,” said the lizard. “A great warrior?”

“Worse, much worse,” said Atropos. “He’s a meddler, a disciple of Prometheus. A mischief among mortals. One who views our mighty edicts as idle whim, who regards the Master Design as a web of cruel fantasy, and believes only in his own dreams—which he refuses to forget upon awaking, but pursues all day long, trying to make them come true. The dream he pursues now is to steal a divine privilege and extend it to mankind.”

“What privilege?” asked the lizard.

“It’s called ‘writing.’”

“What’s that?”

“It’s what appears on the Great Scroll. Only the gods know of it and understand its meaning. It is a code, a set of magic signs through which language remembers itself and utters itself anew. It will focus vague images and make them sing. It will make dreams dance. It can put wings to thought so that it passes from mind to mind, gaining strength as it goes, enriching the minds it touches and drawing forth those dangerous things called ‘ideas,’ which, if allowed to grow wild, will cause men and women to think they’re as good as we are. In their pride, they will storm Olympus, hurl us off the mountain, and try to rule their own lives.”

“And it is Cadmus who has set all this foul business afoot?” asked Abas.

“He and he alone. Although, if allowed to continue unchecked, he will certainly attract disciples. So he must be killed before he infects others. And the perfect antidote to the poison of ideas is a dragon.”

“I am proud to have been chosen,” said the lizard.

“Listen, little pet,” said Lachesis. “You will have to practice on the standard warrior-brand of hero before tackling Cadmus. So I want you to heed this: Never eat a hero without peeling him. Make sure to spit out helmet, breastplate, greaves, sword, battle-ax—every last bit of indigestible gear. Otherwise, you’ll get a monstrous bellyache. Do you promise?”

“I promise,” said the lizard.

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The Smith God

Mount Aetna, an extinct volcano in Sicily, was where Hephaestus had set up his first smithy. But Aetna suddenly decided to stop being extinct, and began to belch fire and spit red-hot lava. So the smith god moved forge and anvil to another dead crater in the eastern range of the Hellenic peninsula. And that is where the great black goat carried Cadmus.

The young prince dismounted and began to descend into the crater. He moved very cautiously. The place was full of sooty shadows. He winced at the great clamor rising from below. Metal struck metal, clanging and screeching. Rock rumbled. He heard ferocious laughter and shouting, cries of anger and pain. The noise was unbearable and the heat was worse. Cadmus felt as if he were standing right at the mouth of an open furnace.

Indeed, the huge figures he saw near the furnace pits wore thick leather aprons and helmets of hollowed rock with a single eyehole—one eyehole each in the middle of the forehead. And he knew that he was viewing creatures he had thought belonged only to legend—the Cyclopes, tall as trees, savage-tempered, master craftsmen who served the gods by laboring in the Great Smithy.

“What do you want?” boomed a voice. “Visitors are unwelcome here.”

Swiftly, Cadmus tried to recover his wits, which had been scattered by the clamor and the heat. He knelt on the rock floor, for he recognized Hephaestus. The smith god was so huge that he seemed to fill the great crater. His enormous span of shoulders and broad chest were knotted with muscle. He wore a leather apron and swung the heaviest hammer ever made. Its shaft was the trunk of a tree, its head a single lump of iron larger than a boulder.

“Who are you?” the god roared.

Cadmus tried to answer but couldn't hear himself through the hammering and clanging. He jumped up on an anvil and spoke into the god's ear.

"O Hephaestus, mighty lord of mechanics and inventors, forgive my intrusion, but I have been sent to ask a favor."

"Who are you and what do you want? Be brief."

"I am Cadmus, a prince of Phoenicia, and am pledged to slay the Dragon of Boeotia."

"Presumptuous runt! How can you slay a dragon that has fattened itself on a diet of heroes?"

"Perhaps he has grown too fat," said Cadmus. "Perhaps he has been spoiled by heroes. Perhaps he has never met a clever coward. Perhaps the desperate strategies of sheer funk may prevail where heroics falter."

"Don't jest with me, little one," warned the god. "How can you possibly hope to slay a dragon?"

"With the weapons you will provide."

"As yet I have heard no reason I should do anything for you."

"My lord, I know that others come here loaded with treasure to repay you for what you alone can provide. But I, I can offer only my need, and can repay you only with gratitude."

"You're a persistent little fellow, I'll grant you that—and not uncourageous in your own way. Well, I happen to have some battle gear made for one who was killed before he could get here. A helmet of beaten brass which no battle-ax can dent. And a shield of brass, which no spear or sword can pierce. It is polished more brightly than any mirror so that you can flash the sun in your enemy's eyes. These weapons are for defense, but to conquer you must attack. Here is a sword of thrice-tempered iron that can cut through armor as easily as a tailor's shears slice through a bolt of wool. Watch this."

Hephaestus swung the sword and struck the anvil, splitting it cleanly in two.

Cadmus gawked at the gifts. The helmet was bigger than the great cooking pot used in the kitchen of his father's palace.

The shield was as big as a chariot wheel. And the sword ... with its point stuck in the ground, Cadmus had to reach as high as he could to grasp its hilt.

“Don’t you have something more my size?” he asked.

Hephaestus scowled. “This is the Great Smithy, you know. We forge weapons for gods and demigods and the larger heroes. Why don’t you take your business to some village smith out there. I’m sure he’ll be able to accommodate you.”

“I can do without a helmet,” murmured Cadmus. “Even one that fits would give me a headache. And the dagger you made for this same warrior will do me as a sword. And a single scale of that mail coat will make a fine shield; all it needs is a handle.”

Hephaestus looked away. His face knotted in fury.

“I know how you must hate to alter your superb handiwork,” said Cadmus. “But weapons are meant to be used; otherwise they are idle shapes of metal. And these are too big for me to use. Nevertheless, having seen them, I shall never be content with anything less splendid. Give me the dagger, I pray. And fix a grip for that brass disk. For I will not go from here weaponless. If you do not think me worthy to bear your arms, then be good enough to pitch me straightaway into your furnace flames so that my worthless carcass may help to fuel your mighty labors.”

“A generous offer, but my fires require heartier fare. See.”

Hephaestus was pointing at a Cyclops who held an enormous uprooted tree in each hand; he flung them into the flames.

“That’s not the furnace,” said Hephaestus. “Just a small fire for making charcoal. There’s how they feed my forge-fires.”

He was pointing to a pile of charcoal lumps that towered to the roof of the great cave. A line of Cyclopes stretched from that pile to a fire pit near an anvil as large as a courtyard. Buckets of charcoal were being passed from hand to hand. The Cyclops nearest the blaze tossed the black lumps in, whirled, and hurled the bucket over the heads of the others to the Cyclops at the charcoal pile. Each bucket was the size of a gardener’s shed.

“No,” murmured Cadmus. “I can see I’m not even worthy to feed your flames. I shall trouble you no more. Farewell.”

“You have offered your all,” said Hephaestus. “That’s enough for me. Here’s your dagger. And here’s your shield. I have fixed a handle to it. Take them. Use them well. But you must have a helmet too. I insist. I’m the armorer; I know best. Take this brass thimble. I had intended it for Clotho, youngest of the Fates, but I’ll make another for that dire spinster.”

He clapped the thimble on Cadmus's head. It fit perfectly.

"If that tiny weight hurts your head, just think how it would ache under a touch of the dragon's claws," said Hephaestus.

Cadmus seized the smith god's great, grimy hand and kissed it. "Thank you, my lord. Memory of your kindness will lighten the heaviest gear. I shall bear your weapons with pride as great as the mightiest warrior can know."

"I must warn you," said Hephaestus, "that the gifts of the gods are not always what they seem. We extract heavy payment for what we give. It's our nature. This sword, for example; if it slays one of your enemies, it will insist on tasting the blood of one you love. I tell you this so that you may refuse the gift while you still have a chance."

Cadmus thought hard. The god's words terrified him, the more because they had been said with such kindness. "But there's no one I love except my sister," he said to himself. "And I have been told that a long time must pass before I see her again. Surely by then I shall have thrown the sword away. She'll be in no danger from me."

Aloud, he said: "Great Hephaestus, God of Fire, Master of Metal, I thank you for both weapons and warning. I shall keep your gifts and try to use them well."

"You're welcome, little one. Good hunting."

Cadmus climbed out of the crater and whistled for the goat. His new weapons were heavy, but they glittered so brightly, and the mountain air was so clean after the smoky forge that he grew half drunk on it and danced for joy. The goat pranced up to meet him. Cadmus flung his arms about her neck and rubbed her face with his. She bit his shoulder gently, then knelt while he climbed on her back. And down the slope of the great crater they went.

A New Dragon

Abas obeyed those haggish sisters called the Fates and journeyed to an oak grove in the land of Boeotia where the shoulder bone of the butchered god had been buried. There the taproots of the trees had drunk of his rich blood and grown huge. The insects had eaten of the buds of these trees and grown huge. Birds had eaten the insects and grown enormous. And, deep underground, worms had feasted and grown into dragons.

When Abas reached the grove, he burrowed deep, as he had been told, and found the shoulder bone of Uranus. He ate of its magically replenished flesh and grew into a dragon. He was larger than any other dragon, with brass scales instead of leather ones, and brass claws. His tail had spikes of iron instead of bone. His breath was now aflame, not only with his own spite, but with that of the ancient god whose scattered body still called for vengeance.

Abas came into that grove a little lizard; he came out as an enormous dragon. Full of bloodthirsty zeal, he immediately began to terrorize the countryside. He devoured cattle, cowherds, sheep, shepherds—and wiped out entire villages. Throughout the land, he became known as the Dragon of Boeotia, or Abas the Abominable.

One other thing happened to this dragon who had been a lizard, and before that, a prince. Having taken a monster form, and behaving as a monster, his human brain had clenched, shriveled and become reptilian. Stupefied by successful cruelty, he was losing the power to reason, and was quite happy without it.

Journey to Boeotia

From the Great Smithy to Boeotia was a long overland journey. Cadmus had no idea where Boeotia might be, and in those days travelers did not stop to ask directions. It was too dangerous. For the savagely inhospitable tribesmen along the route were very likely to offer strangers as sacrifice. In that region, sacrifice was made to a bat goddess, who would refuse to bless the orchards without her ration of human blood.

So Cadmus did not stop to ask his way but let the goat take him where she would. He knew that she was under some mandate from Prometheus and was guided by secret knowledge. And he was in no hurry to reach the hunting grounds of the dragon.

Prince and goat were traveling northward now along the shore of a narrow gulf. Across the bay, mountains loomed. But on their shore were flatlands. They came to a place where the gulf opened into what seemed to be a river.

The goat waded in and began to drink, then moved upstream and dipped her muzzle again. Cadmus tasted the water too, and realized that the salt gulf was turning to brackish river water. It was almost sunset, an early dusk because of the mountains to the west. The river, bathed in red light, looked like blood flowing from some great wound in the earth. Cadmus shuddered. He was seized by a premonition of evil. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do, although it would almost break his heart to do it.

“I must leave you here,” Cadmus told the goat. “I shall strike inland, following this river. I understand that dragons and such favor the banks of freshwater streams; they find good hunting where man and beast come down to drink. You wait here for me. Wait seven days. I shall return when I have killed the dragon. If I don’t return, farewell to you.”

The goat nodded. She had no intention of obeying, but was glad that Cadmus had chosen this route. Now she could follow the river, keeping out of sight, but knowing all the time that he was just ahead. For she intended to be there when he met the dragon.

Cadmus followed the river upstream all day, and grew to dislike it. He was used to the swift, tumbling little rivers of the foothills near his home. This one cut through flatlands, was broad and shallow, and seemed to have no current. It oozed rather than flowed. A green scum flecked its surface. He would have preferred to angle away toward the forest. But some instinct told him to stay near the slow river.

He slept on its bank that night. A brown mist arose and thickened into a tall shape. A voice grated down at him: "I am Asopus, an ancient river god. The high thief, Zeus, stole my daughter, the beautiful naiad Aegina. When I protested, he pelted me with boulders, wounding me to death but never allowing me to die. So that I flow forever in a pestilential stream and am loathed by man because a dragon now harries my shores and litters them with corpses, making my waters fouler still. Nor shall I be cleansed until the dragon is killed."

"I have come to kill it. Tell me where to find it, O river god, that I may cleanse your waters."

"I do not know where the dragon is," said Asopus. "I break into many streams at this point. For this is where Zeus broke my body with boulders."

"Can't you give me any idea where to find the monster?" asked Cadmus.

Follow a cow
She'll show you how.

The grating voice dwindled away. The mist cleared. Cadmus moaned and fell into a deeper sleep. When he awoke he saw a cow grazing nearby. She lifted her head, lowered it again to wrench out another mouthful of grass, and then ambled over to the youth. She was a pretty brown heifer with large amber eyes and small horns. She mooed musically, then moved off. Cadmus followed. He understood nothing. He knew only that he must do as the river god had bidden him.

For the rest of that day Cadmus followed the cow. She kept to the shore of a stream that branched northwest. Her ambling pace was swifter than it

looked, and Cadmus found it hard to keep up. He could not stop to eat or drink. Night came. Surely, Cadmus thought, she'll rest now. But she did not. The stars hung low and it was still easy to see her.

The heifer climbed a low hill and went down the other side. Cadmus followed. His legs were weary. The shield and sword seemed to weigh more with every step. They dragged him toward the ground. "Heavy, heavy, these gifts of the gods," he murmured. "But if their favor is such a burden, how weighty must be their displeasure." He stumbled on. He could not cast off his weapons, nor could he rest while the heifer moved forward.

All night Cadmus followed her. His legs turned to bladders. He staggered and sank to the ground.

"Am I to fail before I even reach the dragon? Simply because I am weary? No! This shall not be."

He pulled himself to his hands and knees but could rise no farther. The cow was moving out of sight. He crawled after her. He tried to encourage himself by thinking that she too was tiring. She was climbing the steep slope of another hill. Cadmus struggled up the hill, dragging himself along on his knees, pulling himself by the strength of his arms. Finally, the cow reached the top of the hill and began to go down the other side. Now Cadmus simply let himself roll. When she started across the plain, he again crawled after her. His hands were scraped, his knees, bleeding. He could see the river glinting in the afternoon sun, and realized they had worked their way back to the main branch.

"I will go on even if my flesh is torn away and I have to creep on my bones," he said to himself.

Then, to his delight, he saw the cow suddenly fold herself into a low shadow and lie down. As he watched, she lowered her head and slept. Cadmus drew in a deep breath of fresh air. He took off his helmet, laid down his shield, and placed his sword carefully upon it. His eyelids sagged, but he kept them open a moment to savor the marvelous idea that he could close them when he wished, and sleep.

To his horror he saw the cow's shadow grow tall again as she arose and moved on. He tried to get up but was nailed to the ground. Groaning, he took his sword, stuck it in the ground, and then, holding the hilt, dragged himself up. He clapped the helmet on his aching head, then took a great breath, and lifted his shield. He couldn't hold it but had to drag it behind

him as he limped after the cow. He knew he couldn't walk far. He knew also that he dared not sink to his knees again and crawl because his legs were raw meat now. He would never be able to bear the pain of crawling over the rocky ground.

The moon had risen. The stars flared. The meadow was flooded with brown light. Now the cow seemed to be walking on her hind legs. He blinked and looked again. The cow danced before him, shaking one raised forehoof at the moon.

That sight finished him. Sword and shield slipped from his grasp and fell clanking. He dropped to the ground. His helmet rolled away. He lay on his back looking at the moon. It was a curdled yellow that seemed to pulse in the sky as he watched. His throat was so dry that he couldn't swallow. He moved his tongue but could work up no spittle. He had not eaten all day, but thirst made him ignore his hunger. His thirst was unbearable, but he hadn't the strength to drag himself across the field to the river.

Cadmus swiveled his neck painfully to look at the cow. If she had been dancing, she had stopped. She was cropping grass again. He tried to call to her, heard himself croaking feebly. He gathered up the last tatters of his strength and sent a thought toward her. "Come here!" She raised her head, swung her tail, and loped toward him. Her swollen bag swung above him. He grasped it, pulled himself up, and tried to drink from her udder.

The cow pulled away. She was skittish. She was moving off. Cadmus fell back onto the grass. "If I don't drink, I'll die," he thought. He flung himself on his helmet and rolled to his knees. It was agony. He forced himself to bear the pain, and crawled toward the cow. He grasped her. She did not skitter. She stood. Cadmus milked her into his helmet. Twin jets tinkled in. The sound gave him strength enough to keep milking until the helmet was half full. He tried to lift it in both hands, but they were shaking so much that he had to put it down. He stretched himself on the ground and drank from the helmet like a snake out of a trough. Every swallow of the warm rich milk was the taste of life itself. He drank every drop. The cow had ambled off again, but stood closer than before, wrenching grass. His belly full, his thirst quenched, Cadmus didn't move, didn't want to. He felt deliciously drowsy and closed his eyes.

Screams woke him, terrible, hoarse, bellowing screams. The cow was screaming. Brass tinkled strangely. Great brass claws were digging into her. The moon was covered by clouds; it was hard to see. The cow was rising slowly into the air, bellowing horribly—a dreadful, clotted, phlegmy sound. Metal wings clanked. Cadmus smelled sulfur and dung. He saw a gout of red fire, and, by its light, a huge lizard shape. It disappeared into the blackness above, taking the cow with it.

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Fighting the Dragon

Cadmus was dizzy with horror. He didn't know whether he was awake or asleep, but he feared he was awake. "It took the cow," he thought. "It'll be back for me." But he could not move. Fatigue was stronger than fear. He fell into a suffocated sleep.

The cow danced in his sleep. She frisked on hind legs and beckoned him with one forefoot, crying, "Moon! moon!" He arose and danced with her. One brisket was torn away; the raw meat bulged. But it did not sicken him; he pitied her too much. He danced with her in the moonlight—dim brown light; the moon swam in a chink of clouds; it was brown as an old bloodstain. The cow's eyes were pits of amber light; her white horns glistened. Her breath was heavy and sweet with the smell of cropped grass.

They danced down to the river. The moon flared, casting a yellow light, turning the river into a mirror. The cow gazed at herself in the water. Her head swayed. She mooed at her reflection.

In the clarity of his stunned, moonstruck sleep, Cadmus knew that this play of cow and mirrored cow held great meaning for him somehow, that this was why he had been commanded to follow her. But what the meaning was he did not know. The cow bellowed and disappeared.

Cadmus awoke at dawn. His weapons lay on the grass; the cow was gone. He looked about. He lay in a circle of trampled grass. He tried to remember what had happened. Suddenly, the air was filled with a hideous clanking sound. The sun was blotted by an enormous shadow. He smelled fire.

"It's here," he said to himself. "I'm about to die."

Shuddering, he looked up. It was worse than he had thought; it was the most dreadful sight imaginable. A crocodile as big as a ship, a flying crocodile with brass wings. The monster's hide was made of sliding brass

scales; its long, thick tail bristled with iron spikes. Its feet wore brass claws. And, from its jaws, spurted hot, red fire.

The dragon was still a mile away, but Cadmus could feel the awful heat as he stood there on the plain. "Well," he said to himself. "I understand that the waters of the Styx are very cold. So my first sensation of death should be refreshing."

But he could not hearten himself. He almost swooned in the stinking blasts of heat. There was no way under the morning sun that he could fight this flaming spiked beast. Now the heat had become unbearable. Clutching sword and shield, with helmet firmly planted on his head, he rushed to the river.

All this time, the black goat had been following Cadmus, but she had found it no easy task. For the beasts of the forest, never having encountered a giant goat, considered anything with horns their natural prey. She had fought off a lion, goring it severely, but had herself been raked by its claws before it had slunk away. Then a pack of wolves had caught the scent of her blood and hunted her over the fields. She outran them eventually, but was forced to make a great circle back to the river. She had lost time, but had finally caught up with Cadmus. As she entered the meadow, she saw the dragon hovering and Cadmus diving into the river. She positioned herself on the shore as close as possible to where he had dived, keeping her hooves on a flat rock.

Cadmus had dived as deep as he could, holding his breath. The water grew warm as the dragon passed overhead, but the flames could not reach him. He waited, crouching on the bottom of the river until he heard the clanging fade. Then he kicked against the bottom, heading for the surface. But he could not move. His weapons were too heavy.

He struggled. He could not surface. Iron bands tightened around his chest. Pain spiked him. He began to gag. One instant more and he would have to take a breath, even of water. He opened his right hand and let the shield go. Then he shot to the surface and floated there, panting. The dragon, wheeling above, saw him surface. It folded its brass wings like a giant pelican and plunged toward the water.

Down, down, straight at the floating Cadmus, hurtled the monster. The goat sprang up at the dragon, just as it had sprung at the vultures tormenting Prometheus. She hurled herself between monster and prey. The brass beast

struck the goat with the full weight of its dive, breaking every bone in her body.

Cadmus was not aware that the goat had come. But he saw the dragon swerve suddenly and fly off carrying a dark mass in its claws. It dropped what it was carrying, rose high, flew a distance, but did not vanish. Cadmus threw his sword onto the bank. He dived down to the river bottom, found his shield, and hauled it to the surface. Then he climbed out and retrieved his sword. The dragon was a speck in the sky. It was growing larger.

Cadmus heard a hoarse moaning sound. He dropped his weapons and ran back to the riverbank. He fell to his knees and embraced the dying goat. He kissed her face, weeping, pleading, “Don’t die. Please don’t.”

But the hard, graceful body was broken and bleeding, all power fled. She twitched piteously, moaning. Only her eyes were alive, golden, more sentient than ever. She looked at Cadmus, and he read the plea in her eyes. He arose, walked away, picked up his sword, and came slowly back.

He stooped beside her and gently closed her eyes; for he knew he could not do what he must do if they were open. Then he kissed her. “I’ll see you in Hades,” he said. He raised his sword over his head with both hands and struck down, point first. He stabbed through the body, driving a last sound out of it, and all tension. The body flopped loosely. The goat was dead.

Cadmus had forgotten about the dragon. Now he turned and looked up. He was ready to be killed. A notion half formed itself. He would drop his weapons, let the dragon strike as it would. Then his soul would join the goat’s, and they would enter Hades together. He was slimy with mud, exhausted, sick of living, afraid of dying. But he did not drop his sword. Once again the cruel pattern had asserted itself—brutality assuming more power, more purpose than innocence and playfulness. Snuffing aspiration, nullifying questions, imposing a doomed certainty.

If only the pattern could be challenged at just one point it might alter the whole. If just once, he thought, size could be overcome by wit, foulness by fair intent.

The dragon was overhead, hovering. Cadmus, holding his sword, felt a nausea of fear. For all his fancy thoughts, he knew he was afraid of pain, afraid of dying, and terror held every priority.

“No wonder evil always wins,” he said to himself. “We fatten it with our fear.”

Cadmus looked up at the dragon. “What’s it waiting for?” he asked himself. “Bigger game? A worthier foe? Look at it. It’s only an oversized lizard after all, winged and armored, to be sure, and bristling with iron spikes and shooting fire. Still, this formidable apparatus is directed by a brain the size of a hazelnut. Or is it? It seems to be making a decision. Does it really find me too small to bother with? Do I hope so? Then why have I come all this way? I warned Prometheus I was miscast in this role. One needs to be a bit monstrous to vanquish monsters. I’m too light for this work, not ruthless enough. I have the impulse, though, I just lack the equipment.

“Still hovering.... If I possessed an ounce of heroism, I’d beat sword on shield until it dived. Heroes need dragons. Who needs heroes? Men do. And the gods need men for their entertainment. Yes, but this entertainment will fail. I warn you, gods, if evil continues to be so successful, success will lose its prestige. Losers will inherit your earth, and you’ll grow so bored with them you’ll send another flood.”

A cleft of lightning stood weirdly on the blue sky. Cadmus heard thunder; it rumbled like the voice of Prometheus.

To make the dragon yield,
let him dread his head
upon your shield.

Then silence. Cadmus tried to puzzle out the message. He knew it was of the utmost importance and that he did not have much time. He heard the brass scales clanking. The dragon was still directly overhead, wheeling. “These rhymes and riddles have proved useful,” he said to himself. “And I dare not ignore this one. But what does it mean? I have a shield, true enough, but what does it have to do with the dragon’s head?”

Cadmus stared into the shield. It was a blur of brightness. He blinked. What he saw was his own face. “That’s it!” he cried. “I understand! The dragon must see itself in my shield. But to do that, it will have to come very close, much too close. Bless me, Prometheus, for here it is!”

Indeed, a great shadow had darkened the plain. The hot breath of the beast was scorching the grass. Cadmus saw it, jaws yawning, swooping toward him in a long, curving dive. The dragon swept low and struck at

Cadmus with one great brass claw. Brass rang on brass as claw struck helmet. But Cadmus was not hurt; the claw did not pierce the helmet. The dragon swerved in the air, flailing its spiked tail. Cadmus stood, sword lifted. “Keep your bargain, Hephaestus,” he muttered. “I’ve paid in advance. The sword has killed the one I love. Let it now kill the one I hate.”

He swung the blade and sliced off the tip of the dragon’s tail. The beast howled in agony, rose to a great height, and came diving down again, furiously beating its wings and lashing its mutilated tail. He looked up and saw the monster hurtling toward him, jaws agape, teeth flashing. It was falling with tremendous force, but Cadmus stood his ground.

“Now’s the time to test the rhyme,” he thought. He held up the shield so that its bright disk covered his face and torso. He stood rooted to the ground. The dragon dove headfirst toward the polished brass disk and saw a terrible sight—its own reflection in the mirror of the shield. The beast had never seen itself before and did not know it was looking at itself, but thought another monster was attacking. When it spat flame at the shield, it saw the monster facing it spit flame right back. The dragon gasped in horror.

Now gasping in horror means drawing one’s breath in. And that’s exactly what the dragon did. It drew in a great draft, not of air, but of fire. It inhaled its own flame. Fire entered its body, burning everything inside. Lungs, liver, and heart were burned to a crisp.

With a choking shriek of agony the dragon fell to the scorched plain. The fire quickly worked itself outward, and, as Cadmus watched, the whole great length of the monster burned with a bright blue flame. The air was filled with bitter smoke. But the fumes were sweet to Cadmus. The fire finally subsided, leaving only a handful of brass scales and ivory teeth.

The dragon, in its last agony, had scorched and flattened the grass in a great circle.

“Thank you, Prometheus,” cried Cadmus. “In your rhyme evil saw its face and choked on its own bile. And thank you again for choosing so unlikely a champion and holding to your choice. Thank you, Hephaestus, for sword and shield. The cost was heavy but no more than you warned. And thank you, thank you, beloved goat, for flinging yourself between me and the monster and taking the death that should have been mine.”

He could say nothing more. He was wracked by loss. He wanted to weep, but could not. His sorrow was too deep for tears. He returned to the body of the goat. Not much was left; the dragon's final fire had consumed it. He lifted a charred piece of skull and looked into the scorched eye sockets. Abrim with yellow light they had been, fierce with loyalty, smoldering with intelligence. They were charred pits now. Cadmus wept. Where she had lain and begged for death, he stood and wept.

His tears fell on the charred bones. Flowers sprang—beautiful yellow and black flowers like the first spillings of sunlight on the grass. They were a kind of daisy, a brave, hardy flower, bright and joyous, strong as weeds. We call them black-eyed susans.

Cadmus stood looking at them. He was weary, battered. He wanted to fling himself full length into that flower bed and sleep there forever. A breeze arose. The flowers swayed and murmured. The murmuring became words: "Do not rest," whispered the flowers. "Not yet ..."

"Who are you who speak?" asked Cadmus. "My goat? The voice of madness? If so, let me be mad."

The flowers whispered again: "I die but shall live in a tale that will be told. Not just in song, but dwelling forever in your magic signs."

Then the breeze had fallen; the voices of the flowers had faded; they were almost too faint to hear. Their final words were "Beware the dragon's teeth." But the sound was so faint that Cadmus heard it as "*Bury* the dragon's teeth."

It seemed an odd instruction, but Cadmus could not ignore the last words spoken by the flowers that had sprung from the body of his beloved goat. He stumbled to the heap of teeth and picked up a handful. With his sword he poked holes in the field, made even rows, and one by one buried the teeth as a gardener plants his seeds.

The Buried Teeth

These seeds grew with monstrous speed. Spikes poked out of the ground. Then brass pots pushed out; they were not pots, but helmets. The helmets were on heads, and the heads on shoulders. Cadmus watched in wonder as full-size warriors burst from the soil, brushing clods of earth off their gear. The brass armor they wore had been corroded by the damp earth and seemed as green as dragon's hide.

The warriors stood in ranks, motionless. Cadmus realized that they were awaiting some word of command. But no one had emerged as their leader. Cadmus hated them at sight, and feared them. They had been spawned by the dragon, and he himself had been tricked into planting the seed from which they had sprung. How? Why? Was this another jape of the Fates? Must his victory contain defeat?

Cadmus had stepped behind a tree when the helmets had begun to appear so that he could not be seen. He picked up a rock and threw it. The rock struck a helmet. The warrior whirled about and smote the one standing next to him with the haft of his spear. The man who had been hit struck back. In a moment, the whole troop was fighting—striking, slashing, thrusting. Cadmus had never seen such power and grace. They used their weapons not as tools but as natural extensions of their bodies, as a wild animal uses its teeth and claws.

Then the largest warrior sprang out of the fray and beat his spear against his shield, making a great, masterful noise.

“Halt!” he roared.

The others stopped fighting and stood at attention.

“Comrades! We must not fight among ourselves. We have been planted here on earth to impose our will upon others. We must begin! We are here to conquer. To sack cities. And kill! Kill! Kill!”

The dragon-men beat shields with spears, yelling, “Kill! Kill! Kill!” Their faces shone with ferocious glee. Their leader raised his sword and rushed off. They rushed after him.

Dazed with horror, Cadmus had drifted out from behind his tree. One of the warriors spotted him. Without breaking stride, the soldier made a backhand swipe with his spear, pierced Cadmus’s side, withdrew the spear all in one motion, and raced off.

The breeze had risen again. The flowers sighed, “Cadmus, Cadmus.”

He felt a fever pulsing inside of him. He realized that he must finish his magic code, but his strength was going fast. He scabbled at the tree and peeled off a piece of bark. He dipped a twig into the blood of his wound, and began to draw.

Pictures flowed into his head—ordinary things, the closest things, things everyone knows. He drew them—water, fish, hand, mouth, field, fence, camel, door, hook. With his blood he drew simplified pictures of these things, each picture standing for the first sound of their names.

How many sounds were there? Did he have them all? The field was tilting. The trees were spinning. The flowers were silent. How many sounds? Twenty-two. He lacked one. Yes. *P-p-p-p*. What word began with that sound? He was puckering his mouth. That was it! Of course! *Pe*, “mouth.” He drew a mouth.

The sounds were all scrambled. Someone else would have to straighten them out. But he had found them all, every one. Now he could rest, and search for the black goat in the Land Beyond Death. There too, he knew, he would finally find his sister Europa again.

His eyes closed. He had done what he had to do; he could die now.

Demeter, Goddess of the Harvest, fell into a rage when she learned that one of her fields had been used to grow a crop of dragon-men, spawned by the monster she herself had cursed. When she looked down and saw Cadmus lying dead near the riverbank, and learned that he had killed the dragon, she decided to bless his labors and make them fruitful.

She cast a healing spell upon the field. Where the blood of Cadmus had soaked into the earth, another crop grew, not of killers, but of clever, gentle creatures who roamed the lands of the Middle Sea basin, teaching the Cadmean alphabet. They were known as *Sileni*, the wood gods, and

wherever they went they trapped language in their net of magic signs. They taught others to read and write so that the bitter lessons of history, the wisdom of Prometheus, and the beauty of the old songs were able to utter themselves anew.

And when people could read what wiser ones had said, it became more difficult for the dragon-men to prevail.

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THE FURIES

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For MARY EVSLIN
whose sorceries humanize bears

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Characters

Monsters

The Furies Three flying hags who serve Hades: Alecto (uh LECK toh), the Strange One; Megaera (meh JEE rah), Dark Memory; and Tisiphone (ti SIFF oh nee), Vengeance

Gods

Uranus The rain god, first King of Heaven, and Father of (YOOR uh nuhs) the Gods

Cronos Titan son of Uranus, second King of the Gods
(KROH nuhs)

Rhea Wife of Cronos, mother of Zeus, earth goddess
(REE ah)

Zeus Last King of the Gods

(ZOOS)

Hera
(HEE ruh) Wife of Zeus, Queen of the Gods

Hades
(HAY deez) Brother of Zeus, Ruler of the Dead

Poseidon
(poh SY duhn) Another brother of Zeus, God of the Sea

Athena
(uh THEE nuh) Daughter of Zeus, Goddess of Wisdom

Apollo
(uh PAHL oh) Son of Zeus, new solar deity

Helios
(HEE lih ohs) A Titan, first sun god

Dione
(dy OH nee) Former oak goddess

Circe
(SUR see) Daughter of Helios, demigoddess

Mortals

**Shepherd,
shepherdess**

Guardians of the infant Zeus

Little Husband Husband of Dione

Salmoneus

(sal MOH nee
uhs)

King of Aeolis, who pretends to be a god

Hairy Man

Bandit of Argos

Ulysses

(u LISS eez)

Greek war chief, King of Ithaca

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Trouble in Heaven

Helios was the first sun driver, a Titan who guided the fire-maned stallions as they pulled the golden chariot east to west across the blue meadow of the sky, casting daylight on the earth below.

Now, Cronos and his court Titans were all very vain and haughty, quick to anger and slow to forgive, but Helios, who dwelt amid flame, had the hottest temper of all.

Down on earth, that new race of creature called *human*—who understood nothing yet but were amazed and awed by everything—stared in wonder at the daily miracle of the enormous black sky growing pale, then flushing pink. Joy flowered in them as they watched darkness being scattered by sheaves of light. They watched as a golden disk of light trundled over the sky, allowing them to see again, making them warm again. Although informed by nothing but the light itself, they knew that they were seeing one wheel of a great fire chariot called the Sun, and that its charioteer was a god named Helios.

And so the first prayers of mankind were raised not to Cronos, King of the Gods, but to Helios, the only god they saw, the only one they knew about. And Helios was pleased by these songs of praise rising from earth and by the stone altars loaded with fruit and flowers and joints of meat—all for him.

“Ho ho!” he chortled to himself. “Cronos may call himself king and strut about Olympus telling us what to do and who is to do it, but it’s me man worships. Me, me, me!”

So he was very happy in his work. He loved his great sleek fire-maned stallions, loved the golden chariot and his daily ride over the sky, watching the new-made earth and its jeweled seas unreeling beneath him. Riding high, he was able to pick out the most beautiful of the nymphs who dwelt

on mountain slope, wood, and stream. Often, he would dive out of his chariot and chase one of them, knowing that his sun stallions would trot about in slow circles until he flew up to the chariot again.

Once or twice, however, it happened that he spent so much time with a nymph that his horses dipped low to search for him, firing the earth and leaving great scorched places that were later called deserts. And nobody knew how these places came to be until long afterward. Once, while Helios was chasing an oread, or mountain nymph, the horses circled the same peak until it melted inside, blowing its top, spitting flame and red-hot rock. And so, it is told, were volcanoes born.

Uranus, whose name means “rain,” was the First One, Ruler of Sky and Earth and the new boiling seas—and All Above, Beyond, and Between. He ruled wisely and well, and the lesser gods expected him to be king forever, but his son Cronos thought otherwise. Cronos was loud in admiration of his father, pretended utter devotion, and kept singing his praises up to the time that he murdered him.

Actually, murder isn’t the right word. Gods are immortal. They can be surprised and dismembered by other gods; even so, each piece will hold a life of its own. But Cronos was as cunning as he was cruel. He had the great body of his father chopped into a thousand bloody gobbets and scattered them over the entire surface of the earth and dropped them into every sea.

Then Cronos announced that because of the tragic and mysterious disappearance of the mighty Uranus, he, Cronos, eldest son, would take the throne until his father chose to reappear. Everyone knew what had happened, if not exactly how, and knew that Uranus would never reappear. But they all feared Cronos and vowed to serve him faithfully.

So Cronos proclaimed himself king, put on the star-encrusted crown and the gorgeous cloud-wool Judgment Cloak, dyed in all the colors of the sunset, and began his reign. He imposed a stricter order upon the wild new earth and divided the work of controlling nature among the Titans, who were his brothers and sisters. It was at that time that he awarded Helios the important task of driving the sun chariot.

Although Cronos held absolute and unchallenged power, he was familiar with fear. For he was haunted by a certain memory, which, instead of fading, seemed to grow more vivid as time passed. The memory was of himself holding a bloody sword as he watched his father’s head tumbling in

the dust. But the head stopped rolling—stood on its stump of a neck and spoke:

“O Son, you kill me now and steal my throne. But what you have done to me shall be done to you—by a child of your own.”

Cronos had great mastery over himself. During the day he was able to shut out this memory. But at night the head floated into his sleep, looking at him out of scooped and empty eyes. In the white thicket of its beard a black hole opened, speaking those same words:

“What has been done to me shall be done to you—by a child of your own ...”

For three nights in a row the head visited his sleep. On the third night Cronos answered: “No! It shall not be! No child of mine shall slay me. It won’t live long enough.”

The hundred-headed giant who guarded the royal bedchamber heard his master utter a strangled shout, and ran in to defend him, each hand wielding a tree-trunk club. Cronos awoke and saw the gigantic figure looming above him. He sprang out of bed.

“What do you want?” he growled.

“Pardon, My Lord,” said the giant. “I heard you call. You must have had a bad dream.”

“Very bad,” said Cronos. “But it taught me what to do.”

Now Cronos’s young wife, Rhea, was bursting with her first child and happily awaiting its appearance. Cronos surprised her by showing great concern. He would attend the birth, he insisted, to make sure everything went well.

It was a hard labor. Rhea swooned briefly, and swam back to consciousness holding out her arms for her infant. No baby came into her arms, nor did she see any midwife—just her husband looking sadly down at her.

“Where’s my baby?” she whispered. “Is it a boy or girl? Give it to me, give it to me.”

“Oh, Wife,” said Cronos with a half sob. “I regret to tell you that our child was born dead. I’ve already buried it to spare you pain.”

“Your mouth is all bloody,” she whispered.

Hastily, he wiped the blood away with the back of his hand. “In my anguish I must have bitten my lips,” he said. “Do not grieve, dear wife.

We'll have other children, many more."

"Oh, yes," she murmured.

"I'll have to be more careful next time," he said to himself. For what had happened was that to destroy all evidence he had eaten the baby.

Three vanished babies later Rhea began to get suspicious. She also got pregnant again. And when her fifth baby disappeared in the same way, her suspicion grew into a furious certainty, for now she realized that her husband had swallowed all their children and meant to keep doing so. But she was determined that he would not.

When she was again ripe with child and felt her time coming she sneaked out of the palace, down the slope of Olympus, and into a dark wood. There, beneath a great oak, she delivered her own child—a boy. She slung a cradle of vines in the tree, suckled him, and put him to sleep. Then she found a rock the right size, wrapped it in swaddling clothes, climbed the mountain and entered the royal bedchamber, holding the rock to her breast and humming a lullaby.

Snorting and bellowing, Cronos arose from his great bed. He snatched the bundle from her and swallowed it, clothes and all—and was amazed. The five other children he had swallowed had given him no trouble at all. This one lay like a stone on his stomach.

Rhea sympathized very sweetly when he complained of indigestion, and, indeed, was all laughter inside. She stole down the mountain again and took her boy from the vine cradle. She found an honest shepherd family and gave them the babe to raise, promising them a great crop of lambs each spring, and a huge hound that would protect their flock from wolves.

The child's name was Zeus, she told them; he was the son of a king and would be a mighty king himself.

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried the shepherd's wife. "Look at him shining there in the manger. He makes the straw look like gold. Not a prince he seems, but a young god."

And Rhea's heart sang as she made her way up the mountain again. She knew her precious babe would be safe with that family until such time as she could fetch him again.

So the secret was kept. Cronos did not know that he had swallowed a rock instead of an infant, and that the dangerous babe, quite uneaten, was out in the world growing fast. Indeed, Zeus was no longer a baby but a boy.

And the boy was growing into a glorious youth. Gray-eyed, suavely powerful, with a joyous, bawling voice and a smile that could melt snow, he prowled the slope like a young panther. So splendid a creature had he become that he amazed even his doting mother, and she realized that his divinity could not be concealed much longer.

And one night she smuggled him into the cloud castle atop Olympus.

The next morning she sought out Cronos and said: "I have a surprise for you, my dear."

"Do you?" he growled. "I'm not sure I like surprises. In fact, I'm sure I don't."

"Oh, you'll like this one. I've engaged a new cupbearer."

"Why? What happened to the old one?"

"*You* happened to him, My Lord. Don't you recall? You split his skull with your scepter when he splashed some wine on your sleeve. Surely, you remember. It was just last week."

"Oh, that ... Did I really hit him hard or is the rascal just pretending?"

"I don't know, dear, but he isn't here anymore. I don't know whether the brains spilled out of that crack in his head or he simply decided it was healthier to vanish. But we need a new cupbearer. And I've found one."

"Who?"

"I think you'll like him. He's a cousin from a far-off place. Son of bickering Titans whose quarrels grew so violent that their children all ran away. This lad sought refuge here on Olympus. And knowing how you like handsome servants, I took him on immediately. He's a real beauty. You'll see."

Cronos saw and approved. And Zeus stayed on at the Castle of the Gods, serving as cupbearer. When Cronos was away, he and his mother walked in the garden, weaving a plot. Now, in the manner of gods, when they decided what to do they began to do it. In the midnight kitchen they brewed a strong potion—mustard and stump water, to which was added a paste of crushed fire ants. They let it steep for two days.

"I don't know, Mother," said Zeus. "See how it hisses and foams? Surely he'll notice it, and know there's something wrong."

"Perhaps not," said Rhea. "I'll have the cook prepare his favorite dish—pig's heart and calf brains. He'll hurl himself on the food very greedily, and

when he eats, he drinks. Perhaps he'll gulp the brew down without suspecting anything."

"Well," said Zeus, "we always knew it would be a risky business. But it's worth it."

At noon on the third day Zeus filled his father's golden goblet with the special drink. Rhea had ordered the cook to oversalt the pig's heart and calf brains, and when Cronos had devoured a huge serving he was very thirsty. He snatched up the hissing goblet and drained it in a single gulp.

He arose from his chair, retching and gasping. He vomited up first a stone, then all the children he had swallowed—Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon, who, being gods, were still undigested, still alive. At the first touch of sunlight they grew to full size, and stood forth in the glory of their prime. They greeted their mother and their brother with loud cries of joy and clustered about Zeus, praising him and embracing him—and immediately chose him to be their leader. But when they turned to rend their father, they found that he had slipped away.

But Cronos soon made himself felt again. He called his Titans to arms; he summoned his Giants and a flight of fire-spitting dragons, and led this fearsome array against the young gods.

But Zeus had won the loyalty of the Cyclopes, gigantic one-eyed creatures who were the world's first weapon makers. And Cronos had so mistreated the lesser gods, woodland deities, and those of river and field, that they, too, came to fight under Zeus. Thus began the War of the Gods, a series of battles that raged across the floor of heaven, shaking earth and sea, spawning bloody tales and terrifying mankind so badly that human dreams were colored by terror to the end of time. But for this tale all we need to know is that the younger gods won the final battle. Cronos and his Titans were forced to flee, and Zeus ruled as King of Heaven.

Whereupon he divided all powers among his brothers and sisters, his sons and daughters. Helios, the huge, shaggy, flame-haired charioteer, was barred from his golden coach and forbidden even to say farewell to his beloved sun stallions. And a son of Zeus named Apollo became Lord of the Golden Bow, sun god, and charioteer.

The Furies

Zeus, as King of the Gods, sometimes visited the realms ruled by his brothers. For the sea god, Poseidon, and Hades, Lord of the Dead, had to be watched closely lest they steal some of his powers.

Both of his brothers received Zeus with great courtesy and sought to lull his suspicions by overwhelming him with hospitality. Poseidon heaped magnificent gifts upon him—spear, sword, and dagger of polished walrus ivory, a bib of first-water pearls, and armlets of gold taken from the holds of sunken treasure ships—and served up a braid of the most gorgeous sea nymphs to attend him wherever he went.

Hades entertained Zeus with strange spectacles. He demonstrated his entire stock of tortures—the Great Mangle, the Marrow-log, the Spiked Shirt—and took him on a tour of the roasting pits.

Now, the shades that inhabit Death's domain are just that—shades, ghosts. They have shed their bodies, leaving pinkish white vapors that drift over the scorched plains of Erebus. But any shade who has been sentenced to torment is clothed again in flesh so that it may again know pain.

And Zeus watched as the condemned shades suffered the attentions of harpies, pitchfork fiends, and assorted demons. He turned every once in a while to praise his brother's ingenuity and the efficiency of his staff, but vowed to himself to send someone else on the next inspection trip. Like all the gods, Zeus could be very cruel when angered, but the spectacle of so much pain when he felt no wrath just made him gloomy. But his interest was quickened when Hades ordered the Furies into action.

Who were these Furies?

They were three hags, sisters, related to the Harpies but even more horrid. They, too, wore brass wings and brass claws and wielded stingray whips, but they were larger than the Harpies, totally vicious, and were used

to torment those who had especially displeased Hades. Their Greek names—Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera—meant Vengeance, Strange One, and Dark Memory, but they called each other Tiss, Ally, and Meg.

“Watch this!” cried Hades. He pointed to a section of scorched field where iron racks sprouted like trees, and their branches bore leather loops instead of leaves. In a clearing before this weird grove huddled newly fleshed shades. Hades whistled.

Zeus stared as three brass-winged hags dived separately upon three condemned shades, who resembled pinkish, plump men. Each hag seized a man and dug her brass claws into the soft places of his body, so that the victims began to scream before their official punishment started. Tiss flew to a rack, folded her man over a metal arm and bound him fast. Ally and Meg flew to separate racks and tethered their men in the same way. They wheeled then, and, standing on air, curtsied to Hades.

The Lord of the Dead sliced his hand through the air. The three Furies wheeled again, unslung the stingray whips from their girdles, and made the barbed lashes whistle through the air as they began to flog the three pink men. Now arose a screaming and sobbing such as Zeus had never heard before. He sat like a rock. The screaming turned to choked, phlegmy howls. Zeus frowned. It had all become unpleasant to him.

The sounds stopped as suddenly as they had begun. Silence lay upon the scorched plain. Every scrap of flesh had been flayed from the condemned; only bloody, pulsing gobs clung to the metal branches. They were shades again. But pain had been branded so deeply into their cores that they would never stop suffering, even though they had lost their torn flesh.

The Furies coiled their whips. They flew toward the ebony throne, circled Hades once in a flurry of black robes, and flew off into the mist.

“Interesting,” said Zeus. “Are they what you call the Furies?”

“They are.”

“You know,” said Zeus, “I’m glad I came down here. You’ve given me some interesting ideas.”

“Me? Furnish ideas to the worlds’s central intellect?” murmured Hades. “You overpraise me, My Lord.”

“Your modesty is becoming,” said Zeus. “But unconvincing. I know you know how clever you are.”

“And what idea have I given you?”

“I admire the way you keep your unruly shades in order. It is difficult, I know, to frighten a ghost. But your staff seems to spread a great deal of wholesome terror, particularly the Furies.”

“Yes,” said Hades. “They are specially bred, specially trained, and I reserve them for special occasions.”

“I have special cases, too,” said Zeus. “And they’re increasing. The human herd grows more restive as it matures. Some of my mortals are quite untamable.”

“They break your laws?”

“Oh, yes, every day—and particularly at night.”

“But do they not fear the suffering that will be inflicted upon them after death? Surely they must be aware of the torments I have to offer.”

“You know, Brother,” said Zeus, “I’m afraid that mortals don’t really believe in death. Very few of them actually think they’re going to die. They see others die, of course, but every man seems to think that he will somehow prove to be the one solitary exception—most women, too. So the idea of after-death torments doesn’t really keep them in line. What I need to do is punish them more vigorously *before* death.”

“Of course, of course!” cried Hades. “That is just what you must do.”

“Which leads me to a favor I’m about to ask you,” said Zeus. “May I borrow your Furies sometime?”

“But certainly ... anytime,” muttered Hades, trying to smile but not quite succeeding. He hated to give away anything, and lending something to Zeus, he knew, meant *giving* it if the King of the Gods decided that he liked what had been lent.

Zeus read Hades’ uneasiness and laughed to himself. It was not easy to embarrass his haughty brother; it was something to be relished whenever he did.

“I thank you in advance,” he boomed genially. “And thank you again for all your hospitality. Now, farewell.”

The Angry Titan

Everything about Helios was violent. When he was told that he could no longer drive the golden chariot, his violent love for the sun turned to violent hatred. He loathed the light and sought the dark.

He found a burned-out crater, scooped out tons of dead ash and rearranged mighty boulders, roofing the crater, making a fortress of the hollow mountain. No windows, no arrow slits, no way for light to get in, just a swiveling slab of rock to serve as a portal. And there he dwelt, coming out only at night, for he did not wish to see the sun being driven by someone else. He came out, in fact, only on moonless nights, because Artemis, twin sister of Apollo, was the moon goddess, and he hated her, too.

When he was abroad on such nights he prowled the slopes, quenching light whenever it appeared, even a glimmer. A traveler, once, lost his way and found himself riding his donkey up an unfamiliar path. He raised his pine-knot torch to see where he was. It was immediately knocked away, and he felt himself rising into the air. An awful, unseen force lifted animal and rider and hurled them off the mountain. The donkey was killed, but the rider lived to tell his tale. And when the story stopped spreading, everyone in the countryside knew that an ogre prowled that crater, and no one would come near it, especially at night.

Since Helios knew that no traveler would come within miles of his mountain, he was amazed, one moonless night, to see another torch flaring. He rushed toward the spot, but the light was restless; it seemed to be floating, swaying, rising—seemed now to lodge in the branches of a tree. Its color was strange also, not a ruddy red and yellow like pine-knot flame, nor did it cast the strong odor of burning pitch. This light was silvery gold, rather like the color of the moon when it was climbing, and the scent it cast

was of violets after a rain. He stood under the tree and looked up, and was amazed at what he saw.

A child straddled the swaying branch, riding it as if it were a horse. Her flying hair did not reflect light; it was a source of light. Each strand was a tendril of pale flame. And it was this pearly fire that allowed him to see her and the branch that she was riding.

With a roar of fury he seized the branch, broke it off and held it aloft, preparing to smash it down on the ground. The little girl clung to it like a monkey, screeching with glee. He stared at her in disbelief; he couldn't understand why she wasn't terrified. And his disbelief changed to stupefied wonder as she slid down the branch and perched on his shoulder, clutching his beard to steady herself.

"Who are you?" he muttered.

"Your daughter."

"I have no daughter."

"Yes. Me."

"Who's your mother?"

"Arlawanda."

"An oread?"

"Dryad."

"I don't remember her."

"She remembers you. Every morning we'd look up at the sky and she'd say, 'There's your father driving the sun chariot.' That's why I'm here. I want you to take me for a ride across the sky."

He roared again. She giggled. "Why are you yelling?" she asked.

"You're as stupid as your mother, whom I'm beginning to remember now."

"I'm not stupid. Neither is she."

"It's that foul Apollo who drives the sun chariot now, little fool. Not me at all."

"Oh, my, I'm sorry ..."

"You'll be sorrier if you don't get off my shoulder."

She didn't answer, just tightened her grip on his beard.

"Vanish!" he growled. "Before I do dreadful things to you."

"You won't. I'm your daughter."

"You taint my darkness with your damned bright hair."

“Mother says it’s just like yours—except not quite so red.”

“My hair and beard are black, can’t you see?”

“You just dyed them, that’s all. The stuff’s coming off on my hand. Why did you do that to yourself? So you wouldn’t glow in the dark?”

“That’s right. I hate the light. I need utter darkness. Now run away. Get off my mountain while you’re still in one piece.”

“You won’t hurt me. I’m your daughter. You have to love me.”

“Love ... Pah!”

“I don’t care whether you drive the sun or not. I’ve decided to live with you for a while.”

He laughed a laugh that was like a snarl.

“Why are you so grumpy?” she asked. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry.”

“Do you do your own cooking?”

“I don’t do any cooking. You need a fire to cook with. Fires cast light. I eat my meat raw.”

“You can’t like it that way.”

“I like fires less.”

“Well,” she said, “I can be quite useful to you. I can cook without fire.”

“I take it back,” he said. “You’re not stupid. You’re crazy. Now jump down and disappear. I’m getting very angry.”

She did leap off his shoulder, landing lightly as a leaf. “Watch!” she called. She whirled about three times, hair whipping her face like tendrils of flame. She pointed at a rock. “Watch, watch ...”

Helios saw the rock begin to change shape. Smoke came off it, and a hot meaty smell. He walked slowly toward it.

“It’s all right,” she said. “It’s roast lamb. Eat some.”

He tore off a chunk and crammed it into his mouth. It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted, roasted rare, redolent of garlic, rosemary, and thyme.

“Like it?” she called.

“Not bad,” he mumbled. “How’d you do that?”

“I’m quite magical for my age. I can do other things, too. I can be useful to you.”

“The most useful thing you can do is go away,” he said.

He left her then and entered his cave, plunging again into utter darkness. He thought he heard her voice even through the thick rock and couldn't tell whether she was weeping or singing. Then he heard a crack of thunder and a great wash of rain. He knew that she was still on the slope, waiting for him to come out. He pictured her under a drench of rain. He groaned aloud and stamped his foot so hard he thought he felt the floor of the cave shaking. Like a flower she was crouching under the rain, being nourished by it, growing like a flower in his mind.

He rushed out of the cave. He didn't see her. Wind drove the rain in sheets. He was immediately as wet as though he had jumped into a river. He knew that the black dye was washing out of his hair and beard. He saw the hair of his arms smouldering in the rain. He saw a smaller patch of light.

It streaked up to him and a weight hit him on the chest. Wet arms were about his neck. He smelled violets. "Father, father," she cried. "You came out again! It's raining very hard."

"You don't say," he grunted.

He carried her into the crater. They lit up the darkness. He watched, amazed, as the solid blackness trembled and flowed away from their forms like an ebbing tide. Shocked by light, a canopy of lizards swayed and chattered.

"Lizards!" she caroled. "How lovely!"

"You like them?"

"Oh, yes. Don't you?"

He grunted. She laughed and grunted, imitating him. "Does that sound mean yes or no? Never mind, it doesn't matter. What a big cave. What a wonderful place to live. Are you hungry again? Shall I cook something else? Rain makes me very hungry. Doesn't it you?"

"Everything makes me hungry."

After three days the crater was brimming with light. Helios was scrubbed clean. Every hair of his head and beard and body pelt was a glowing filament. The light he cast was the hot red and gold of the sun at noon. And Circe shed a silvery gold, the new quivering light of dawn. Savors of food hung upon the air—baking bread and roasting meat, garlic, rosemary, and thyme.

The exiled Titan, who had been existing in a cold, sullen, clench of rage, knew that he had been visited by a budding sorceress. He was bewildered, but submitted to enchantment. She had thawed him, healed him, had relit the great lamp of his spirit. He felt suddenly that in his new health he was breathing up all the air in the cave; he wanted to knock a hole in the rock wall to let more air in for her. He had to move. He whirled and stamped. She spun with him, screeching with laughter. Her hair whipped about her face.

“What am I doing?” he said.

“Dancing. I am, too.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Are we happy or something?”

“I’m very happy here with you, Father. And you’re almost happy.”

“Why only almost?”

“You won’t be completely happy until you’re driving the sun chariot again.”

Helios stopped dancing in midstride. He stood there, thinking. “I’m thinking,” he thought. “I like to think sometimes, but it’s hard to start.” He couldn’t think without using his hands. Thoughtfully, he picked up two boulders and smashed them together. He scattered handfuls of rock dust.

“Stop it!” she cried. “You’re making me sneeze.”

“You know what I think?” he asked.

“No, what?”

“You said that about me driving the chariot again just because you want a ride.”

“Of course I do, if it’s you driving. I mean it’s not just for the ride, it would have to be you at the reins. I wouldn’t want to ride with Apollo, for instance.”

“Apollo—pah!” He spat.

“Do you hate him, Father?”

“Of course.”

“Suppose, just suppose, you did want to take me for a ride. How would you get the chariot? Steal it?”

“It was stolen from me. It was mine. I’d repossess it.”

“How? Can I help? Please let me.”

“You’ll wait here until I come back for you. That stable is closely guarded. Hundred-handed giants ring it about. It’s no place for a little girl.”

He did not realize how she had maneuvered him into making her intention his.

“How would you get in past those horrid giants?” she asked. “Won’t it be very dangerous?”

“I won’t try to get in,” he said. “The chariot will come out. I’ll stand off and whistle. The stallions will awake and gallop out, dragging the chariot behind them. They love me, those sun horses. It was I who greeted them when they were foaled by the Great Mare. I trained them myself. They obey Apollo now because Zeus has made him their master, but it’s me they love. And they’ll come when I call.”

“And you’ll pick me up here? Promise?”

“Not here,” said Helios. “The chariot must not swing too low or trees will burn like torches, and the earth scorch. When I leave, you must leave also and climb to the top of our highest mountain, which is Pelion. Go to the very top, stand there at dawn, and I’ll scoop you up.”

“Oh, Father, I love you so much.”

He just grunted, but he was very pleased.

The Stolen Sun

The sun chariot was trundling across the sky. The huge wheels were turning, casting light, warming and brightening the earth, chasing the shadows of night. Hot with pride, Helios was driving. And the great golden stallions, feeling their old master's hand on the reins, were trumpeting their pleasure as they went.

Circe stood raptly in the chariot, stretching on tiptoe so that she might see over the scalloped side at what was passing below. She saw specks of houses, little humps that were mountains, and splinters that were trees—and, farther off, a purple smudge of sea.

“Mother is somewhere among those oaks down there,” she thought. “And all the other dryads I know. But even if they're looking up at the sky they won't see me because we're too high. Wouldn't they be surprised to know that I'm up here, though ... I wonder if they'll believe me when I tell them.”

They were passing over tiny cliffs that dropped off into the puddle of sea. She gasped in pleasure as she saw the water start to sparkle in the early light. “Lower!” she cried. “Lower, Father! Go down!”

“Why?”

“I want to see if we can make the water boil.”

Helios twitched the reins, putting the horses into a dive. The chariot swooped low over the sea. Circe saw the water bubble and hiss. Steam arose, and a strong, hot chowdery smell as the fish began to cook.

“Phew!” growled Helios. “What a stink!” He shouted to the horses, and they began to climb so steeply that the girl felt herself sliding toward the back of the chariot and clung to her father's waist. She saw gulls, maddened by the smell of boiling fish, diving toward the sea, screaming greedily as they went. She saw them pull up short. The sea was too hot, the steam too

thick; they could not alight. And bears and wolves thronged the headland, coming down to the shore to feed, but they, too, were driven back by the heat of the boiling sea.

Screaming with excitement, Circe clung to her father as the chariot careened over the billowing steam. And her screeching was a wild song to Helios, who had never loved anyone before and didn't understand his new, strange feelings. All he knew now was that he would do anything, anything at all, to keep this daughter shrieking so joyously.

"Faster!" he called to his horses. "Go, my golden ones—faster still!"

The great stallions broke into a gallop. The chariot smashed across the sky fifty times faster than it had ever gone before. And folk on earth saw a sight most strange: night pursuing day like a black hound chasing a golden stag. And no sooner had the sky turned black than silver light began to nibble at its eastern rim. Silver turned to pink, to red, to orange. Bars of orange fire branded the horizon, flushing to hot gold, becoming a golden flood of light that washed away the last darkness.

To the gods atop Olympus watching the sun chariot streak by, it seemed that earth's day was flashing on and off like a child playing with a lamp.

"What's happening?" said Zeus to Hera. "Has Apollo gone mad?"

"Ask him," said Hera. "There's your golden boy now racing up the mountain as fast as he can."

"Apollo!" cried Zeus. "Why are you down here with your sun high in the sky?"

"Oh, Father, 'tis not I in the sky. I'm right here, as you can see. Someone has stolen my chariot. And the damned fool is racing the horses without mercy. They'll pull up lame."

"You've lost your chariot? How careless!"

"I didn't lose it. It was stolen, I told you."

"You allowed yourself to be robbed? By whom?"

"By Helios."

"Him? Are you sure?"

"Very sure. It must be Helios. The horses will allow no one else to drive them. Except me, of course."

"Helios driving the sun chariot?" growled Zeus. "Against my strict edict. He's either very crazy or very brave."

"Probably both," said Hera.

Poseidon suddenly appeared on the mountaintop. The sea god was looking very unlike his elegant self. His hair was matted with boiled seaweed, and a huge, half-cooked stone crab was clinging to his beard. He walked toward Zeus, bellowing: “Do something about Apollo; he’s gone mad! The sun is out of control. My sea has turned to steam, and my fish are all cooking.”

“I’m here, Uncle!” cried Apollo. “Can’t you see? I never touched the reins this morning. Helios stole my chariot. It’s he who’s driving it so fast, day chasing night, and night chasing day. Oh, Father Zeus, can’t you do something?”

“Yes, Brother,” said Poseidon. “Do something.”

“Yes, Husband! Something ... anything,” said Hera.

He drew back his arm and hurled his thunderbolt. The fiery spear sizzled across the sky and hit Helios in the chest, knocking him out of the chariot. He fell to earth as the masterless horses galloped over the horizon, dragging darkness in their wake—so that Helios, ablaze, fell like a star.

Without hesitation, Circe leaped out after him. Her hair floated, casting a nimbus of light. The steam was still coming off the sea where she fell, slowing her descent. It was like falling into a cloud, falling in a dream. And when she landed it was upon a seabed left by the evaporated tide. She found herself among the corpses of octopi and whales and the skeletons of foundered ships, and she didn’t know whether she was awake or asleep; whether a happy dream of her father had turned into nightmare, or whether she had really found her father, and had fallen into this slimy nightmare and would soon awake. But awake or asleep, she had to find him. She moved off along the seabed, among the dead, huge bodies of whales and sharks and manta rays, and threading through the skeletons of sunken ships, calling, “Father ... Father ...”

The High Council

Helios had vanished after being hit by the thunderbolt. He was not dead, Zeus knew. Titans, being of the god breed, are immortal; they can be made to suffer, but cannot die. And Zeus was determined to make Helios suffer as much as possible. He called a meeting of the High Council to organize the pursuit. They met in the great throne room of the cloud castle atop Olympus.

Zeus, clad in his star-encrusted purple judgment robes, sat on a gold and ivory throne, fingering the volt-blue zigzag shaft of lightning he used as a scepter. He addressed the gods briefly, outlining the task.

“I have a question, Your Majesty,” said Poseidon. “Do we really need to mobilize such vast forces against one unruly Titan?”

“Well,” said Zeus, “if you think back to our war against Cronos and his Titans, you will remember that Helios was one of our most dangerous foes. His strength has not diminished with age—and he seems to have grown more reckless than ever. He will not, I assure you, be easily subdued.”

“In any case,” said Poseidon, “we have to catch him before we start subduing him.”

“Exactly,” said Zeus. “And that is why I shall ask Brother Hades to lend us his Furies. In addition to their other formidable skills, they fly so fast, and their noses are so keen for the hunt, that they’ll be able to ransack all the corners of earth and heaven for that cursed rebel. Once we take him we’ll make sure he’s incapable of any further escape, and his endless punishment will begin.”

“The Furies will report to you this very night, My Lord,” said Hades.

“Our thanks to you, Brother,” said Zeus. “And while they’re up here they can attend to some other matters. As I mentioned, some of my mortals are

getting out of line and need a bit of professional torment to teach them their place. Yes-s-s, your hags will find themselves fully employed.”

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Dione

Searching for her father, Circe was walking through a wood in Arcadia. The trees thinned into a clearing; she crossed it heading toward a stand of oaks. She stopped when she saw a big woman standing there. Too tall for a mortal; she seemed to be a goddess. But Circe couldn't tell what she was because her hair was white and her handsome face looked worn, and no goddess, Circe knew, ever aged past her glorious prime. Whatever she was, though, the girl immediately preferred the look of her to anyone she had ever known, except her mother and father. In fact, her wide gray eyes reminded Circe of her dryad mother. Her voice was curious, too—rich but harsh—as she called to Circe.

“You there, stop lurking. I see you.”

“I'm not lurking,” said Circe. “If I didn't want you to see me I wouldn't have come this close.”

“Come closer.”

Circe came right to her and looked up into her face. “My name is Circe,” she said.

“I am Dione.”

“The oak goddess?” cried Circe.

“Well, I used to be.”

“*Used* to be?”

“I'm no longer a goddess, but am still an oak something, I suppose.”

“I don't understand.”

“Can't blame you,” said Dione. “I scarcely understand it myself, but it happened.”

“What happened exactly? How could you stop being a goddess once you started?”

“I fell in love, shed my divinity, and became a woman.”

“Oh, tell me, tell me!” cried Circe. “Whatever you are, I seem to be growing fond of you quite rapidly. Which is odd because I’m coldhearted.”

“Who told you that?”

“My mother—many times. Anyway, we must be related. My mother is a dryad of the Oak Clan. Her name is Arlawanda.”

“Arlawanda ... Circe ... Yes, they’re clan names. I’m probably your great-aunt or something. Do you really want to hear my story?”

“Yes, please!”

Circe sat on a stump and looked up at Dione. She saw that the gray eyes were brimming with tears.

Dione said: “Cronos, who gave his name to time, was master of all its cruel tricks. I went to him and pleaded that my husband, who happened to be human, be granted immortality. Cronos pretended to heed my plea. He said that year by year, bit by bit, I might bestow my own immortality upon my husband. And if I managed it skillfully I’d be able to keep him alive for a thousand years and we’d both die at the same time. I accepted the conditions joyfully, for I had no wish to outlive my dear one. And so the bargain was struck, but I didn’t realize what a foul trickster Cronos was. For, while I was able to keep my husband alive by shortening my own life, I could not keep him young. And he aged much faster than I did. Kept withering, shrinking ... Behold him now!”

She pointed to a tree. At first Circe saw nothing, then when she went closer she saw a tiny man leaning against the trunk. No larger than a three-year-old child, he wore a long, grizzled beard, and his skin was as wrinkled as bark.

“I shall lose him soon,” said Dione. “If a hawk doesn’t take him, or a fox, he’ll simply dwindle away till there’s nothing left. But he shan’t go alone into Hades, poor little darling. I shall take full advantage of my mortality. I shall slay myself, and our shades will embrace as we journey to the Land Beyond Death.”

“I’ve just found you, Aunt. Don’t go away. I can’t bear another loss.”

“Another? What do you know of loss, my child?”

“Too much. A few months ago I tracked down my father, whom I’d never met, and was just teaching him to love me when he was taken.”

“How?”

“Well, we were going for a ride in his sun chariot when Zeus hurled a thunderbolt, hitting him square.”

“Your father is Apollo?”

“No!” cried Circe. “Not that thief! My father is the true sun god—Helios. Zeus stripped him of his authority and put Apollo in his place. Took away his chariot and his horses and his proud task, and broke his heart—which I was just mending before he vanished.”

“What happened? Did he steal the chariot?”

“Not steal; it was his. He repossessed it. Whistled up the horses, who love him, and they came galloping. He didn’t mean to keep the chariot. He knew he couldn’t. He just wanted it for long enough to take me for a ride. Then slimy Poseidon made some trouble because we boiled a bit of his sea away, and the tyrant, Zeus, flung his fiery shaft. And my father fell from the chariot. I jumped out after him but couldn’t find him anyplace. I’ve been searching and searching.”

“Let’s try a finding,” said Dione.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll try to locate your father for you. Witch me up a fire on that flat rock.”

“How do you know I can do that?”

“You have the look of someone who’s been dabbling in magic. It’s a family trait. Start me a fire so that a daughter’s sharp young love can enter the spell—and I’ll do the rest.”

Circe pointed her hands at a rock, mumbling as she whirled about three times. Pale flame stood upon the stone. Dione cupped one hand in the other; when she opened them they were full of herbs. She dropped the herbs on the fire. The flame leaped. It danced on the rock, spitting purple and green goutts of smoke. Aromatic smoke, very sweet.

Breathing it, Circe felt herself go blank. She didn’t know her own name. She was being translated into a place beyond words. In the burning crystal of her new state she saw patches of hard whiteness that might have been snow-covered rock, but were only glimmers of whiteness behind struggling shapes of darkness. She screamed. Nameless horror filled her. Blackness swarmed. Deeper and deeper she sank.

When she awoke it was into fragrant warmth. She found herself in Dione’s lap. The great arms cradled her, rocked her gently. She heard her

voice coming out in a thready whisper.

“Oh, Dione, I saw things. Horrid, huge, ragged things. Their blackness covered everything. I couldn’t see past them.”

“Yes,” said Dione. “I saw them, too.”

“What are they?”

“The Furies.”

“Furies?”

“Flying hags. Hell hags. They serve Hades. They hunt down runaway shades and flay them with their stingray whips.”

“What are they doing up here?”

“Pursuing your father.”

“Why would Hades send them? It was only Zeus my father offended. Well, and Poseidon and Apollo, too, perhaps. But not Hades.”

“Ah, my child,” said Dione, “while the gods quarrel among themselves, they tend to help each other when there’s an important cruelty to be done.”

“But I didn’t see my father. Just those things flying.”

“It means they’re pursuing him hotly, but haven’t caught him yet. Helios is very powerful and resourceful. It may be that they’ll never catch him. But they’ll keep trying, you can be sure of that.”

“Then I must leave immediately,” declared Circe. “I must find him before they do.”

“Then what?”

“Help him fight the Furies, of course.”

“You’re a very brave girl, but you’re not ready to fight the Furies, not even one of them, let alone three. As you are now, you wouldn’t last the wink of an eye. You must prepare yourself before you go against them.”

“How?”

“You must grow into your full strength. And while you’re doing so, you must learn real sorcery. I will teach you.”

Circe felt a sharp pain in her calf. She kicked out, heard a squealing, and saw Dione’s little man sprawled on the ground. She was amazed when Dione slapped her, and tumbled her off her lap.

“You kicked him, you wicked girl,” shouted Dione.

She scooped up her husband and held him to her, kissing him.

“Something was pinching my leg,” said Circe. “I didn’t know it was him. I just kicked. Why was he pinching me?”

“He was jealous because you were sitting in my lap. That’s his place, he thinks; no one else belongs there.”

Circe saw that the little man, high above her, safe in his wife’s arms, was grinning down at her. “He’s rather childish for his age, isn’t he,” she said.

“He is, he is,” said Dione mournfully. “Everything about him has shrunk—his mind and his spirit, too. But I love him just the same, even more, perhaps. And if you’re going to stay here with me, you must learn to love him, too, and not hurt him in any way.”

“I’ll try,” muttered Circe.

“You must do more than try,” said Dione. “You must succeed.”

Circe looked up at the husband again. His eyes twinkled pure malice; he stuck his tongue out.

“All right,” she said. “But do you think you could tell him not to pinch me?”

“Have you ever had a puppy or a kitten?” asked Dione.

“Oh, yes, lots of them. They’re dogs and cats now, and waiting for me at my mother’s place. I miss them.”

“Well,” said Dione, “you didn’t mind when a kitten scratched you or a puppy nipped you, did you? You didn’t kick them, I’m sure. Can’t you look at him the same way?”

“Yes, I really will try,” said Circe.

She knew there was something wrong with Dione’s comparison; nevertheless, she was determined to learn sorcery, and knew that to do that she would have to put up with the little man, or at least pretend to.

Sorcery Lessons

The next day Circe began to learn sorcery from Dione. “The lesson begins,” said the big woman. “Come to the oak.” Circe came into the spangled shade under the tree. “Now, cast off your garment,” said Dione, “and I shall do likewise. For you must enter sorcery with your whole body. You must feel the wind on you, birdcall must enter you, and you must know the touch of this mighty oak—the living totem of our clan whose taproot drinks the blood of mutilated gods.”

Circe shed her tunic. She felt sequins of hot sunlight upon her, felt the fingers of the wind searching her. A musk of summer grass beat about her, threaded with birdcall. Screaming with joy, lithe as a cat, she sprang to a lower limb of the tree. Dione doffed her tunic. Unclothed, she seemed larger. She easily lifted herself into the tree.

But then the little husband dashed out from behind the trunk and began to jump up and down, blubbering and bawling. “Oh, dear,” murmured Dione. She swung down, lifted him in one hand and climbed up again. She stood him on her knee and passed her hand over his face, whispering, “Sleep, sleep ... Do not weep, my dearie, but sleep, sleep ...”

He slumped on her lap, fast asleep. “Come up here,” she said to Circe. The girl climbed to the upper limb and sat beside her. And, to her dismay, was handed the sleeping husband. “Here,” said Dione.

“What shall I do with him?”

“Please don’t use that tone. He’s not really a slug or a snail, you know. Just hold him carefully and roll him up in my hair so that he rests against my back between my shoulders. He’ll sleep soundly there, and I’ll be able to start our lesson without interruption.”

Circe took the little man, holding him gently, although she yearned to twist his ears. She wrapped him in Dione’s thick, fragrant hair and rolled

him up until he hung against her back between her shoulder blades, snoring slightly.

“Thank you,” said Dione. “Now swing down to your own branch and make yourself comfortable. We have a lot to cover.”

To do magic,” said Dione, “is to tamper with nature, and the risk is enormous. For a spell gone wrong will not only destroy its target; it will turn and rend whoever has wrought the spell.”

“Worth the risk, it seems to me,” said Circe.

“Does it? Well, hearken now. There are two kinds of magic.”

“Good and bad?”

“Yes.”

“But so is everything else—either good or bad,” said Circe.

“Magic even more so,” said Dione. “It’s always more so, in every way. Witchcraft is evil magic, cruelly twisting nature and wrenching things out of their form and their own meaning, and changing them into something worse, always worse. Sorcery is good magic. It looks into the essence of living forms, and when it *transforms* something it is always within the nature of what it really is, only more so.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Circe.

“I’ll give you an example,” said Dione. “Ages ago, when I was young and this oak was just a sapling, there was a young hunter who roamed the forest. He was a pretty lad, very brave and merry, and I grew fond of him. I did not make myself known to him, but watched him, kept watching, for I enjoyed the sight of him. And I noted that toward the close of day he lost his merriment, grew sad, in fact. And when he left the wood and turned toward what I thought must be his home, his sprightly gait changed, his footsteps dragged.

“So I followed him home one dusk and learned the reason. Followed him to a trim little cottage which he must have built with his own hands, and saw him enter. And heard a voice start up. A woman’s voice, a young one, but with no sweetness. Harsh, rasping, mean, accusatory. Occasionally, he spoke a soft answer, which made her screech. I peered in and saw her. She was a little thing for such a loud voice. Not bad looking if her face hadn’t been twisted by all the rage that was in her.

“Well, I felt that I had to do something, and did it that very night. He awoke to find her gone. He mourned for a few days, but I taught him to forget his loss and count his blessings.”

“What did you do to the woman?” asked Circe. “Kill her?”

“Oh, no, no, no. I worked a good magic. Abrupt but good. I turned her into a jaybird. She flew off, found herself a blue-crested mate and happily scolded him all day long. And is not angered by soft replies, for he scolds also.”

“And you call that a good magic?”

“Certainly. You see, she was really meant to be a jay from the first, or a raving bitch, perhaps, but something went askew. In her soul’s journey toward birth she took a wrong turn somewhere. And was full of mysterious rage and unhappiness until I turned her back into what she should have been in the first place.”

“Why not a bitch, then, since you didn’t like her?”

“Well, I actually do like dogs; they’re usually sweeter-tempered than birds, even the vicious ones. Besides, she was really more birdlike than doglike. Yes, it was a good magic, Circe. Slightly selfish, but basically good. I made both of them happy; him, perhaps, more. But things can’t always be equal.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that was a good magic. It still leaves the sorceress quite free, doesn’t it?”

“All you’re free to do now, my girl, is learn. And the lessons are quite hard. Every herb that heals or harms. All the spook words of benefit or bane. Charm-rhymes plain and puzzling. And countercharms for everything, of course, so that you may combat witches and evil wizards—and undo your own mistakes.”

Salmoneus

Salmoneus, king of Aeolis, was very rich and powerful, but he was gnawed by dissatisfaction. “King ... king ...,” he muttered to himself. “It’s better to be one than not, but it’s still not much. Every piddling little state has someone who wears a crown and squats on a throne and calls himself king, so the title is not sufficiently revered. Take me, for example, ruler of a big, warlike country which is getting bigger all the time as it gobbles up its neighbors—even I, who am outgrowing kingship and becoming an emperor, am not paid enough honor. Oh, I’m feared and obeyed, but I’m not *worshipped*. People are afraid of me because they know that extremely unpleasant things will happen to them if they don’t exhibit wholesome terror—which is all very well—but the idea of me doesn’t awe them, overwhelm them, cause them to fall on their silly faces and worship. And that’s because I’m still only a man and not a god. I can’t stand it any longer. I must find a way to be more than I am. But how? There’s a way ... there must be a way.”

He thought and thought and finally decided what to do. He sent heralds throughout the land, to every city and town and village. They announced that Zeus, ruler of heaven, had honored the nation by choosing its own king to represent god power here below; not merely as priests do, but as the very embodiment, on certain occasions, of the divine will on earth.

Whereupon Salmoneus ordered an enormous marble pedestal to be built in the courtyard in front of the palace. Upon this pedestal a golden throne was set, even larger and more splendid than the one inside the palace, and studded with diamonds and rubies and sapphires. Above the throne was spread a canopy of gold-threaded silk and peacock feathers to shade him from the sun.

And to the great square in front of the palace in the capital city of Elis were summoned the populace. One day each month everyone was required to attend. This day was called the Day of Justice. Anyone who felt himself wronged in life in any way could appeal to the king. And he, with the wisdom and power conferred upon him by almighty Zeus, would render judgment, declaring either that the unlucky one deserved his bad luck, or that he had been unjustly used by fate and was due for a change in fortune.

Of course, Salmoneus cared nothing about the pleas themselves. He would listen with less than half an ear, and his decision would be based on whether the plaintiff happened to please or displease him. Nor were bribes discouraged. Often, Salmoneus made no decision at all, but postponed the matter, because he enjoyed the feeling of keeping people in suspense.

But the real point of this entire business was the closing ceremony, which was held at dusk. Then Salmoneus would arise from his throne, stand tall upon the pedestal, lifting his face to heaven and stretching his arms high, and quiver for a while, uttering low, ecstatic moans, as if the power of Zeus were an actual current flowing down from Olympus and entering him as he stood there.

Then servants would rush to him bearing brass pots, which he would clang together to imitate thunder. Others would come bearing torches, which he would snatch from them and hurl in the air to mimic lightning. And the great crowd had been rehearsed to fall on its knees at this moment, shouting, "Glory, glory, glory to our god, Salmoneus!"

Jealousy

For some time now Circe had dwelt in the oak grove, learning the art of sorcery as fast as Dione could teach. And her body grew along with her mind. Her legs grew very long and suavely muscled. Rose over bronze was her skin, and the rich mane of her hair seemed woven of light. All in all, she was a sleek, powerful young nymph, taller now than Dione, bursting with health, and casting a fragrance of sunshine and crushed grass.

Upon this day Circe and Dione were lying on a flat rock near the river's edge, letting the sun dry them after their swim. Circe was amused, for Dione had caught her husband and bathed him—something he hated. She had disregarded his complaints, and scrubbed and dried and oiled him rather roughly. And he had rushed off, cursing.

“You know,” said Circe, “he seems to have stopped shrinking.”

“I've noticed,” said Dione.

Circe was puzzled by her tone. “What's wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Yes there is.”

“Well,” said Dione. “He's not only stopped shrinking, he's stopped glaring at you and doing little mischiefs. Or haven't you noticed?”

“I have, and I'm glad, of course.”

“Don't you know what that means?”

“What?”

“The little fool is falling under your spell. Not one I've taught you. Nobody had to teach you. You cast this spell as naturally as a rose putting out her scent to pull a bee into her cup. Yes, yes, I know it's not your fault. You can't help being so young and beautiful, damn you.”

“Do you want me to go away?”

“We are going away, you and I, for a little while. To Elis to attend Judgment Day.”

“What’s that?”

“King Salmoneus claims that once every month he is invested with the authority of Zeus and can change the fortune of anyone who had been treated unjustly by the gods.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I don’t believe or disbelieve,” said Dione. “I’m willing to be shown. I shall appeal to him to undo the treachery of Cronos and grant me another thousand years with my husband. I shall also pray that the poor tyke be released from the spell you have cast. No, no, don’t say it. I know what I know.”

“I’m sorry, Dione.”

“And while we’re there you can ask the king to aid you in finding your father. I don’t know whether he’ll want to since it is Zeus your father offended. Isn’t that your story?”

“It’s what happened. In any case, I shan’t be coming back here. How can I live with you if you feel this way?”

“Yes, perhaps it would be better for you to resume your journey. There’s not much more I can teach you, anyway.”

Aeolis lay on the other side of the mountain; the road there lay through valley and wood. But Circe and Dione walked tirelessly with an easy, swinging gait. They didn’t speak much on the way; each was wrapped in her own thoughts. Of course, what Circe was thinking about was what Dione had said.

“He’s such a treacherous little thing,” she said to herself. “I don’t think he hates me a bit less than he ever did. I think this is just a new trick. He’s pretending to fall in love with me just to make Dione jealous. Yes, of course, that must be it. He’s found the one sure way to turn her against me. Oh, if it were only possible to give him what he deserves. How I would enjoy getting my hands on him. Pooh! What’s the difference? I’ll never see him again. This chapter of my life is ending, and I’m ready for a new one to begin.”

Judgment Day

As they neared the city they passed other people going there, and everyone seemed to be staring at them. Dione drew Circe into a fringe of trees at the side of the road.

“It’s no good,” she said. “You’re attracting too much attention.”

“Me? They’re staring at both of us.”

“It’s you they’re looking at, and no wonder. You’re much too beautiful to go unnoticed.”

She reached up and pulled two leaves from a branch. She held them above her head, mumbling. The leaves turned to two long brown cloaks, with cowls attached.

“Here,” she said. “Put it on.”

“It’s so ugly,” said Circe.

“That’s the idea. Get it on and stoop and huddle as you walk so that you won’t look so tall. And be sure to cover your hair with that cowl.”

“But why? I don’t mind them looking at me. I rather enjoy it. I’ve never been in a city before.”

“Do as I say,” gritted Dione. “Put it on immediately, or you’ll spoil everything.”

“How?”

“If you stand in that crowd towering above everyone, flashing your bare arms and legs and that mass of hair, why, they’ll all be gawking at you. And the king will see them doing it, and grow furious. He doesn’t like anyone to notice anyone else when he’s there—especially on his day of divinity. And if he falls into a fit of temper, instead of doing us any favors he’ll be more likely to do some very unpleasant things. So please put the cloak on without any more argument.”

Circe snatched the cloak and flung it over her, covering her hair with the cowl, but she was fuming inside. “I’ll get rid of it as soon as possible,” she said to herself. “When the king summons her to the throne she’ll be too busy to notice me at all, and I’ll do as I like. I can’t believe the change in her, and all because of that little toad of a husband.”

But as she humped along in her cloak, she saw that Dione’s tactic was working. No one stared at them. They entered the city and made their way through thronged streets to the courtyard, which was mobbed. Dione, using her strength, elbowed her way to the front of the crowd and stood near the pedestal—and Circe followed.

The king sat on his throne. His robe was purple, encrusted with silver stars. His scepter was blue and of a zigzag shape to imitate the scepter of Zeus, which was a lightning bolt. Gilded boots he wore, with very high heels, and a tall, spiked, golden crown sat on his head. Circe couldn’t see much face because he wore an enormous fleecy white beard à la Zeus, obviously false.

“But he’d look worse without it,” thought Circe. “How can anyone believe that he’s a god?”

A young herald stood near the throne, holding a scroll. At a signal from the king, he read out a name. A man emerged from the crowd and climbed marble stairs to the pedestal, then knelt before the throne. He mumbled to the king, too low for Circe to hear. The king interrupted him with a wave of his hand. The man pulled himself to his feet and left. He was slinking away, Circe noticed, as if whatever he had asked had been denied.

Dione stood erect beside her, motionless, staring at the king. “Does she still really believe in this nonsense?” thought Circe. “Can’t she see he’s a fake?” Then, as the herald began to read out another name, she felt a kind of shiver pass through the closely packed crowd, like a wind passing through a wheat field.

She looked up and saw why.

At that time, when the world was new, there were no bats. The only mammal that flew was the lupalia, which in Greek means “winged wolf.” Indeed, the body slung between the wings was as big as a wolf’s, its jaws even more powerful, its wingspread greater than an eagle’s. It ate only meat—live meat—which meant deer, mountain goats, sheep, cows, and the occasional brave shepherd who tried to protect his herd. The only good

thing about the lupalia was that it disliked towns and villages and loathed cities, and folk who did not roam the wild places were fairly safe from this savage beast.

Upon this day, therefore, when the crowd gathered before the palace of Salmoneus saw three enormous creatures flying overhead, its first terrified thought was, “three lupalia ... what are they doing over a city?”

The creatures were coming lower, in slow swoops, and people were beginning to scream and panic. But were they lupalia? Their wings were glinting strangely; their claws glittered. And by the time the horrified Elians realized that what they were seeing were not flying wolves but flying hags with brass wings and claws, the Furies were in a steep dive toward the golden throne.

Salmoneus, watching them, was petrified; he could not move.

What the Elians saw then they were never to forget. The sight branded itself on their memory and deviled their sleep. Night after night, for years afterward, they awoke whimpering. And the tale of that day when the Furies came was used to frighten children into pious behavior for generations to come.

Alecto and Megaera unslung their whips as they dived. The king awoke from his stupor and tried to scramble away, but they caught him. Hovering low, they snapped their whips. The lashes whistled through the air toward the king, not flogging him but binding him. One lash curled about his neck, the other about his ankles. The hags pulled on their whips, stretching him horizontally just over the pediment, then, still hovering, moving in perfect, horrid rhythm, they flailed him up and down, smashing his body against the marble.

The Royal Guard had been stationed in back of the throne, but not one guardsman defended his king; they were paralyzed by fear. When they were able to move, it was backward, off the pediment, to vanish in the crowd.

Circe felt Dione trembling beside her. She could tell that Dione was not afraid. Her face was flushed bright red with rage. She uttered a wordless roar. Circe grasped her arm, trying to hold her back, but Dione shook off her hand and rushed forward. She leaped onto the pediment, caught one lash, and tried to break it. The hags screeched and dropped their whips.

The king lay on the marble, and Dione saw that she couldn't have helped him. The man who had played god had been pounded to a pulp-split open

like a rotten melon. Now the Furies, all three of them, seized Dione and flew up with her. Circling slowly above the crowd, they struck at her with their claws, raking her to shreds with their brass talons. Leisurely, they tore her to pieces. Bloody gobbets of her who had been Circe's teacher dropped from the Furies' claws, but never hit the ground because they were caught by screaming gulls.

Circe slipped through the crowd. She flung off her cloak and raced away like a deer. There was something she had to do. Her tall legs flashed, her bright hair flew, and people thought it was the goddess Artemis, hunting a stag.

She didn't stop until she had reached the oak grove, and didn't rest then. Dione had built her husband a little stone house so that he might shelter safely at the rare times she left the grove. Circe ran to that house, reached into the door, and plucked the little man out. She lifted him, holding him before her face and studying him as if she had never seen him before.

The red light of failing day sifted through the oak leaves, setting them ablaze. An owl who awaited darkness hooted hungrily.

"Where's Dione?" quavered the little man.

"Dead."

"Oh, my. Who'll look after me?"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"You'll have to take care of me now."

"I'll take care of you, all right."

"Why do you say it like that?" he whined. "Why are you looking at me that way? You're frightening me."

"Am I, now?"

"Be nice. Please."

"I'm going to be nice. I'm about to do Dione, whom you turned against me, a final favor. I'm sending you to keep her company."

"Don't kill me. I don't want to die."

"Don't you? But she gave up her immortality so that she might not outlive you. What an ungrateful little rat you are. Rat. Yes."

She shifted her grip so that he dangled upside down. Slowly turning, she crooned:

Meager, selfish,

*ceaselessly mean.
Scurviest rascal
ever seen.
Form must follow content,
and you shall be
what you were meant
to be.
I'll see to that!
Drop your human guise,
Reduce your puny size,
Return to RAT!*

She felt the leg she was holding change in her hand; it became thin, whiplike. She looked down and saw that she held a rat by the tail. It arched up and glared at her out of poisonous little red eyes. It curled up farther and tried to bite her hand. She snapped her wrist and it fell back.

She glanced at the sun. Only a red tab was left and that was going; shadows flowed after it. Circe hooted like an owl. With no rustle of leaves an owl appeared on a lower branch; its huge circular eyes caught what light was left. Circe swung the rat around and around by the tail, then slung it into the air. She had aimed it well. The owl caught it without leaving its bough. Clutched it in her claws just as the Furies had clutched Dione, and flew away.

“He’s lucky,” thought Circe. “Owls kill quickly. A few seconds of pain and his shade will join Dione’s. Why she should want that shabby little soul with her throughout eternity is something I’ll never understand. Love is a mystery. I wonder if I’ll ever love anyone that much. I guess I’m too coldhearted. Oh, well ...”

Athena

Quarrels flared frequently in the Pantheon and grew into feuds. But since gods live forever, and forever takes so long, they learned that keeping the same enemy grows boring after a while, so the feuds healed themselves.

There was one high feud, however, that was never healed, but went on and on, growing worse every century. For Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, hated her uncle Poseidon so fiercely that she could never make peace with him, and he returned her hatred full force. Although the Maid in Armor could not match the sea god physically—she did not own his mastery of wind and tide—she could outthink him, and was always weaving plots.

Now, the owl was Athena's favorite bird and she had given it the gift of wisdom. She had chosen a great gray owl as her special adviser. He flew here and there, spying for her, picking up snippets of information, doing various confidential errands—and, between missions, perched on her shoulder.

Birds are great gossips, even owls who look so solemn and judgely. And what happens to one soon becomes known to all. Thus, when Athena's owl heard from an Arcadian bird how a young oak nymph named Circe had changed a little man into a rat and was thoughtful enough to feed it to the owl, the goddess heard the tale soon after.

Now, Athena had been very busy the last year or so, launching a new attack on Poseidon. What she had done was plant various hazards about the islands of the Middle Sea so that ships would disappear, crews would vanish, and seamen everywhere, who had been Poseidon's most ardent worshipers, would lose faith in him and turn to other gods. And nothing wounds a god more than losing worshipers. For only when he is praised and feared and adored does a god feel fully alive.

Athena had planted many a hidden reef that could tear the bottom out of a ship. Jagged rocks and whirlpools she dropped into the Middle Sea, and various monsters—the man-eating Cyclopes she had led to one island, and settled the iron-headed Amycus, who butted people to death, on another isle. Winged naiads called Sirens she had stationed on certain rocks. In their voices dwelt the chuckle of tide over pebbles and the lisp of rain, birdcall and wind sigh. And when they perched on the rocks, singing, their song scattered the wits of helmsmen who steered their ships onto the rocks.

Athena observed with glee the rising toll of lost ships and lost sailors, and the way Poseidon's altars were drawing fewer worshipers with each shipwreck. She exulted in the sea god's mounting wrath. But for all her success she was not satisfied. And when she was told of the lovely young sorceress who could change a man into a rat and coolly feed him to an owl, she became very interested.

"Thank you," she said to the big gray bird. "This is a juicy bit of information. I can use a girl with that kind of talent."

She stood on the peak of Olympus, breathing in the mingled fragrance of a west wind and thinking hard, trying to recall all she could about Circe and Helios, and the stolen sun chariot and forbidden ride.

"Yes," she said to herself. "She must still bear a grudge, which would make her want to go along with what I have in mind."

Whereupon she flew off to find Circe.

Knowing that Circe was half dryad of the Oak Clan, she searched among stands of oak, and found her in a grove in Argos, sitting on a fallen log, combing her hair with a silver comb. Athena heard someone coming through the trees and made herself invisible.

Shambling out of the woods came a huge, hairy man carrying a club. "Hey, you," he growled to Circe.

"Good morning," she said calmly.

"I've come to get you," he said.

"Really? Then what?"

"Take you back to our cave."

"How many of you are there?" asked Circe.

"Twelve, fifteen. Depends how many are left alive at the end of the day."

"And what would I do in your cave?"

“Place is a mess. Big healthy wench like you could do a lot of cooking and cleaning for us. And see to ... other comforts.”

“Interesting,” she murmured. “Suppose I were to tell you I didn’t want to do that?”

“Look. If you don’t come along nicely, I’ll just hit you over the head and carry you there.”

Circe arose from the log, stood to her full height, raised her arms, and slowly began to twirl, crooning:

*Not there
nor anywhere
for you are now
a BEAR.*

Indeed, instead of the bearded bandit, a big black bear now stood in the grove. He dropped to all fours and came toward Circe, growling. She snapped her fingers. He stood on his hind legs and began to dance. He danced up to her. She put her hand on his shoulder and danced a few steps with him, then patted his head and shoved him away. He dropped to all fours and shambled back into the forest.

Athena made herself visible and stepped into the clearing. Circe saw a very tall, stern-looking maiden, wearing helmet and breastplate, bearing spear and shield. “You are Athena,” she said.

“And you are Circe. I am pleased that you recognize me, though we’ve never met.”

“My father, Helios, described you all to me.” She smiled. “And your appearance is quite distinctive, you know.”

“So is yours, my dear, so is yours. It is your father I’ve come to speak to you about, among other things.”

“He didn’t have much good to say about your family,” said Circe. “They treated him cruelly.”

“Not me,” said Athena. “I didn’t have anything to do with all that. I always admired him, as a matter of fact.”

“Well, no, he didn’t have anything really bad to say about you. Or Hermes.”

“You know,” said Athena, “our family is not a single loving unit. We all certainly do not hold the same opinion about things, and can quarrel very fiercely among ourselves. For example, I loathe my father’s brother, Poseidon. For years we’ve been feuding with each other.”

“Poseidon,” murmured Circe. “Tell me more.”

Athena then told her how she had been attacking the sea god, trying to rob him of worshipers. How she had dropped rocks and reefs and whirlpools into the Middle Sea to wreck shipping. And how, on various islands, she had planted monsters as a menace to navigation. “But,” she said, “all this is not sufficient. Word gets about very quickly among seamen, and they are learning to avoid these perils. I need someone like you to dwell upon an island and provide such enchantments as will draw fleets and their crews to that place, where you will make sure they stay. Will you do it? Will you serve me? The rewards will be great.”

“I’d like to help you,” said Circe. “I, too, hate Poseidon. It was he who complained to Zeus about my father, just because we rode low and cooked a few fish. I’d enjoy doing mischief to his mildewed majesty.”

“Then it’s settled!” cried Athena. “Splendid!”

“Not quite settled,” said Circe. “I can’t take on any duties yet. I must search for my father. I’ve vowed to find him if he’s still alive, and I don’t even know if he is.”

“Perhaps I can help you there,” said Athena.

“How?”

“Hearken. Helios is not the only Titan who has been made to disappear but not to die. Uranus, the First One, was beheaded by his son, Cronos, who then cut him to pieces and buried him in a thousand different places. And each one of these thousand graves swarms with life. From the vital mud of the god’s decay sprang a rich grass whose seeds fed worms into giant size. And these worms put on leather hide, sprouted wings and spiked tails, and became dragons. From other sites of the First One’s burial grew fruit trees of magical nourishment. Then Cronos himself was deposed by Zeus and no one knows what happened to him. Some say that he, like his father, was chopped up and the pieces scattered. Others say that he escaped intact, hid somewhere, and is gathering forces to counterattack. None of us really knows, but my guess is that he’s very much alive and still as dangerous as his name, which means time. The point of all this is that I’m sure that your

father, who was once so hotly alive, is still smouldering somewhere. Perhaps not in his own form, but still Helios, still casting unique heat. Well, these are deep mysteries, perilous questions. The heirs of murdered kings don't like those who meddle in their secrets. But someone somewhere must have a clue about the whereabouts of Helios. None go to as many places as seamen. And if you catch sailors and take them to your island you will be able to learn all they know before you do other things to them. And I shall help you. I'll make it a point to learn what I can and tell you what I know."

"Will you help me against the Furies?"

"If they threaten you, yes."

"Suppose I want to threaten them?"

"You are a cool one. Well, we'll see. Now go to your isle, which lies off the huge island of Trinacia. The name of yours is the sound the wind makes—*Aiee*. It's a beautiful place, hilly, rich in oaks, abounding in herbs. You will be able to practice a special sorcery there."

"Let our pact be made, O Goddess," said Circe, bowing before Athena.

"Arise, young friend. The pact shall be observed. And we shall both prosper."

She vanished. And Circe laughed with pleasure.

Final Enchantments

For many centuries, then, Circe dwelt on the island of Aiee and served Athena well. She taught herself a spell that allowed her to shift the winds about her island, blowing Trinacia-bound ships into her harbor. Hungry crews disembarked and were drawn by the savors of roasting meat to her courtyard. There a spitted ox was turning over a fire, crackling, sending out a smell that made the sailors slaver with greed.

A beautiful, golden-haired woman then appeared and invited them all into dinner—where they gluttoned themselves and drank heavily of spiced wine. They fell asleep at the table; when they awoke, they were animals. She had read their natures and turned them into the various beasts they resembled: lion, bear, wolf. Pig, weasel, monkey. Some into birds and fish.

Among the ships that came was that of the great war chief, Ulysses, who had fought in Troy for ten years and had been wandering the sea for ten more, trying to get home but meeting disaster after disaster. This crew, half-starving, had rushed to Circe's castle while their captain followed more slowly.

Circe watched the men gorging themselves and turned them all to swine. When Ulysses came charging into the castle demanding that his men be restored to him, she was about to turn him into a fox. But she changed her mind. His fiery red-gold hair reminded her of Helios; his knotted bronzed arms gave off a musky heat like a ripe field awaiting the last harvest of the year. For the first time since she had lost her father she felt her cold heart thawing.

She undid her magic, restored his men to their own shapes, and begged him to stay with her. He agreed. Her beauty enchanted him. They had fallen under each other's spell, but she was the one most transformed—into a loving warm woman.

Although she offered to share her immortality with him, she could not keep him. For after ten years of war and ten years of wandering, he loved his wife Penelope more than ever, and knew he had to return to her.

So he sailed away and never came back. But they never forgot each other.

Athena, always vigilant, soon learned what had happened and feared that a brokenhearted Circe might lose her magical powers. She decided, therefore, to bring her some information she had been saving for an emergency. The goddess visited the island of Aiee and appeared before Circe, who sat on a rock looking out to sea, toward where she had seen Ulysses' sail disappear.

"Greetings," said Athena. "I bring you good news."

"Thank you, Goddess, but there is only one piece of news that I would consider good, and that I shall never hear. For he has vowed never to return, and he keeps his vows."

"Try this," said Athena. "I know where your father can be found."

Circe sprang to her feet. "Where?" she cried.

"In Tartarus. No, he's not dead. On the contrary, he has chosen a very safe hiding place, for who would think of seeking him there where no one goes voluntarily? But there he dwells in a great roasting pit, disguised as a working fire."

"I want him here—with me! What can I do?"

"Gently, gently. I'm about to tell you what you can do. Although the risk is considerable. You may be torn to pieces doing it."

"Tell me, tell me!"

"Well, you know that the Furies nurse a grudge against you."

"Do they? They haven't bothered me. I haven't seen them since they carried off Dione."

"No, they don't dare attack you while you're up here under my protection. But on their home grounds—that will be quite different."

"Their home grounds? You mean Tartarus?"

"Yes. I know that now I have told you, you will make an attempt to rescue your father. If you rush down there without a plan you will end up in bloody fragments just as Dione did. But I am known as Mistress of Tactics, and will provide you with a plan. A very risky one, but it's your only chance. Now, listen well ..."

When she chose to, Circe could run so lightly over a field that she did not bend the grass. And she drifted lightly now over the hot ashes of Tartarus. She drifted slowly, offering herself as bait to the Furies. She had located the great roasting pit where her father hid but had not revealed herself to him. She was waiting for the Furies to attack.

Now, far off, she heard them screeching. She sprang into the air and floated whitely over the roasting pit, sheathing herself in her own coolness because the heat was terrible.

The screeching grew louder. She saw three black shapes diving at her, wings and claws glinting in the ruddy firelight. She floated there, waiting. Just as they were about to grasp her in their claws, she slipped away like a blown leaf. But they were hurtling so fast they couldn't quite stop their dive. They spread their wings, skidding in the air.

And Helios arose from the pit, and in a wild mimicry of affection took the hags into his fiery embrace. Black shapes threshed violently. There was a shrieking, a roaring. Flame wrestled with shadows.

The fire was broken, scattered, flared separately here and there. But the Furies had vanished. Scorched rags were all that was left of them. But the hags were immortal; the vital force was still in them. The black, scorched rags fledged into bats, thousands of bats, who immediately flew away to find caves in the upper world.

Helios divided into flame, and lived separate lives. He lives still, some say, as marsh fire, will-o'-the-wisp, wherever wandering fires are seen. Others say something worse: that Helios, vowing to avenge himself upon the world, has squeezed himself into a tiny space without losing his strength. For he knows that man, the questioner, the toolmaker, will one day search out his hiding place, will rudely force it open and release a compressed fire, hot as the sun—scorching earth and sky and all above, below, and between.

Circe, given new hope by the sight of her father and the destruction of the Furies, returned to her island and continued to weave spells in the service of Athena—until the old gods vanished and no one believed in magic anymore.

But Circe, as has been told, was immortal, which means that she is still alive somewhere, although no one knows where. She no longer turns people

into beasts. She feels it's unnecessary; they're doing too good a job of it themselves. Besides, she chooses to live quietly and not draw attention to herself. But she is a sorceress still, and keeps in practice. What she does is change an occasional animal into a person.

So if you meet a girl with green eyes and feel you've met her somewhere before and want very much to meet her again, don't fight the feeling. She may have been a cat of yours who wandered away and never came back, one that you've never been able to forget. What you must do is look very carefully at her fingernails. If she can pull them in and stick them out again, then you can be sure that your lost cat is now a found girl.

But be careful. She scratches.

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GERYON

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For my grandson
NATHANIEL EVSLIN
who is less a monster than any child I've ever met.

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Characters

Monsters

Geryon A three-bodied monster; also known as the Triple
(GUR ih uhn) Terror of Thessaly

**Snapping turtle,
Sickle-fish, and
Whip-snake** The appropriated forms of the river god Castelos

Giant shark An ordinary fish, magically enlarged

Gods

Castelos A river god; father of Calliroa
(KAS tell uhs)

Atropos Eldest of the Fates; Lady of the Shears; she cuts the
(AT roh pohs) thread of life

Lachesis
(LAK ee sihs) The second Fate; she measures the thread of life

Clotho
(KLOH thoh) Youngest of the Fates; she spins the thread of life

Hera
(HEE ruh) Queen of the Gods

Ares
(AIR eez) God of War

Poseidon
(poh SY duhn) God of the Sea

Demigods

Calliroa
(kuh LIHR ruh) A river nymph; daughter of Castelos and mother of Geryon

Hercules
(HER ku leez) Son of Zeus; the greatest hero of ancient times

Others

Giant bats The guise of the Three Fates

Suitors Those who come to woo Calliroa

Pygmies A colony of little people on the river Nile

Tattle-bird Hera's spy

**Hundred-
handed Giants** Hera's servants

Slaves Those who serve Geryon

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The Three Fates

Of all the monsters who sought to destroy Hercules, the most dreadful, perhaps, was the three-bodied Geryon, also known as the Triple Terror of Thessaly. This tale has deep roots; its seeds were planted long before Geryon was born, in the very year that the dawn-hero, Perseus, was stalking the snake-haired Medusa.

It all began one windy night in a cave on the western slope of Olympus, where dwelt three ancient sisters known as the Fates. Atropos, the Scissors Hag, was ranting at her sisters, raising her voice above the screech of the wind:

“We have enemies, I tell you!”

“Who dares challenge us?” yelled Lachesis.

“Yes, sister, who, who?” howled Clotho.

“Stop hooting like an owl,” said Atropos, “and listen. A new breed has arisen among humankind, a select few who seek to blur the designs of destiny. Instead of worshiping the official gods and meekly obeying our edicts, they intend to follow the arch-meddler, Prometheus, who defied us by giving man the gift of fire.”

“Who are these troublemakers, who, who?”

“They are called heroes,” said Atropos. “They move restlessly from adventure to adventure, upsetting the natural order, breaking the webs of fate we so carefully spin.”

“How?” asked Lachesis. “What do they do?”

“Different things, all of them troublesome. They’re either brawling young brutes like Hercules and Perseus, who go about killing monsters who should be killing them. Or they’re pesky questioners who keep poking their noses into our most sacred arrangements, always asking ‘How does it work? How can it be changed? Why, why?’ And then there’s the sneaky,

gentle kind like Asclepius, who dares to overturn our dooms, dosing people with his damned herbs, sewing up wounds, resetting bones, pulling his patients from the very brink of death and robbing our cousin Hades of his proper quota of corpses.”

“Makes you think, doesn’t it?” murmured Lachesis. She was the one who measured the thread that Clotho spun and Atropos cut. This was the Thread of Life, out of which the three sisters wove the web of Fate. Each time Atropos cut the thread it meant death.

“Yes,” said Clotho. “Her words are full of wisdom; they do make one think. And thinking makes one thirsty, very thirsty.” She dipped a ladle into the great vat of barley beer that stood near the hearth; the other sisters dipped their ladles too, and drank deep. They were gluttons. As ancient as they were, they had kept their big yellow teeth and could crack marrow bones, something they did all day long and much of the night. The sisters sat down to regular meals, of course, but they also ate while they worked. Nor did they foul their webs, for they kept curly-headed slaves to wipe their greasy fingers on.

“Thinking makes one thirsty,” muttered Lachesis. “And drinking makes one hungry.”

“But you never speak idly, sister,” said Clotho. “An intention always lurks behind your words. What do you want us to do—reinforce our webs so that these heroes can’t escape their fates?”

“By all means,” said Atropos. “We should do that. But we must do more, I’m afraid. We must leave our cozy home and go on an inspection trip to see just what these pesky heroes are up to. Then we’ll be able to patch our webs more precisely.”

“Oh dear,” said Lachesis. “I hate to travel. It’s a sorry business. Can’t eat properly on the road.”

“As it happens, we can do two things at once,” said Atropos. “A place I particularly want to visit is the western shore of the River Castelos, where great events are fated to transpire. We must look over that ground carefully. There’s an oak grove near the river whose acorns are very fat and flavorsome. And the wild pigs who eat these acorns are also very fat and flavorsome. The flesh of their suckling pigs is said to be of unparalleled flavor.”

The sisters slavered as they heard these words. Roast piglet was their favorite dish.

“Yes,” said Atropos. “We’ll round up a nice batch of these sucklings and bring them back with us. That should make up for the discomforts of travel.”

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Bats on the River Bank

The three sisters changed themselves into bats for their journey, giant bats, who slept by day and flew at night. When they flew low their wingspread blotted the moon. They flew here and there, spying on people—on kings and slaves, heroes and cowards, lovers and killers, and many who were none of these things but simply lived as they could, hoping to avoid trouble and keep going from day to day.

On the last night before returning home, the sisters alighted on the shore of the River Castelos, where they hoped to catch suckling pigs, enough to last them through the winter.

Now, the local river god who had given his name to these waters was someone very hard to get along with. He had a savage temper. He hated strangers—almost as much as he despised acquaintances. Boasting the purest waters in all the land, he drove away any animals that tried to hunt along his shores, for he couldn't bear the idea of blood seeping into his river. The only creature in the world he didn't hate was his beautiful naiad daughter, Calliroa. Nevertheless, he had always wished that she were a boy. For he dreaded the prospect of her marrying someone someday; he knew he would hate her husband, whoever he was.

Particularly loathsome to Castelos were bats. His waters were fed by icy little springs born out of the winter snows, which turned into boisterous streams as they tumbled down the mountain slopes. These streams ran through caves and under rock walls where bats clung. They hung like rags from the ceilings of the caves until nightfall when they suddenly became winged rats with terrible claws, who hunted through the night, killing everything they could catch and drinking its blood.

Upon this night, the moon knelt low and burned so brightly that it was like a muted sun, strong enough to cast shadows. Castelos and his daughter

rose from the spangled river to bathe themselves in golden light.

Something darkened the moon. The naiad uttered a half cry. Castelos saw the shadow of wings branding his shores—huge wings, not tapered but fan-shaped and strangely ribbed. Three enormous bats were settling upon the riverbank. The god had seen enough. He grasped his daughter’s arm and pulled her under the water.

“What are they, father?” she cried. “Are they bats? They’re so big!”

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll get rid of them.”

He pushed her into the underwater cave where they dwelt, and began to stir his river into a flood. So enraged was he at the sight of the loathsome creatures that he didn’t even bother to surface for another look. He didn’t see the bats strip off their wings like capes, twitch their rat faces back into crone faces, and stand revealed as themselves, the Three Hags of Fate.

Tittering and chuckling in the moonlight, they began to caper with excitement, for they smelled suckling pig on the wind.

But the hags were given no chance to hunt. Castelos was busy below, and the river swelled with his rage. It rushed, it foamed, it overflowed its banks in a mighty spate and swept over the land, washing away everything that stood before it, including the three sisters. Being immortal, they couldn’t drown, but they could suffer discomfort.

Now, gathering their wet cloaks about them, they bobbed on the surface, shivering, and clinging to one another. Castelos rose from the river and saw a seething waste of waters. He studied the treeline and the sky, saw no bats flying against the moon, and laughed to himself. He raised both arms high and whistled loudly, summoning the waters to subside. Obediently, they shrank back between their banks.

Then, Castelos froze with horror. The bats had returned; they had sprouted legs, and were dancing about waving their wings and screeching at him. Their hag voices were like knives slashing away at his power, letting his strength drain out, and fear enter. They screeched:

River, take care,
River, beware.
Rolled in mud
by your insolent flood,
we Hags of Fate

know how to hate,
and whom to curse
with magical verse.

River, take care,
River, beware.
Monsters three
shall your daughter bear.

They shall hunt
along your shore,
killing, killing,
spilling gore,
fouling your waters
forever more.

The hags uttered the last mighty rhyme of their curse, spread their cloaks and flew off, still screeching.

For the first time in his life, Castelos was afraid. Before this, the only fear he had known was the fear he had caused. For in those days, people who dwelt in delta lands were affected by the whims of their local river god far more than by any of the distant gods of Olympus. Their lives literally hung on the antics of the river, which in flood swept away houses and barns and those who lived in them, and buried fields under tons of water. At other times, the river simply shrank itself into a miserly muddy trickle, leaving crops to wither on the stalk, cattle to thirst, and people to starve.

Thus it was that up till now, Castelos had spread fear but had never felt it himself. Now everything had changed. The giant bats had blotted the moon and settled loathsomely on his bank. When he had tried to drown them, as was his right, they had changed into the very Hags of Fate, cursing him forever, and naming his daughter as both the victim and the instrument of their vengeance.

The Suitors

Despite all the magical verses and moonlit curses uttered by all the capering hags in the world, Castelos was not one to acquiesce in his own doom. He said to himself, “If I arrange matters so that no male of any species is able to approach my daughter, then she will bear no child—singleton, twin, or triplet—monster, or otherwise. I shall keep her strictly secluded, and in my behavior shall set an example for suspicious fathers everywhere.”

Now, Calliroa was very shy, appearing only after sunset and before dawn to dive off rocks and play with the swans. Nevertheless, she had been seen, and young men came courting. Nor were they discouraged by rumor that her father was an ogre who had promised death to all who wooed her. Such rumors only made the idea of winning her more attractive. For in the springtide of life when youth is maddened by unspent energy, danger adds spice to any possibility. It is so now, and was even more so then, when the entire human race was in its springtime.

So the young men came courting, and some that were not so young—warriors, captains, princes, a widowed king or two. They appeared on the shore at all hours, some with rich gifts, calling into the waters. They spoke to her in various ways:

“Nymph. Maiden. River’s daughter. Come out! Come out! Come see what I have brought you! Come be my bride!”

But not one of them was given time to press his suit, for Castelos was there, crouching underwater on mighty legs, waiting to attack.

A young poet who came at the first light of dawn was rewarded by the sight of Calliroa completing her last dive. He caught a searing glimpse of her long legs entering the water and was so excited that he hopped up and down on the shore, shouting: “Nymph! Nymph! Come out! Please come out. I can’t go in after you; I’ll drown.”

A column of mist rose from the river and thickened before his wondering eyes. It congealed into the shape of a gigantic snapping turtle. The youth gaped in amazement.

“Begone,” said the turtle in a throaty voice. “You stand upon a fatal shore. Depart, or die.”

“Thank you for your warning, good turtle,” said the young man courteously. “But I cannot leave just yet. For I have fallen in love with the nymph who dwells in this river. And I mean to marry her.”

The turtle did not reply. It simply tucked in its head and legs and spun out of the water like a discus. It skidded to a landing on the shore, poked out its leathery head and advanced on the boy. He was too poor to own a sword. All he carried was his lyre, slung over his shoulder, and a wooden staff. He felt very frightened as the huge turtle came toward him, but was determined not to be chased away. He clutched his staff and prepared to strike.

“Stop where you are,” he said. And was disgusted to hear his voice quavering. “Stop right there or I’ll smash your shell with my stick.”

The turtle lunged. The youth struck. The turtle caught the staff in his jaws and snapped it in two like a twig. The lad realized that those terrible jaws could break an arm or leg just as easily. He whirled and ran away as fast as he could, hating himself for his cowardice. He didn’t stop running until he reached the top of a hill, and the river was just a silver thread far below. There he sat on a rock and wept. “I shall never forget her,” he vowed. “I shall spend the rest of my life making verses about nothing but her, her, her!”

Indeed, for some weeks he did go about muttering passionately to himself about the nymph he had seen diving through the pearly light of dawn. He kept grieving in verse until he met an oak dryad who had no jealous father and who taught him to forget the river nymph. He never forgot the giant turtle, though, and for the rest of his life avoided rivers and streams and bathed only when he was caught in the rain.

The next suitor came to the river at noon. He was no fragile poet but a big, burly young man wearing breastplate and helmet, bearing sword and shield. He beat sword against shield, making a great clamor, and shouted, “Naiad! Naiad! Naiad!”

A spout of mist rose from the water. It thickened into the shape of an enormous fish, but such a one as the suitor had never seen. A horn grew out

of its head, a long curved ivory blade, and the suitor realized that he was looking upon the sickle-fish, a creature most rare, of which dreadful tales were told.

Hanging in its column of mist, the fish slithered toward a willow tree that grew on the shore, its boughs dipping gracefully toward the water like a maiden washing her hair. The fish flailed its body; the ivory blade sheared the willow branches as neatly as a scythe. The boughs fell into the water and slowly floated away as the young man stared in amazement.

But he did not run. He never ran before an enemy. Instead, he about-faced and marched off—firmly, but not too slowly. He didn't look back. It was an orderly retreat, and he never returned.

For other, more dangerous-looking suitors—and there were many who courted his daughter—Castelos put on the third and most deadly of his transformations. He would rise from his depths as a whip-snake—a hundred yards of living muscle, encased in sliding leather scales, tougher than bronze, and edged along its entire length by a murderous ridge of spines. In this form Castelos could hover over an entire troop of armed men. He would crack his body like a bullwhip and simply sweep the phalanx away, crushing them like beetles in their armor. If a princely suitor survived the massacre of his royal guard, he would run for his life, vowing to forget river nymphs and marry the rich, ugly princess his mother had chosen for him.

Some powerful princes, however, came even more heavily escorted. They arrived with squadrons of battle-trained spearmen and archers, who stationed themselves on both sides of the river, ready to destroy anything that threatened their leader. For such suitors Castelos would forego his transformations. No giant snapping turtle, no sickle-fish, no whip-snake would appear from the river, but the river itself would rise.

Castelos would crouch in the depths, stirring, making the river swell higher and higher until it overflowed its banks and rolled across the fields in a seething brown flood, sweeping away everything that stood in its path, drowning every living creature that did not flee to high ground. Only when the countryside had been swept bare of anything that might call itself a suitor did Castelos recall the waters.

Thus it was that Castelos kept his daughter from marriage. "I've stopped those rancid old hags in their tracks," he muttered to himself. "No three monster grandsons shall I have hunting along my shores and fouling my

waters with the blood of their kill. Yes, I've thwarted the Fates so far and must continue to do so."

But for all his self-congratulation, Castelos did not permit himself to get befuddled by success. He kept his wits, kept studying the situation. He knew that boys and girls who wanted to meet each other became more slippery than eels and managed to elude the strictest parental vigil. He remembered how a king of a nearby country had sought to thwart a prophecy that he would be killed by his own grandson. He had imprisoned his only daughter in a door-less, windowless brass tower, and thought he had found a foolproof way to keep suitors out—until, one day, passing the tower, he heard the sound he dreaded most—a baby's cry. He ordered his slaves to break down the walls of the tower and found his daughter seated calmly amid the rubble nursing a day-old child. She informed her father that the babe was sired by a god who pierced the tower as a shaft of light. The boy did indeed grow up to kill his grandfather, accidentally, it was claimed, but sufficiently to fulfill the prophecy.

"So ..." muttered Castelos to himself. "It is not enough to drive away suitors, which I'm getting very good at. I must stop her from even thinking about marriage and children. I'll have to find a way to make her put these things out of her mind forever."

Several days passed. The river god was in the great underwater cave that formed his palace. Clad in his royal cloak of crocodile hide, wearing his opal crown, he sat on a rock that made a natural throne. His daughter, Calliroa, knelt at his feet, threading periwinkle shells into tiny necklaces for her family of dolls. Although tall and ripe, she was still childish in many ways, and clung to her toys. Castelos stared at her, trying to think of a way to say what he had to say without making her cry. For of all things in the world, only his daughter's tears could move the huge, brawling river god.

"My dear child," he said. "You may have wondered why I have been driving away those who would wish to marry you."

"I know you must have your reasons, father."

"Ah, you're a dutiful daughter, my pet. And I love you very much."

"But I must marry sometime, mustn't I father?"

"No, you must not."

"Really not?"

“Really.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Father ... I may be about to cry.”

“Please don’t.”

“But you’re saying sad things. I don’t care so much about having a husband, I don’t think, but I have to have one to have babies, don’t I? And I do want those. I’ve wanted a baby of my own ever since I stopped being one myself.”

“Let me explain, my darling. And you’ll see that I’m doing only what I have to.”

She flowed to her feet, slid into his lap, and began to play with his beard. “All right, tell me,” she whispered. Feeling even more keenly that he couldn’t bear to hurt her, Castelos began to tell how he had offended the Hags of Fate and of the heavy curse they had laid upon him.

But he changed things a bit in the telling. He did not say that she, his daughter, was fated to bear three monsters but that the Hags had decreed that she would marry a monster who would do monstrous things to her.

“But father,” she murmured, “he would have to love me to marry me, wouldn’t he, so why would he want to do me harm?”

“A monster has a monstrous nature; it likes to hurt other creatures.”

“Even his wife?”

“Maybe even especially his wife,” replied the river god. “Only another monster can survive being married to one.”

“Did those old hags tell you what he’d be like?”

“Not exactly, but I can assure you that all monsters are big and horribly ugly.”

“Maybe not. Maybe it’s mostly rumors. I’ve heard a lot of people say that you’re a monster, daddy. But I, who know you best, see how kind and good you really are, even if you do sometimes change into other things and frighten people. So you see ...”

“No, I don’t see. What’s all that have to do with anything? And if I’m so kind and good and you love me so much, why are you in such a hurry to leave me? No, don’t cry! Please don’t; I can’t bear it. I’ll tell you what. I’ll go steal a baby somewhere. Maybe even a *couple* of brats. I’ll bring them back here and you can take care of them. Will that do?”

“Think how sad their mothers will be if you steal them.”

“Oh no, my sweet, dear, innocent child, not everyone’s like you. Some of these poor peasants have more little ones than they can afford to feed. They’d be happy if someone took a few of them off their hands. If you like, I won’t steal them; I’ll buy them, pay more than they’re worth. How’s that?”

“Thank you, dear father, but I wouldn’t know how to take care of their children. What would I do with them down here? I’d have to teach them to breathe underwater, and if I didn’t do it right they’d drown.”

“Children can learn anything if they start young enough. And if they drown, I’ll get you some more.”

“Oh, you’re too good to me, and I do love you,” said Calliroa. “But let me think about it a little.”

“And you won’t try to run off and get married in the meantime, will you?”

“I won’t. I promise.”

The War God

Rumors spread through Thessaly and beyond of the ferocious river god and his beautiful naiad daughter. The news reached Mount Olympus, where the high gods dwelt, and came to the attention of Ares, Lord of Battles.

Now, Ares, like his father, Zeus, was interested in nymphs of every variety—naiad, dryad, Nereid—and when he wasn't making war, he was hunting them through the woodlands and waterways of the world. Nevertheless, his appetite for fighting was even greater. While he very much liked what he heard of the beautiful Calliroa, the idea of fighting her father intrigued him even more.

All the gods are big, but Ares was the biggest. In full armor he looked like a tower of bronze. The blade of his battle-ax was as large as a millstone. The shaft of his spear was an entire ash tree, trimmed. His spear point was longer than any ordinary sword. Eight black horses drew his enormous war chariot. They had been sired by Apollo's fire-maned stallions who drew the sun-chariot across the blue meadow of the sky. They were larger than elephants, and swifter than stags.

Ares happened to be between wars when he first heard of the river god's daughter, and he was eager for adventure. He leaped into his chariot and shouted "Go!" Ares never had to use a whip; his voice was enough. The stallions galloped down the slope of Mount Olympus, the great brass chariot trundling behind them, crushing rocks under its wheels. The horses thundered onto the wide Thessalian plain, then headed east by south toward a bend in the river where Castelos and Calliroa dwelt.

Sounds change as they pass through water, and the sounds now drifting down to the cave of Castelos were not muted but filtered, made musical. What the naiad heard was unlike anything she had ever heard before: a

clanging as of a great gong being struck, again and again, growing louder as she listened. Her father had always warned her to remain in the cave when she heard strangers approaching, but this time she had to see for herself. Swiftly, before he could tell her not to, she slipped out of the cave and slid to the surface. She hid herself among the reeds along the shore and peeked out.

A great, dazzling shape swelled against the tree line. It was as if a piece of the sun itself had fallen and was rolling toward the river. There were horses; she heard bugling, heard someone shouting, but everything was lost in the huge brightness. The clangor grew louder and louder; it was like being inside a bell.

Calliroa squinted, trying to pierce the brightness. She saw a chariot, larger than any she had ever known, drawn by eight gigantic black stallions. They were rearing up at the riverbank, huffing and snorting. She saw a giant dismount and stride to the edge of the water. The sun bounced off his helmet, his breastplate, his greaves. He was a pillar of fire.

Calliroa knew that he had come for her and she was seized by terror. The very sight of him was too much to bear. He seemed to be crushing the life out of her, just standing there on the shore.

But the god didn't call for her; he called for her father. He put his huge, gauntleted hands to his mouth and bellowed. His voice seemed to roll off the hills, filling valley and plain: "River, river, give me your daughter! River, river, I want her now!"

Ares stood on the shore, waiting for the river god to answer his challenge. He was beginning to boil with the joyous rage he always felt before battle. He hoped that Castelos would not choose to yield his daughter peaceably but would fight for her.

Ares was not disappointed.

Out of the river rose Castelos in the first of his transformations: the giant snapping turtle. Like a living discus it spun toward the war god. The enormous creature skidded onto the bank, poked out its leathery head, and advanced. Ares laughed and struck with his spear haft, trying to smash the turtle's shell. To his amazement, it violated all rules of turtle behavior by leaping off the ground, catching the spear haft in its jaws, and snapping it in two.

But the war god's reflexes were incredibly fast; he actually thought with his body. He dropped his spear, shifted his grip, and swung his battle-ax. It struck the turtle and split its shell. He struck again with the flat of the ax. But the turtle scuttled free of its shell, and moving as swiftly as a lizard, slithered into the water, unharmed.

Ares waded in after it, but stopped when he saw a gigantic sickle-fish rising to the surface. The war god was in a battle fever now, moving faster than his size would seem to allow. His bronze-gloved hand shot out, seized the curved horn blade that gave the sickle-fish its name, and whipped the fish up and down, smacking its body against the water. The horn snapped off. Ares took it up and flung it like a javelin, but missed, for the fish had already slid down into the depths.

Ares climbed back onto the riverbank and jeered, "Is that the best you can do, Castelos? Slimy little reptiles and freakish fish? Come on out and fight in your own form!"

But before he could finish his challenge, Ares found himself knee-deep in water. The river had begun to rise. Castelos had gone into his worst rage, which no one had ever survived. He was in flood.

Ares heard his stallions neighing. They were hock-deep in the rising water and could not gallop away because the massive chariot had begun to fill with water, making it too heavy to budge. Ares raised his ax and with one blow slashed the traces, freeing the horses. He leaped onto one of them, and the whole string galloped off toward high land. The river rolled in pursuit, bending trees, tossing huge boulders like pebbles, raging after the fleeing war god.

When the fighting had started, Calliroa had returned to the depths and hidden in the cave. Now, her father came to her and said, "He will be back, you know."

"But you defeated him, father. You chased him away."

"He will be back. Ares cannot allow himself to be defeated. He is the spirit of battle itself. He will call up his cousins, the Hundred-handed Giants. They will come over the mountains, every one of them carrying a boulder in each of his hundred hands. They will stand safely on the hills and hurl those boulders down upon me in a great shower of rocks. They will choke me. I shall not be able to flow; I shall be nothing but a heap of rocks

along my entire length, and there shall I abide, dried up and useless underneath.”

“Then,” said Calliroa, “you must give me to him. Perhaps he will weary of me soon and let me come back to you.”

“Never,” said Castelos. “I will never give you to that raging brute. You must flee, my darling. Vanish. Hide. You are a water nymph; you have all the rivers and lakes and fountains of the world to hide in. So do so. Go now.”

“But what about you, father? I can’t leave you to be destroyed.”

“Perhaps I won’t be,” replied the river god. “Perhaps when he learns that you have vanished he will forget about me. There are, after all, many nymphs to chase, many feuds to plant, many wars to wage. I’m only a little enemy in the scheme of things. But you must not tarry here. Go to sleep now. Refresh yourself for your journey. And by the first light of dawn, depart.”

Calliroa flung herself, weeping, into his arms. Castelos stroked her face with his great, misty hand and cast her into a deep sleep.

Queen of the Pygmies

That night Calliroa dreamed of another river, a wide, slow one, cutting across a great stretch of plain. There were palm trees and animals with humps along its shores. She was somewhere beyond the scene, watching it. The river traffic was unlike any she had ever seen. Boats spread brown sails to catch the wind, which blew directly upstream. Other boats, barges, and rafts floated lazily downstream, their sails furled. And she understood that with the wind blowing steadily one way and the river current running the other way, one could spend an entire life on the river, sailing upstream, drifting downstream.

Now she was in the water, drifting with the current. It was much warmer than her own river, and less swift. The sun was a brass ball; the air burned. She was floating through shoals of sleep.

The river seemed to broaden now, weaving among a chain of small islands. On these patches of land were huts about the size of the doll houses she had made of twigs back home. Tiny people were launching boats no larger than the baskets used by the women of Thessaly when they came down to the river to wash their clothes.

Calliroa stood up in the river. The water came only to her hips. Tall and feeling taller, gleaming with wetness, she strode toward the little houses. A basket boat bobbed beside her. It floated into her shadow. Three faces stared up at her in amazement. She stooped swiftly, caught up the basket, and waded toward one of the little islands.

On reaching shore, Calliroa sat gently on the roof of the largest hut. The boatmen leaped out of the basket and perched on her wet shoulders. Others swung on her wet hair. She tumbled them into her lap and held them there. They tried to wriggle free, but she tickled them into submission.

One by one she turned the little people over in her hands, examining them carefully. They were pygmies but not potbellied or misshapen. She felt herself filling with strange, powerful joy as they squirmed in her grasp. Somehow, she had been granted a villageful of living dolls to play with, not infants, but frisky adults, her own age and older.

They would be hers, these little people; she was the queen they had been waiting for since the beginning of time. She would live among them, defend them, rule them, reward and punish them, and be loved by them always.

Calliroa awoke in her father's cave under the river. But she was still in the grip of her dream; it hung its vapors about her as she prepared to leave. And, she realized, it was giving her a place to go.

She swam eastward down her father's river until it entered a gulf, then southward into the Middle Sea, and continued swimming southeast. Moving instinctively as a fish, she glided through those waters until she came to one hot shore where entered the wide, slow river of her dream. She swam upstream and discovered with joy that the vision sent to her was indeed a reality.

There, along the shore, ran a chain of islands. On one of the islands stood little houses. She saw tiny people launching basket boats. She rose from the water and waded toward them, and heard their thin voices crying out in welcome.

A Vengeful Goddess

The tattle-bird was framed by nature for spying. It had eyes as sharp as a hawk's; no sound escaped it; and the underparts of its wings and body were the exact blue of the sky, allowing it to hover overhead without being seen. Hera, Queen of the Gods, who was always burning with curiosity about the activities of her fellow gods, employed a flock of these tattle-birds and rewarded them richly for their information. She had her gardener save the fattest worms for the birds, and forbade anyone to hunt them.

One perched now on Hera's shoulder. "Have you news for me, little bird?" the goddess asked.

"I do, I do," replied the bird. "You know the cranes and the pygmies of the Nile delta wage ceaseless war against one another."

"Do they now?" said Hera. "Well, that's an informative piece of natural history, no doubt, but I fail to see where it holds much interest for me. Have you no meatier news than that, little bird?"

"Patience, goddess, patience. I mention the cranes because it was one of them who told me what I am about to tell you. It seems that the pygmies are now ruled by a naiad who arose from the river one day and made herself their queen. She's tall and beautiful, and they worship her."

"Worship?" said Hera coldly. "Worship is reserved for the gods."

"Exactly why I knew this would interest you," said the tattle-bird. "For the pygmies are saying that their queen is more beautiful and regal than any goddess, even you, O Hera."

"They do, do they? Well, when I get through with that Egyptian slut, nobody will be saying she's beautiful."

"She's not Egyptian. She's from Thessaly," said the bird.

"Thessaly? Then why is she in Egypt, playing around with those pygmies?"

“She fled there.”

“Whom was she fleeing?”

“Well, this will interest you too. Her pursuer was your son, Ares.”

“She spurned Ares?”

“She did. Her father defied your son. And the naiad fled all the way to Egypt, where she’s been hiding ever since.”

“Well, this works out nicely, doesn’t it,” said Hera. “I was going to send my Hundred-handed Giants to hold her prisoner there until I could figure out a suitable punishment. Now, I’ll simply send Ares after her. Any close contact with him is punishment enough, especially after he’s been rejected.”

“Then you are satisfied with this tidbit I’ve picked up?”

“You’ve done well, little bird. Off with you to my gardener now, and he’ll give you a spadeful of his fattest worms.”

The tattle-bird flew away, and Hera sent for her son. But her messenger came back without him, reporting that Ares was on the other side of the world, igniting a war, a big one, big enough to keep him away for several months.

“Well,” said Hera to herself. “What do I do now? Wait for Ares to return? In the meantime she’ll be queening it over that scurvy mob of pygmies who call her goddess. This I cannot endure. I can’t wait for Ares. I’ll finish her off immediately. I’ll send my giants now.”

“Who has aroused your wrath *today*?” asked a creaking voice.

Hera whirled about. It was Atropos, the eldest Fate, who moved as softly as a spider when she wanted to. Hera was hot-tempered and imperious. But no one ever refused to answer destiny’s Hag.

“Tell me, lady,” said Atropos. “Whom are you planning to finish off now?”

“An impudent naiad named Calliroa,” replied Hera, “who rules over a tribe of Egyptian pygmies and dares to be worshiped as a goddess.”

“I can see where that would enrage you. But allow me to ask you this. Whom do you hate more, Calliroa or Hercules?”

“Can there be any doubt?” answered Hera. “I intensely dislike this conceited water nymph, but I positively loathe Hercules, more than anyone else in the world!”

“Then you must restrain your wrath for the moment. Do not kill the naiad.”

“Why not?”

“Because she is fated to produce a monster whom no one can kill, not even the hero, Hercules.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am surety itself, my dear. As I decipher the tangled threads of destiny, this is what they seem to say: ‘The monster that Calliroa will bear shall meet death at the hands of no one else.’”

“Very well,” said Hera, “I shall refrain from killing her and shall welcome that monster when he makes his appearance. What is he to be called, by the way?”

“Geryon,” said the Hag. “And you won’t be disappointed in him.”

Atropos then departed as silently as she had come.

“Nonetheless,” said Hera to herself, “I can’t let Calliroa go on sunning herself on that Egyptian islet, being adored by those damned pygmies. I won’t kill her yet, but I’ll put her somewhere where she’ll be less admired, and a lot less comfortable.”

Whereupon Hera sent for two of her Hundred-handed Giants and told them what to do.

Abduction

The pygmies were frantic. Their queen had disappeared. The night before she had bedded herself down as usual before the mud walls of the village. And, since her arrival, they had not bothered to post sentries at their gates. The naiad, they knew, was big enough and strong enough to drive away any marauding cranes. She had retired as usual the night before, and the village too had slept, only to awaken and find her gone.

There were no signs of struggle, there had been no cries for help, and they could find no trace of anything unusual except some big shallow dents in the mud, too long and wide to be footprints.

The pygmies were baffled. They hunted high and low. In their desperation they grew careless and sailed too far upstream in their basket boats. They were attacked by cranes and lost several of their best boatmen.

For days, the pygmies continued their search in vain. But their beloved queen was nowhere to be found. What they did not realize, of course, was that the trenches in the earth were indeed footprints left by the giants who had come in the night to seize the naiad. The pygmies were unable to imagine that any feet could be big enough to leave such prints.

“She’ll come back one day,” they reassured one another. “She appeared out of nowhere once, rising from the river mist, and she’ll appear again as swiftly and magically as she did before.”

So the pygmies waited, and waited, and swore to themselves they would wait forever.

The Hundred-handed Giants, obeying Hera, stole the naiad out of Egypt and bore her away to a punishment pen in Thrace, a land sacred to Ares.

This place did not look like a prison; at first sight it resembled a garden. But it was a garden that grew only two things—a jailer-vine that wrapped

itself about anyone who tried to escape, and held the fugitive as securely as chains; and a punitive thornbush that could hobble about on its roots, striking with its thorny branches and flogging the vine-wrapped prisoner.

Calliroa saw one would-be escapee caught by the vine and flogged to bloody ribbons by the thornbush, and she was filled with terror. Nevertheless, she was determined to leave the garden, for Ares had returned from his latest war and was visiting her regularly now—and she loathed him.

Remembering her life with the devoted pygmies, she hated the huge, brutal Ares even more. She would try to escape, she resolved, and would risk being flogged to death. Calliroa devised a plan.

The next time Ares visited her, she dodged his embrace and raced away. He hurtled after her. She ran straight for the vine and almost into it, then swerved suddenly. Ares, closing upon her, charged into the jailer-vine, which immediately wrapped itself about the war god, binding him tight, weaving loop upon loop, so that the harder he struggled the more he entangled himself.

The thornbush, dutiful but without intelligence, hobbled over and began to flog Ares with its bramble whip. The naiad heard him bellowing with pain as she slipped out of the prison-garden and vanished among the trees.

Thenceforth, Calliroa lived in the woods like a dryad. Although longing for her father, she did not wish to go to him until she had borne the child she knew she was carrying. Some instinct directed her to seek solitude. She found a grove of trees and there gave birth.

When Calliroa saw what had been born to her she uttered a despairing shriek and fell into a swoon from which she did not awake for three days. Had the baby been an ordinary infant, it would have starved to death or been eaten by wild beasts. But it grew with monstrous speed, and by the end of the first day was able to crawl into the forest on its hands and knees. Since it had six hands and six knees, it scuttled along quite swiftly.

It, or they, were what might be called Siamese triplets, three complete bodies joined at the waist. The faces were bestial, with identical bulbous snouts, little pig eyes, and teeth so big their lips could not close.

Once in the forest this three-bodied monster, whom the Fates had named Geryon, began to hunt small game and caught enough to keep growing until

he could hunt larger game.

As for Calliroa, she realized that the curse spoken by the offended Hags so long ago had finally ripened within her own body. Wracked by grief and self-loathing, she wandered from the grove where she had borne her terrible babe.

Geryon kept to the forest, teaching himself to hunt. He was able to kill small deer now, and to protect his kill from all but bear and lions. He was completely solitary, but living in triplicate, as it were, needed no other company. His solitude, nevertheless, was soon to be broken.

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The First Massacre

Hera had been keeping an eye on Geryon since his birth, several eyes in fact. She sent her tattletails to observe him and report on his progress.

Then, when Geryon was seven years old, Hera sent for him. She shuddered when the three-bodied child shambled into the palace on Olympus, but she controlled herself and spoke in a calm and friendly way.

“You are old enough now,” she announced, “to start on your life’s work.”

“I know I’m a monster,” said Geryon. “And I’m ready to start doing monstrous things.”

“Very good. You shall go to Egypt immediately. Follow the Nile southward to where it flows around a chain of islands near its western bank. On one of these islands pygmies dwell. That place shall be your first killing ground. I want you to wipe out the entire settlement.”

“Any particular way?” asked Geryon.

“Any that appeals to you. If there are too many to dispose of single-handed, you can always feed them to their enemies, the cranes. I’ll expect you back here in two weeks’ time with a full report on your activities. And I want to hear that the entire little pestilential nation has been wiped off the face of the earth.”

“Thank you, your majesty. Farewell.”

For the first few days, Geryon had good sport. He would cut off one pygmy from the rest, run him down, pluck him off the ground, and kill him with a chopping blow to the neck. Then he would stick the body into his bag, and set off after another. When he had taken five or six, he would skin them, spit them, and roast them over an open fire. All the exercise made him hungry.

After three days, however, Geryon wearied of pygmy flesh, and the little creatures were so easy to catch, and so helpless when caught, that hunting them was no longer any fun. So he decided to finish off the entire village in one stroke.

Wading into the river, he ripped a huge net from one of the moored fishing boats and dragged it in to shore. That night he crept up to the pygmy settlement and crouched in the darkness, watching the sentinels make their rounds. Geryon grunted, reached out with his six hands and strangled all six sentries; then he cast his net over the entire village.

He slung the net over his shoulder and bore the struggling, shrieking pygmies—men, women, and children—to a marsh where dwelt their enemies, the cranes. He had broken off a tree as he went, and was using it as a staff. Now he drove the staff into the mud, and hung the net from it; then he squatted in the brackish warm water, waiting for the cranes.

Finally he saw the great birds dipping toward him. They hovered briefly, then dived, stabbing their beaks into the bulging net like wasps attacking rotten fruit. He watched for a while, then left. Slogging away through the marshy ground, he heard the screams of the pygmies mingling with the cries of the hungry birds.

Back on Olympus, Hera praised him for the way he had handled his first assignment. Geryon listened expressionlessly, but he was pleased. It was his first massacre. It gave him a taste for murder which grew as he grew. And he was growing very fast.

The River's Ally

Calliroa returned to her father. He tried to kiss her tears, but they flowed even faster.

“Why do you weep, my daughter?” Castelos asked.

“Oh father, I have given birth to a monster.”

“Do not reproach yourself,” he soothed. “Monsters may have very worthy parents. Think of Gaia, the great earth goddess, mother of us all. Did she not bear those primal monsters, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-handed Giants?”

“But Geryon is already full-grown!” cried Calliroa. “And he’s a killer. He steals cattle and kills their owners if they resist, and even if they don’t. Everywhere he goes, he leaves a wake of corpses in his path. And now, I know, he will come here, and carry out the vengeance of the Hags by slaughtering people on your shores, fouling your waters forever.”

“Unless he’s stopped,” said Castelos.

“Who can stop him?”

“Do you know of Hercules?”

“The young hero? He’s a son of Zeus, isn’t he?”

“But not of his wife, Hera,” said Castelos. “The jealous goddess hates Hercules and has condemned him to twelve labors. He has to fight the world’s worst monsters. Hera’s hope is that one of them will kill Hercules, but none of them have been able to, at least not yet.”

“But father, what does he have to do with us?”

“I’ve asked him to challenge your son, Geryon.”

“Will he be able to—with all those other monsters he has to fight?”

“I’m doing him a big favor in exchange.” And the river god proceeded to tell his daughter about his meeting with Hercules.

Some days before, Castelos had recognized the young hero walking along his shore and had risen from the water in his own form.

“Greetings, Hercules,” said Castelos.

“Greetings, whoever you are,” answered Hercules.

“I am Castelos. I rule this river.”

“I commend you, Castelos. Your stream is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen.”

“I mean to keep it that way,” said the river god. “But I need your help. I can help you in return.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve heard about your next labor, which is to clean out the stables of Augeas.”

“Yes,” said Hercules. “That is my next task. And I would prefer to fight any monster you can name than to go within ten miles of that dung heap he calls a farm. Augeas is the supreme slob of the Western world. He keeps two hundred head of cattle tightly penned and hasn’t mucked out the place in more than twenty years. There’s policy behind all this. He craves his neighbors’ property, but he is too lazy to steal; so he simply stinks them out and takes their acreage as they leave. Now the task set before me is to clean the stables in one day, leaving them spotless.”

“And that’s what I’m going to help you do,” said Castelos.

“How?”

“I have a reputation for belligerence. I used to drive away my daughter’s suitors by turning into other forms—snapping turtle, sickle-fish, whip-snake, and so on. When my enemy was especially strong I would strike as a flood. I would rise and rise, overflow my banks, and rage across the countryside. Now, I can do the same for you, not as an enemy, but as a friend. You shall appear to provoke me, just so we may deceive Hera, and I shall go into flood, hurl my waters after you across the fields, and follow you into the Augean valley. You will race across the barnyard, through the stables, and the waters will sluice through that filthy place, washing everything clean. The flood will then withdraw so swiftly that not a cow shall drown. Yes, I’ll shrink back between my banks, and your task will be done.”

“Why, that’s brilliant!” cried Hercules. “I accept. Just one thing: give me a day to warn the people of the region so that they may retreat to higher

ground.”

“Good,” said the river god. “I’ll be ready whenever you are.”

“And what favor do you seek in return?” asked Hercules.

“I am threatened by the three-bodied monster, Geryon, who happens by evil chance to be my own grandson. Carrying out a vengeful edict of the Fates, he means to indulge in murder along my shores, fouling my water with blood and poisoning me forever.”

“And you want me to fight Geryon—stop him, somehow?”

“Yes.”

“It has been foretold that he can be killed by no one else. You are aware of that, aren’t you?”

“It will not be an easy task,” said Castelos. “But none of your tasks have been easy, have they?”

“Never mind, I’ll try it,” said Hercules. “It has already been decreed that I combat Geryon and take back the cattle he has stolen. Help me clean up the filthy stables, and I’ll do what I can against the three-bodied monster.”

And that was our entire conversation,” said Castelos to his daughter. “I help him tomorrow. The very next day he will go after Geryon.”

Geryon sought Hera and found her in the Garden of the Gods on the sunny slope of Mount Olympus. “Your friend Hercules is after me,” he told her.

“Indeed?” said Hera. “On his own? I meant you to be one of his labors—his last I hoped.”

“Well, he seems to be planning this on his own. My dear grandfather, Castelos, has pleaded with Hercules to slay me before I fulfill the prophecy and turn his proud river into a foul, bloody trickle choked with corpses.”

“You’re ready for Hercules, aren’t you?” asked Hera. “You’re confident of overcoming him, I trust.”

“Confident? The Nemean Lion was confident. And the Hydra too, no doubt. And they’re both very dead.”

“But the Fates have assured me that no one can kill you.”

“Perhaps not. But there are no assurances that I can’t be severely damaged.”

“Geryon, is it possible that you’re afraid of Hercules?” asked Hera.

“I don’t know what fear is, majesty. No one ever taught me to be afraid. But I owe my string of victories not to obvious physical advantages but to

the fact I weigh every detail before joining battle to make sure that I gain every possible advantage. In other words, goddess, I have begun to put together a plan of attack, and I want your help.”

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll do what I can,” said Hera.

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Send A Storm!

About ten miles off the eastern coast of Thessaly was an island that grew the most succulent grass in that part of the world. Here grazed sleek red cattle that were the envy of herdsman everywhere.

This island had been ruled for many years by a kindly old man, known as the Old Drover, who was an expert in the ways of animals. One day Geryon had decided that the island would be a good place for him to live, at least for a while. He swam out to the island at night, climbed ashore, made his way to the palace, and slaughtered everyone in it—the Old Drover, his wife, his nine children, and his twenty-two grandchildren. Geryon spared only the servants, whom he meant to enslave and whom he threatened with death if they tried to escape.

Thereafter, Geryon dwelt on the island and increased his herds by a very simple method. He raided the mainland and robbed the coastal farms of their cattle, killing anyone who objected.

Hercules stood now upon a rocky beach on the eastern coast of Thessaly and stared over the sea, trying to make out the shore of Geryon's island in the gathering dusk. But it was too dark. He still had a decision to make—whether to wear his lion-skin armor and lion-head helmet. This gear could turn aside any blade and was therefore very useful in battle. But it made swimming difficult. And he preferred to swim to the island rather than use a boat because he wanted to slip ashore unseen and take Geryon by surprise.

“Well,” he said to himself. “I'm too tired to swim now in any case. I'll go to sleep right here, and perhaps when morning comes I'll know what to do. Sleep sometimes confers wisdom.”

Using the lion skin as a blanket against the night wind, Hercules curled up and fell asleep. He had no idea that he was being watched.

Hera stood on Olympus gazing down on the darkening coast. Next to her stood her brother Poseidon. The stormy-tempered god of the sea had always held a special affection for Hera and was always ready to do her a favor.

“See down there,” said Hera. “That one, wrapped in a lion skin, sleeping on the headland?”

“I see him,” said Poseidon. “Is he human? No, he can’t be. Too big.”

“That’s Hercules,” said Hera. “He’s the one I loathe most in all the world, for he was spawned by my husband Zeus and his mother was the woman I despise beyond all others. In the morning Hercules means to swim to Geryon’s island and challenge the monster.”

“This Hercules has something of a reputation,” said Poseidon. “But I should think Geryon would be able to handle him without too much trouble. Why, each of his three bodies is twice as big as Hercules. No one can stand up against such a beast.”

“That may be. Nevertheless, Geryon himself has asked me to help him by crippling Hercules before the fight.”

“How do you propose to go about that, dear sister?”

“By asking your help, dear brother.”

“Ah, I thought this was no idle conversation. And how do you propose that I go about crippling that stalwart young fellow?”

“He lies now on that spit of land poking into your sea—the sea that you rule so absolutely, and can magnify or diminish at your will. This is what I want you to do. Whip up a storm. Send your waves rolling over that beach. Tear it off the mainland. Sweep it out to sea. Hercules will find himself on a patch of land that is rapidly shrinking. He will be forced to dive off and swim. When he dives, I want him to find himself among a school of hungry sharks, which you will have summoned.”

“Hercules won’t be easy prey, even for sharks,” said the sea god.

“He can’t possibly fight as well in the water as he does on land,” said Hera. “At the very least they should be able to chew him up enough so that he won’t be in any shape to fight a monster like Geryon. Will you do this, dearest brother, dearest friend?”

“Anything for you, my sister. I just hope it works out as well as you think.”

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The Trial of Hercules

Hercules' lion-skin armor had been an unexpected bonus of his first great victory, slaying the Nemean lion. That lion had been considered invincible, and indeed had devoured everyone who dared to challenge it. It was large as an elephant with teeth like ivory daggers. Its claws were razor-sharp hooks, and its hide could not be pierced by sword, spear, or arrow.

After a great struggle, however, Hercules had managed to kill the beast, and had helped himself to its skin, which he first used as a weatherproof tent. Upon the occasion of his second labor, which was to kill the Hydra, he had decided to cut up the skin. A complete suit of armor was necessary to protect him, for Hydra poison was much more deadly than the strongest snake venom. So he had fashioned himself garments of lion's hide—rough trousers that covered the lower part of his body, a jacket with long sleeves, boots, and gauntlets. His helmet was the lion's head.

This armor immediately proved its worth. In his battle with the hundred-headed Hydra it had turned aside every one of a thousand vicious bites, and had enabled Hercules to slay his second monster.

Now, asleep upon the headland, Hercules was awakened by a terrible windstorm, which he had no way of knowing was aimed especially at him. He donned his armor. The lion skin kept him dry in the lashing rain, and its weight helped anchor him against the savage gusts. The rain turned to hail. Stones of ice pelted down at him. Any one of them could have shattered a man's skull, but they bounced harmlessly off the lion's head that was his helmet.

He watched the trees sway around him, heard them crack, saw them fall. The sea had risen so fast that it was impossible for him to race back over

the neck of beach that led to the mainland. Waves were already dashing over it. Hercules was forced to stay where he was.

The headland where he had camped for the night was actually a low hill overlooking the sea. Then, suddenly, it was *at sea*. To please the vengeful Hera, Poseidon had packed three winds into a whirling cyclone and sent it spinning toward Hercules. It tore the spit of land away from the mainland and sent it scudding out into the ocean.

There was nothing Hercules could do. He planted himself there in his lion skin, trying to hold his footing and beginning to understand that such a storm was no freak of the weather but a god's spite—and he knew whose.

The wind dropped as suddenly as it had risen. The moon swam in a rift of cloud. Stars appeared. But the island was still rocking. He saw that the water was churning though there was no wind.

Then, something gigantic rose to the surface. Up, up it came—the huge glistening oval of a fish head—a fish of unbelievable size. It was a shark as big as a whale. It slid out of the water and towered above Hercules.

The terrible jaws gaped; the triple rows of teeth gleamed in the moonlight. Hercules retreated toward the center of his earth raft. The shark slid back into the water and began to circle him, whipping the surface to a froth.

Now, sharks—however large—can slip through the water without making a ripple if they wish. But this one was swimming untypically, and Hercules wondered why it was beating its tail and making such a froth. Then he realized that the churning water was making his island dwindle. Great clumps of soil were slipping off the edge and dissolving in the sea.

“This will never do,” thought Hercules. “If the island goes and I end up in the water with that fellow, he’ll have every advantage. I won’t stand a chance. I don’t exactly relish the prospect of meeting him out of the water, but it’s definitely preferable. Of course, it would be best to get away from him completely. But how? Maybe I can move this patch of earth through the water and get back to the mainland. I can’t have blown far.”

Hercules picked up a fallen tree and swiftly broke off its smaller branches. He then took the entire tree to the edge of the water and began to use it as an oar, paddling what was left of his island back toward the mainland.

The water had become still. “Where’s the shark?” he thought. “Have I lost him?” Then he knew he had not. His oar snapped in his hand. The shark’s jaws closed on the thick trunk and broke it as if it were a twig. Hercules hurled the stump of the tree at the shark and retreated hastily from the water’s edge.

“This will get me exactly nowhere,” he said to himself. “I’ll have to fight the brute. But I’m determined not to fight him in the water.”

Thereupon, he knelt and thrust his arm into the sea. That arm, of course, was encased in a lion-skin sleeve, and the hand wore a gauntlet. He felt the great jaws close upon it. He had expected this. But he knew that the shark’s teeth, sharp as they were, could not pierce his sleeve. What he had not counted on was the enormous strength of the jaws. While the teeth were unable to pierce through the lion skin, the jaws could crush. Hercules felt the incredible pressure on his arm; it was being crushed to jelly inside the armored sleeve.

He swelled his bicep and tried to will every small muscle—in arm, and wrist, and hand—to strain against the viselike grip. Bracing himself on his knees and exerting the last tatters of his strength, he swung his arm out of the water, pulling the shark with it.

With his other hand, encased in its lion-skin gauntlet, Hercules smashed at the shark’s face. Struck again and again, great blows of the fist that had once knocked down a stone wall and then smashed the helmeted heads of the warriors hiding behind the wall. That fist was now pounding at the shark, breaking every bone in its rubbery head. Its eyes began to bleed. Its jaws slackened. It was dying. Hercules pulled his arm from the loose jaws, and swept the shark into the water. It turned belly up and floated away. Hercules picked up the tree that had been his oar and started paddling again, pushing his patch of earth, much shrunken now, toward a dark place looming upon the moonlit sea. It was an island, he knew, but he wasn’t sure which one. This gulf was dotted with islands. He hoped it was not the one where Geryon dwelt. After fighting the shark, he felt he needed a few hours’ sleep before meeting the three-bodied monster.

His clump of earth was dwindling rapidly now as Hercules poled it forward with mighty thrusts of the tree trunk. Finally, he reached shallow waters. But he didn’t want to swim the remaining distance; there might be another gigantic shark lurking nearby.

Now he felt the last bit of earth crumbling under his feet. He flexed his knees and jumped off with all the power of his mighty thighs. The lion-skin armor was heavy upon him, and he carried spear and sword, bow and arrows. Nevertheless, he leaped through the air and skimmed over the offshore rocks, landing in the tidal pools.

Swiftly he waded onto the beach. Fatigue overwhelmed him. He sank to his knees. But he could not allow himself to stop here. The tide was coming in. With the last dregs of his will he forced himself to crawl up on the beach beyond the tide line and then fell into an exhausted sleep.

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Clam and Gull

Hercules awoke at dawn, fully refreshed. For no matter how drained of strength he was, this son of Zeus could always replenish himself with a current of his father's energy, that magical voltage that branded the sky with blue lightning.

With strength restored, Hercules took stock of his surroundings. He had landed on a small islet, he saw. A hot, red tab of sun was pushing up over the eastern rim of the earth. It was going to be a brilliant summer day. Looking south, he saw another, larger island some miles away. As the sun climbed, he could see hills upon this island, low hills, thickly wooded, running down into grassy meadows and then to the sea.

Shapes moved upon the meadow; their slow, smooth pace and bulk told Hercules they were cattle. "That must be Geryon's island," he said to himself. "And those are his cattle grazing. But how am I to get there? I'm not going to swim. One giant shark is enough to last me for a while. My arm still feels half crushed.... But what strangeness is this? All creatures are magnified here, just as the shark was. Those birds up there; they fly like gulls, and their cry is a gull's cry, but they are larger than eagles!"

Indeed, every living creature was monstrously enlarged—for Hera had asked this of Poseidon and the sea god had done as she wished. Hercules was staring at a clam the size of a chariot wheel. The thing was alive, for it was spouting water and beginning to dig itself into the wet sand, sinking out of sight as he watched.

"Oh, no you don't!" cried Hercules. "I have need of you!"

He drew his sword and rushed at the clam. He pried open its shell, then studied what was inside. Hercules never killed any creature unnecessarily. Using his sword as delicately as a surgeon's scalpel, he swiftly severed the tendons, slid the blade under, and flipped the naked clam out of its shell.

“Sorry to evict you, my friend,” said Hercules, “but I must borrow your dwelling place.”

He watched the blob of phlegm that was the naked clam wobble toward the sea. A gull dived, screaming. But the clam slithered safely into the water.

“Yes,” said Hercules. “I think my idea may work.”

He lifted the two massive clamshells and carried them to the edge of the water. There he washed them out thoroughly and scrubbed them with sand, then rinsed them again. Finally, he climbed into one of the shells and closed the other over himself, pulling the two tightly together.

Something hard struck the shell, almost deafening him. But he had expected the shock and braced himself. He felt the shell rising, felt himself being lifted into the air. This is exactly what he had wanted. For gulls, he knew, loved clam meat but were able to break the shells open in only one way, by dropping them onto the rocks. He had noted that the incoming tide had covered the rocks of this islet, but that Geryon’s shore was very rocky, girded by tall boulders whose tops poked above the swelling waters. And he had calculated that the only place a gull could break a clam was upon Geryon’s shore.

Hercules lay curled in the darkness as he felt himself rushing through the air. “It’s working!” he said to himself. “And I’ve assured myself safe passage, at least as far as the sharks are concerned. All I have to do now is survive the crash when the gull drops me. But it must be flying lower than usual; with me inside, this clam is very heavy.” No sooner had he finished this thought, when he heard the gull scream and felt himself fall. The shell dropped heavily and shattered on the rocks.

Hercules did not rise but lay sprawled among the fragments of clamshell. The lion-skull helmet had protected his head; nevertheless, he had hit the rocks with such force that he was knocked unconscious.

He did not feel the gulls’ claws striking his armor nor hear them scream as they quarreled over his body. For gulls are thievish. When one carries a clam over rocks, others will follow and dive after the falling shell, trying to snatch away the meat before its rightful owner can reach it.

It was only when he felt himself being tugged at that Hercules regained consciousness. But he immediately understood what was happening. The gulls, unable to pierce the lion skin, thought he was inside some sort of

inner shell, and one of them was trying to lift him in order to drop him again.

Hercules clung to the rocks. His weapons had been knocked from his grasp in the fall, but he swung his fists, punched at the birds, and drove them off. One came at him from behind. He whirled just in time to seize the giant bird and wring its neck with one twist of his great gloved hands. When he flung the dead gull on the sand, the others dived at it in their cannibal way, forgetting him.

“Well, gulls,” said Hercules. “I have repaid you poorly for wafting me safely over the shark-swarmed seas, but you should not have returned to the attack.”

He gathered his weapons and struck inland.

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Hero Meets Monster

With the sun beating down hotly, Hercules felt himself basting in his armor. He stripped off the lion-skin garments and carried them. When he came to a hollow tree he hid the armor inside, marking the place in his mind so that he could find it again. Then, he passed through the wood onto a great meadow, and immediately wished he were back inside his armor.

Three enormous dogs were rushing toward him. He was still near the fringe of trees fortunately. With one powerful leap, he was among the lower boughs of an oak. Just in time. As he caught the bough he felt the hot breath of the dogs upon him. Mastiff they were, large as bull calves.

One after the other they leaped up, trying to catch any part of him in their great jaws. But Hercules was just out of their reach. He sat on the bough, considering them. "They're magnificent," he said to himself. "As splendid as the cattle they guard. Geryon certainly knows how to pick his animals. I'd hate to kill them. But I'm afraid they have no such reservations about me."

After pondering this for a while, Hercules drew an arrow from his quiver and studied it. "Pity to do this to a good arrow," he thought to himself, and snapped the sharp head off the shaft.

In those days, archers used short bows of yew or ash and drew the bowstrings only to their chests. But Hercules used a much longer bow made of antelope horn stiffened by copper wire. His arrows were as long as ordinary spears. And he drew the bowstring in a full-armed way, bending the bow almost in two, pulling the string back past his right shoulder. His arrows sped with deadly accuracy and with such force that, hitting a tree, they would bury themselves up to their feathers.

Now, however, he took the headless arrow and drew his bow only halfway. The blunted shaft traveled at half speed and struck one of the dogs

in the rump, knocking it off its feet. It rolled on the ground, yelping in pain, then struggled up, and limped away.

Hercules broke the point off a second arrow and shot it in the same way, hitting the second dog squarely in the nose. This dog, too, rolled on the grass, yelping and whimpering, then scrambled away. Hercules did not have to shoot again. The third dog understood and raced off after his wounded companions.

Hercules waited until they were quite gone, then climbed down from the tree. The cattle, excited by the clamor of the dogs, milled about in a nearby meadow. Hercules decided to circle around the herd instead of passing through it. He still felt stiff and bruised and would have liked to loosen his muscles by wrestling a bull or two, but he also wanted to find Geryon's dwelling place as soon as possible.

He quickly ran over in his mind the things he had to do. "Observe his movements for a full day; study his habits; try to see how he handles himself in a fight—and finally, test that dismal prophecy. For if the prophecy is correct, and some magical mandate says that he cannot be killed, I shall have to avoid direct conflict and try to devise some other way to cope with the monster."

Hercules made his way through the woods until he entered a clearing and knew immediately that he had found Geryon's dwelling place. At first sight, it resembled a cave more than a house, for it was built of huge boulders. It looked like the most ancient of habitations, built in the very dawn of time.

A huge grass sward fronted the dwelling. Hercules saw that Geryon preferred to dine outside. His table was a slab of stone resting on four tree stumps. He saw smoke arising from behind the house, and smelled the savor of meat roasting.

Then he saw something huge shambling out of the stone hovel. Despite all his experience of monsters, Hercules gaped in dismay. For this—or *these*—appeared more fearsome than anything he had encountered before. Each of the three bodies was twice as tall and at least twice as wide as his own.

Hercules watched the monster very closely as it shuffled toward the table. Although Geryon was actually three separate entities bound together at the waist, he still managed to move with absolute coordination, as if one brain were directing all the action. Nevertheless, Hercules noted, the two side bodies could do two entirely different things at once, while the middle body

was pursuing a third activity—and they did not interfere with one another, or betray the least awkwardness. And when they had to move in concert, the separate activities flowed smoothly into a single set of movements.

All this told Hercules that if it ever came to close combat, he would have a most difficult time.

Geryon was seated now. Servants were crossing the grass, bearing trays of food. Hercules had watched greedy creatures before—huge ones that devoured everything in sight—but he had never witnessed gluttony like Geryon's. Every two hours, three cooks and their helpers laid out three different meals on the table. For each body had its own favorite food. The right-hand body craved pork. The middle body liked mutton. And the body on the left preferred goat meat.

“Odd that he doesn't like beef,” thought Hercules. “No one on earth has such fine herds. Perhaps he doesn't want to eat his own cattle.”

One of the servants, setting a haunch of mutton on the table, was unfortunate enough to splatter his master with a bit of gravy. Without rising from his seat, Geryon shot out one of his six hands, caught the man about the neck, and squeezed until the servant's face grew purple and his eyes bulged. Then the hand dropped the dead body to the grass. And not one of the three monster's mouths had ceased chewing for a second.

“I don't want to believe that this ogre can't be killed,” thought Hercules. “I shall have to test the prophecy myself.”

He withdrew into the woods to try his arm and sharpen his aim. He raised his spear and flung it at an oak. The spear passed entirely through the thick bole, splitting it as cleanly as the ax of a woodsman splitting a log. Retrieving his spear, he loped back toward Geryon's house.

The monster was still at the table. His three heads were sprawled on the stone slab; he was asleep, snoring hoarsely. Hercules came closer and hurled his spear with all his force. It cleaved the bright air, then slowed strangely, without dropping, as if the air had suddenly jelled around it. Hercules saw that the air about Geryon's sleeping heads had indeed thickened to a murk. The spear point stopped one inch from the monster's middle head.

The murk cleared; the aspic air faded. The spear dropped to the grass, and all eyes remained shut. “The prophecy does not lie,” thought Hercules. “Some demonic destiny shields him from death.”

He walked back into the shade of the trees. He needed to think. “What I’ve learned about prophecies,” he continued, “is that they don’t always mean exactly what they say. Fate often speaks in code. Now what does this prophecy say precisely? ‘Geryon can’t be killed’.... No, that’s not it. It’s longer than that. ‘Geryon can’t be killed by anyone’.... That’s not right either. ‘Geryon can be killed by no one else.’ That’s it. No one *else*. What does ‘else’ mean? It means another being, another creature, not himself. Himself? But he’s three selves. Hmm.... There’s the seed of an idea in there somewhere.”

Hercules went deeper into the woods, then climbed a hill. He spotted a goat and chased it, springing from boulder to boulder as the animal leaped ahead of him. He cornered it finally in a cleft of rock. It turned and charged him, lowering its big, curved horns, trying to butt him off the hill.

Hercules caught one horn in each hand, swung the goat off the ground, slung it over his shoulder, and carried it down the hill to a place where three paths came together. There he tethered it to a tree and set off into the woods again. He was after wild boar now.

First he returned to the hollow tree where he had hidden his armor, and dug out his lion-skin gauntlets. For a boar is very dangerous to hunt. It is built low to the ground, is one slab of muscle, and moves very fast. Its tusks are deadly weapons. When cornered, it turns and charges.

Now a huge one burst out of the underbrush. As soon as it spotted Hercules, it lowered its head and charged. Hercules reached out his gauntleted hands. Seizing the boar by its tusks, he arose, swinging the beast high and smashing it to the ground, knocking its wind out. It seemed ten times as heavy as the goat when he heaved it onto his shoulders and carried it back to the hill. There he tethered the boar to a tree near where he had tied the goat and ran down the path again to find a sheep.

He came upon a meadow where sheep were grazing, and chose a big ram. Despite its horns, the animal was no fighter. Hercules simply lifted it upon his back and carried it to where he had tethered the other animals, feeling quite weary by the time he had it tied to a third tree. But he could not permit fatigue; he had much to do before he could sleep.

He returned to the clearing and stood in the dappled shade of the trees near the house so that he could see without being seen. Geryon was still at

the table, but awake now, bawling for food. Hercules saw the servants beginning to file out from behind the house.

He raced across the grass, pulled a tray out of the hands of an amazed cook, and carried it toward the table. Standing behind Geryon, he held the tray over him and calmly turned it upside down.

A ten-pound ham hit the middle head. A gallon of hot gravy splashed over the two other heads. Hercules moved around to the front of the table so that the monster could see who had done this to him, then began to run. Geryon sprang after him.

For all the monster's bulk, he was extremely fast. Running on six legs, he could outrace a good horse. But Hercules easily kept ahead of him, holding the same distance between them—speeding up and pulling ahead when the monster came too close, lagging again when he thought they were too far apart.

Geryon would have kept chasing him in any case. The three-bodied monster was in a flaming rage now, not only because he had been assaulted in that unbelievable way but also because he had been running so long. He had missed a meal and was about to miss another. Hunger mixed with rage and clawed at his bellies.

Geryon saw that he could not catch the young man. He scooped up a rock as he ran and hurled it. His aim was good. The rock struck Hercules in the calf. It would have shattered the leg bone of any other man, but Hercules' bones were like iron rods. His flesh, though, could be bruised and his muscles torn. And the stone did wound him.

His leg hurt terribly; the pain slowed him down. Geryon put on a burst of speed and was gaining on Hercules, who angled off now, left the road, and ran across a patch of woodland, leaping over fallen logs. Hercules chose this rough route because he thought that, despite his injured leg, he would be able to out-jump Geryon.

It was true. Forcing himself to ignore the agonizing pain of his leg, he soared over the tangle of fallen trees, while Geryon had to clamber over them. Hercules was able to draw ahead slightly, but he was terribly weary now. He had hunted all day without food or rest, while Geryon had eaten and slept. He knew that he would have to end this chase soon or Geryon would catch up with him and break him to pieces with those six monstrous hands.

Hercules was running uphill now. He swerved and headed for a stream that was tumbling down the slope. He ran straight toward the water, then leaped. He sailed over, landed on the other side, and kept running. Geryon jumped also, but he came down in the middle of the stream and stumbled, trying to regain his footing. He plowed through the water and climbed out onto the other bank.

But now Hercules was well ahead, and racing to where he had tethered the animals. He drew his knife as he ran. When he reached the goat, he slashed its rope, setting the animal free. Raced to the tree where the pig was tied, and cut that rope. Sped to the third tree, and cut the rope that bound the sheep.

But he didn't let them run free. With his last strength Hercules caught them in his arms. He hurled the boar to the left, the goat to the right, and the sheep straight ahead.

The three bodies of Geryon, hurtling toward their enemy, saw food fleeing before them—the favorite food of each body racing away. These bodies were raging with hunger. They were used to eating every two hours and had now missed three meals.

The right-hand body tried to go after the pig; the left-hand body tried to wrench itself away to follow the goat. And the middle body forged ahead after the ram. With three bodies trying to go in three different directions, they went nowhere. They were glued to the spot.

They shook violently, trying to tear free. But the more they tried, the less they could move. Six legs began kicking at one another. Six hands became six fists, pounding at the nearest face. Three sets of teeth tore at each other's shoulders and necks.

Hercules, hiding from behind a tree, watched the three bodies of the giant fight among themselves—doing to Geryon what no one else could do. They broke each other's face bones, kicked each other's legs to a pulp, clawed and butted. Blood bubbled when mouths tried to scream. Geryon fell. He looked like a crab crushed by a rock.

Hercules stood over him and saw that his enemy was dead. "That was it, then," he said. "That was the joker in the prophecy: This monster could be killed by no one *else*. But, torn by conflicting hungers, his selves hating one another, he went to war with himself, destroyed himself. And I'm glad I was able to help."

There was one more thing Hercules had to do. He rounded up Geryon's herds and, aided by mastiffs, drove them down to the sea. The recent storm had felled many trees, and Hercules labored mightily for an entire day, hauling the great trunks down to the beach and lashing them together into gigantic rafts.

He then bound raft to raft, making a long line of barges, and drove the cattle on board. Planting himself on the first raft, he used a tree trunk to paddle the entire string of barges, loaded with cattle, across the strait to the mainland.

Word of Hercules' victory had reached the coastal villages of Thessaly, and a great crowd had come down to the beach to welcome him. Hercules unloaded the herd from the rafts and thanked the people for coming to greet him. He bade those who had been robbed by Geryon to reclaim their cattle.

Hercules was very tired, but happy. He had no way of knowing that the Hags of Fate were hovering above him, for they had made themselves invisible.

"Never mind, sisters," hissed Atropos. "Hercules has tangled our threads and thwarted a doom and gone to a great deal of trouble to preserve the purity of one stupid river. But patiently, patiently, we spin our webs—slowly, patiently, preparing so terrible a death for Hercules that it will be spoken of forever, and strike the fear of Fate into all the generations to come."

HECATE

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For my daughter,
JANET
whose magic hands and healing beauty
make the harpies fly.

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Characters

Monsters

Hecate
(HECK uh tee) Queen of the Harpies

Harpies
(HAHR pihz) Demonic crones who police the underworld

Cyclopes
(SY kloh peez) Powerful one-eyed servants of the gods

**Hundred-
handed
Giants** Also employed by the gods

Serpent A huge snake who works for Hades in Tartarus

Gods

Zeus
(ZOOS) King of the Gods

Hades
(HAY deez) His brother; ruler of the Land Beyond Death

Dionysus
(dy un NY sus) Son of Zeus; the vine god

Artemis
(AHR tuh mihs) Daughter of Zeus; the moon goddess

Mortals

Orpheus
(OR fee uhs) Poet and musician whom death did not silence

Eurydice
(yoo RIHD ih see) His bride

Asclepius
(ass KLEE pee uhs) Son of Apollo, the sun god; father of medicine

Telesphora

(tuh LEHS fuh ruh) Assistant to Asclepius; a magical nurse

Vine-tenders

Countrymen who practice the rites of human sacrifice

Thallo

(THUH loh) A crippled poet

The Tormented

Shades

Souls of the dead

Tantalus

(TAN tuh luhs) A sinner; always desiring, always denied

Tityus

(TIHT ih uhs) A Titan who led a revolt against Zeus

Sisyphus

(SIHS ih fuhs) Another who offended the gods and by result is bound to an endless task

Stone man

A hero who was turned to stone after death

Stone woman His wife, a huntress, also petrified in stone

Animals

Shade of a war-horse Who served loyally in life and in death

Stone dog Who followed his master and mistress into Tartarus

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A Hellish Baffle

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Death's Domain

Hecate was Queen of the Harpies. And what were the Harpies? They were the flying hags who patrolled the holding pens and roasting pits of the Land Beyond Death.

Hecate's mother was a nymph of the Falcon clan, her father an Egyptian panther-god. Those of her victims who survived stammered out different stories. But most sources agree that she looked like a cheetah partially transformed into a woman—long-legged, long armed, with blazing yellow eyes, teeth like ivory knives, and hands and feet tipped with great ripping claws.

Hecate was called the High Hag, a title rather than a description. Though white haired, she was always in the prime of her strength. These white locks straggling about her stern young face only added to the terror of her appearance.

Her wings were ribbed and made of membranous leather, tinged gold, wherein arose the report that she wore brass wings. Her followers, the Harpies, did have brass wings and brass claws and were true hags, with hideous ravaged faces. But she, their queen, was beautiful as a cheetah in mid leap, if that which murders can be described as beautiful.

To understand Hecate's duties, and the workings of that region of hell called Tartarus, we must go back to the beginning of Zeus's reign, when he was still deciding what kind of world he wanted.

He was seated upon his new throne, a royal perch carved out of the rock that formed the peak of Mount Olympus. On a clear day, it appeared to those below that the whole mighty mountain was a throne for the King of the Gods, and the great plain his footstool.

The towering black-robed figure of Zeus's brother, Hades, stood beside the throne. The two gods were conversing earnestly.

“These humans must learn that our displeasure will become their pain,” Zeus declared.

“A start,” said Hades. “But not enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being mortal,” said Hades, “they view everything as temporary. They know that when they cease, their troubles cease also. And this encourages them to ignore consequence.”

“Not if the consequence is sufficiently painful,” said Zeus.

“I beg to differ, O king and brother. The bravest and strongest are able to endure whatever torment we visit upon them because they know that death will end their suffering.”

“Surely,” said Zeus, “you are not proposing that we grant them immortality?”

“Indeed not. Immortality must be reserved for us gods. But we can extend the human capacity for suffering so that it may persist beyond physical death. Thus, we shall be able to arrange a system of endless punishment that will frighten mankind into docility.”

“But,” said Zeus, “won’t the prospect of eternal suffering make them hate us?”

“Quite the contrary,” said Hades. “When people are sufficiently terrified, they tend to adore those who can hurt them but sometimes refrain.”

“Hades, I like your thinking!”

“Futhermore, brother,” said Hades, “since the logic of my idea seems to indicate the need for a vast prison compound where the dead can serve out their sentences, I hereby volunteer to rule that realm.”

“Do you? It seems a dismal chore for my eldest brother.”

“I see it differently. Such a realm, a dance with demons, made brilliant by pain, is exactly what I am meant to rule.”

So Hades was appointed King of the Dead, and given the vast gloomy hollow of the underworld as his domain. He immediately named Hecate his chief aide. He borrowed the tribe of one-eyed Cyclopes and a band of Hundred-handed Giants from his brother’s kingdom, and kept them working night and day to remodel the place according to his design.

Before real work could begin, however, the savage creatures that dwelt underground had to be killed, captured, or tamed. And so the workers

became warriors first—a role they welcomed.

Dragons dwelt underground. They were huge, had wings and claws and terrible teeth, wore armored hide and spiked tails, and spat fire. The Giants and Cyclopes could make no headway against the dragons. But then Hecate found a way to subdue them.

Studying the habits of the gigantic lizards, she found that their dispositions were so foul that they were forced to nest one to a cave, otherwise they would fight to the death. Thereupon she led a raiding party against one nest at a time until she had captured six dragons.

She then assigned four of the Hundred-handed Giants to each dragon. Gripped by four hundred hands, the creature was held high and used as a flamethrower. Thus, Hecate was able to lead her Giants and six captive dragons against the dragon swarm.

Now these creatures, for all their size, had brains no larger than walnuts. Seeing their own kind spit fire at them, they began to fight among themselves, killing each other off until only a few were left.

The surviving dragons were driven from their caves into the upper world, where they began to prey on humans—which pleased Hades, for their kills enlarged his kingdom.

Still using the captive dragons as flamethrowers, the Giants and the Cyclopes tamed the enormous serpents that also dwelt underground. Hecate then trained them to guard the outlying regions of Tartarus.

Hades bade the Cyclopes build him a palace under a great seam of coal that looked like the night sky. He commissioned his nephew, Hephaestus, the smith god, to make a silver moon that worked by invisible springs and pulleys, and climbed and sank and changed shape and color like the real moon. And the Cyclopes stuck diamonds into the black dome to imitate stars.

A grove was planted about the palace, and was named Erebus. Beautiful mournful trees grew there—alder and myrtle and weeping willow. Ghostly deer glimmered among the trees. Black swans swam on a black lake; only their glittering eyes could be seen, and their white masks.

All this time, Hecate and her band of hell-hags, the Harpies, were overseeing another party of Cyclopes and Giants, who were constructing the roasting pits and torture pens of Tartarus, and stoking the furnaces for a

Lake of Fire that burned with a perpetual flame. The banks of this lake were diabolically contrived to recede before a swimmer trying to reach shore.

When all was completed, Hades demanded a secret entrance to his realm so that none might enter but the dead. He chose a lake in the Saronic mountains, and had the Cyclopes and Giants empty it of its cold blue waters. Then they drove a great cleft into the dry bed. Hades named the chasm Avernus after the vanished lake. It led down through a series of interlocked caves —down, down, to the bank of the River Styx, which had been bent out of its course and made to flow underground.

In fact, the mighty laborers had twisted the routes of four rivers and forced them into subterranean channels, forming the boundaries of the Land Beyond Death. The rivers were named Styx, Acheron, Phlegethon, and Cocytus—or Hatred, War, Fire, and Wailing Waters.

Now, Hades was eager to display his new domain. He invited the entire assembly of the gods underground. Also invited were the minor gods—the Muses, the Graces, the Hours; Hypnos, God of Sleep; the wood god, Pan, and his band of Satyrs; the wind god, Aeolus, and his Four Winds; the beautiful flame-haired Eos, Goddess of the Dawn; the crusty old sea deities who aided Poseidon—Proteus, Nereus, and Triton with his twisted horn. And those three crone sisters, the Fates, hobbled down; they added nothing to any celebration but no one dared offend them.

The Harpies acted as ushers, leading their distinguished visitors through the roasting pits and torture pens, showing off new devices like the Barbed Flick, the Marrow Log, and the Gut-winder. Hecate took charge of the most honored guests, Zeus, Hera, and Poseidon, explaining each improvement, showing them about the entire perimeter of the Lake of Fire, and introducing them to the charred turnspit demons and the faceless Torment Team.

After the grand tour, the guests were led to the palace grounds at Erebus, where they were treated to the spectacle of a Harpy echelon flying up into the black vault and plucking diamond stars out of the dome. Then, the Harpies, led by Hecate, swooped down and presented a diamond to each guest. Hecate presented Zeus with an enormous gem, and Hera with its twin.

Zeus laughed with pleasure and embraced Hades as all the company cheered. Then he drew him aside for a private talk.

“You’ve done a marvelous job down here,” said Zeus. “There’s only one thing I might suggest.”

“Name it, Majesty, and it shall be done.”

“Well, it’s a difficult matter and requires thought. As things stand now, no living mortal can enter your realm, nor dead ones depart. So there is no way for the human herd to understand what happens after death to those who displease us.”

“O king and brother,” said Hades, “I have reason to believe that the torments we are preparing will be so intense that a sense of anguish will steam up from this place and seep through the earth’s crust into the consciousness of humankind—perhaps in the form of dreams, premonitions, the ravings of oracles.”

“All very well,” said Zeus, “but I believe we shall need more positive testimony. No hurry though; we’ll both give it some thought. And now, brother, let me congratulate you again. This hell you are making promises to be the most splendid piece of work since we built the heavens.”

The Poet

Once it became known that the end of life did not mean the end of suffering, and that divine vengeance would continue to pursue offenders even after death, people were gripped by such terror that they sought to placate the gods by every means imaginable, including human sacrifice.

Thus, in response to any natural disaster—earthquake, tidal wave, volcano, drought or famine—people, made cruel by fear, would select a victim. It could be man, woman, or child—sometimes an entire family. They would be dragged to the altar and put to the sword before an image of whatever god or goddess was to be appeased. Nor were those who did the killing always moved by religious impulse. This custom of human sacrifice was also a useful way to work off a grudge or settle a quarrel.

And since natural disasters always blew over after a time, those who preached sacrifice could boast of a string of successes. So the habit grew. Certain blood offerings embedded themselves in custom, became ritual, practiced not only in times of trouble, but in times of prosperity to buy a god's favor in advance. Before a fishing fleet embarked, for example, some villager might be chosen as an offering to Poseidon. The victim would be taken to the altar of the sea god and stabbed to death with a knife carved of whale's ivory. The shrieks of the victim and his family would be drowned by the prayers of those calling to Poseidon for a rich harvest of fish.

Before every Spring Sowing, the strongest and most beautiful youths of a village would be brought to the ploughed field and butchered with a scythe—so that strong blood might nourish the furrows and bribe Demeter, Goddess of Growing Things, to send fat crops.

Most of the gods, while pretending disapproval, secretly relished these blood offerings. Hades, of course, openly approved, for corpses enlarged his kingdom.

But there was one young man who loathed the murderous rite, and risked his life again and again by trying to stop it. He was the poet, Orpheus, the first of his kind, and there has been none greater since.

A slender, graceful youth with burning black eyes, Orpheus ambled about as if sleepwalking, but could move very quickly on occasion. He invented the seven-string lyre and drew such ravishing melodies from it that trees would wrench themselves out of the earth and hobble about on their roots to follow him. And as he strolled about, plucking at his lyre and fitting his own verses to the music, savage beasts and gentle beasts would come out of the forest and stand in a circle about him. The wolves did not hunt, nor the deer flee. But all stood in an enchanted truce, listening.

Born in Thrace, Orpheus roamed the land, never staying long in one place. He reached the coast, and wandered the length of it, but then, instead of striking inland, turned, and began to drift down again, still following the shoreline but now stopping at each village.

The fishermen welcomed him very warmly and fought for the privilege of taking him on board their boats. Not that they were such ardent music lovers, but they knew that when he stood on their decks, plucking his lyre and singing, fish would rise from the depths and balance themselves on their tails, listening. And such fish were easy to catch. But often, as it happened, the fishermen themselves fell into a trance and forgot to cast their nets.

It was at this time that Orpheus began to attack the practice of human sacrifice. During a visit to one village, he had seen a shouting mob escort a fisherlad to the edge of a cliff. The tall, fresh-faced boy held himself erect, gazing out to sea, as the villagers chanted prayers to Earth-Shaking Poseidon, Sender of Fish. Holding his head high, the boy stood there, outfacing death, wincing only when he heard his mother sob.

Then, without waiting to be pushed, he shouted, "Accept me, O sea!" and leaped off the cliff into the swirling water below. Jumping into water from that height is like falling onto rock, and the broken body spun a few times in the riptide, then sank. The boy's mother tried to leap off after him, but was caught by her husband and led gently downhill.

Orpheus, watching, was riven to the heart. More than anything else, he was moved by the gallantry of the doomed youth who had tried so hard to welcome death, knowing that the gods preferred an offering untainted by

grief or fear. Then and there, Orpheus vowed never to sail on any ship belonging to a village that sacrificed its sons and daughters.

The practical fisherfolk, faced with a choice between the immediate results of the poet's deck music and some future prospect of Poseidon's favor, chose Orpheus. So the ivory knives tasted no more innocent blood, nor were any more youths forced to leap off cliffs—at least not while the poet lingered on the coast.

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The Cannibal Gods

Orpheus traveled up and down the shore, hurling verse against the cannibal gods, and where he passed, lives were saved. After some months, however, he decided to leave the fishing villages and strike inland.

Any journey was perilous in those days. To go among strangers was to invite robbery and death. And of all places in the world, none were more murderously inhospitable than the slopes and passes of the Thracian mountains. There were bandits who routinely preyed on travelers; savage mountain clansmen who viewed everyone born outside their village as an enemy. And most dangerous of all were neither bandits nor clansmen, but the dour hardworking vine tenders whose grapes yielded a sweet potent wine.

These growers believed that the Mistress of the Crops became a ravaging white sow in the summer, whose hunger could be glutted only by human flesh and whose thirst could be quenched only by blood. The Midsummer Sow had to be pleased or she would blight the grapes. Given her fill of meat and drink, however, she would load the vine with heavy purple fruit, and its juice thereof would be sweet and strong.

At midsummer, then, the vine tenders put on green clothing so they might not be seen among the leaves, and lay in wait for strangers passing by. They preferred to sacrifice at noon. They bound their victim with vines, and offered his best parts to the goddess. The head would be buried near a tumbling stream, the hands under a myrtle, and the rest of the body put into a shallow hole among the vine roots.

Orpheus, new to these slopes and a stranger to local custom, was pacing gaily down the trail, admiring the steep, terraced fields that seemed to be tilted toward the rich sunlight. He was hot and thirsty. Perching on a low stone wall, he plucked some grapes. They were sour but eased his thirst. He

was cramming a handful into his mouth when the green-clad men leaped out of the brush.

They seized him. They were big, and there were three of them. He was helpless in their grip. One man held him from behind as a second stripped off his tunic. The third man stood by, holding a curved knife. They bound him to a tree, wrapping him with vines.

His lyre had dropped to the ground. The men did not know what the strange object was; they thought it some kind of weapon. One man kicked it away and was startled when the thing uttered a musical complaint. They were more startled when the trussed man uttered the same sound. They were used to their captive screaming when he saw the knife, but this one did not scream; he sang.

Birds were calling all the while. The bound man's voice threaded among them. The man with the knife tried to come closer, close enough to cut. But he could not move. His feet were rooted to the ground. The song was casting silver loops about him. He just stood there, listening. The two other men stood rooted also, listening.

Orpheus sang. His song told them that they were offering to the wrong god, that they should be worshipping no ugly, greedy midsummer sow, but *Dionysius*, Lord of the Vine, Master of Revels, Bestower of Ecstasy.

He sang of the birth of Dionysius—how his mother, a Phrygian princess named Semele, Priestess of the New Moon, was courted by Zeus, disguised as the night wind. But Semele was very proud of being loved by a god and wanted everyone to know. She coaxed Zeus into dropping his disguise. He appeared to her in his own form; she was consumed by the divine fire upon which no mortal can look, and live.... Dying, she gave birth to Dionysius, who was born among the flames. Ever afterward, fire ran in his veins, giving him his matchless radiance.

In his youth, Dionysius was tutored by satyrs and learned the secret of the grape and the terrible enchantment cast by its fermented juice.

“Yes!” sang Orpheus, “It is this radiant youth who empowers the vine. It is he who bestows the grape, and sweetens its juice, and lays magic upon it as it ages in the cask. It is he, Dionysius, not the Midsummer Sow.”

The green-clad men knew they were listening to sacrilege and would pay with their lives when the white sow came, claiming vengeance. They knew they should move upon the singer and dismember him—offer him, piece by

piece, to the raging sow, begging her forgiveness all the while. They tried to break the spell, tried to rush at Orpheus. But the song noosed them in its silver coils and they could not move.

Now, animals had slid out of the forest and stood with them, listening. Wolves and deer, and a single bear. The birds had fallen still, for they too wanted to hear, and the voice of the singer was the only sound in the hot silence of the afternoon.

Orpheus kept chanting. His song told how the youngest god Dionysius wandered far, visiting all the kingdoms that border the Inner Sea, introducing men to the culture of the vine. He was followed by a troupe of laughing worshipers, men and women, who reveled nightly under the moon.

And now the rooted men shuddered and the animals bristled as they heard his voice take on a new tone. Trumpets rang in it—spear shock, and battle cry.

“Beware! Beware!” sang Orpheus, “One day, the vine god was captured by pirates who took him aboard their ship, thinking he was a prince they could hold for ransom. Then the ship stopped, though it was in deep water and sailing before the wind. Vines sprouted out of the sea, climbing the hull, twining around the mast. The oars of the galley slaves turned into sea serpents; they wrenched themselves free and swam away. Where Dionysius had been standing at the bow, a lion appeared. The wind in the rigging became the sound of flutes. The golden lion stood on his hind legs and danced. The terrified pirates jumped overboard and drowned. Beware! Beware!”

At this point in the song, a wild boar wandered out of the copse and stood among the other animals, listening. And the green-clad men, seeing the beast, thought that the sow had sent her consort to kill them. Now terror broke the spell of the music. The animals, smelling fear, began to growl. The man with the knife dropped his blade and ran. The others scurried after him, whimpering with fear. The wolves would have followed the men and torn them to pieces, but Orpheus began to sing again, for he did not wish them to be killed. He wanted no death in the grove that afternoon.

The wolves turned again, and listened to the song. And, Orpheus, escorted by wolves and the single bear, wandered the mountain villages, singing against the white sow and human sacrifice, hymning the vine god

and the life-giving power of the Sun, who is the daily risen god, and can alone decree abundance.

By now, rumor of Orpheus and his band of enchanted listeners had reached the gods—those who dwelt upon Olympus, and those who prowled the depths of Tartarus. And demonish powers he hardly even knew existed began to make decisions about him.

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His Song Is a Mischief

The roots of mountains are the roof beams of hell. Thick shafts of rock grip the floor of Hades' realm and soar upward out of sight—up through bottomless lakes and nameless caverns, lifting themselves up past the clouds into a great drench of sunlight, becoming the mountains of earth whose snowdrifts are the source of rivers, whose crags are a nest for eagles, and upon whose slopes wild horses graze.

But seen from the floor of Tartarus, they are huge pillars of rock thrusting straight up and losing themselves in darkness. Hades leaned now against one of these pillars, awaiting Hecate, whom he had summoned. He heard the chiming of brass wings before he saw the hags. He looked up. Wings and claws gleamed in the perpetual dusk. Hecate glided down, motioning for the Harpies to fly on. She coasted to the ground and alighted near Hades.

“You summoned me, my lord, and I am here.”

“We have heavy matters to consider,” said Hades. “Does the name Orpheus mean anything to you?”

“Is he down here?”

“No. He still lives.”

“I have been so busy carrying out your instructions, O Master, that I have quite lost track of what is happening on earth.”

“Well, good Hecate, I may have to enlarge your field of operations. You are the only one of my staff who has the wit to do my business on alien soil.”

“I am highly gratified by your confidence in me, my lord.”

“This Orpheus is a young poet,” said Hades. “A Thracian.”

“A poet? How does a poet come to occupy your majestic attention? I have always considered them the lightest of lightweights.”

“Not this one,” said Hades. “He doesn’t twitter mindlessly like a bird. His song is a mischief. He wanders the land, persuading people to stop killing each other on our altars. Human sacrifice, he tells them, is a fancy name for murder. And murder, despite all natural instincts, is wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“The man’s a lunatic!” cried Hecate. “Why do people believe him?”

“It’s because he doesn’t preach,” said Hades. “He’s never boring. He doesn’t moralize about killing, but praises life in terms so compelling that people quell their own murderous instincts. His message is gilded by such beautiful sound that it pierces the hearts of his listeners, and they refuse to do what he disapproves of. And so, he has reduced our quota of corpses.”

“Truly,” muttered Hecate. “The antics of this madman demand drastic action. Shall I go up there and kill him and drag his shade down here for appropriate torment?”

“No,” said Hades. “I want him, but I want him alive.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s something I haven’t discussed with you,” said Hades. “It is the opinion of Zeus, which I am beginning to share, that for once we must violate our own rule. A living mortal will be permitted to visit us, and depart, alive.”

“Whatever for?”

“We need a witness—one who will observe what happens down here, and return to the upper world. His testimony, it is hoped, will frighten those restless herds into the kind of docility we have never been able to impose.”

“I see,” said Hecate. “And you think that this Orpheus will make a good witness?”

“He is a poet. His perceptions are keen, and his testimony eloquent.”

“But he’s a troublemaker, you say. A very active one. Shall we not be presenting him with more opportunity for mischief?”

“I am hoping that what he sees here will frighten the mischief out of him. Besides, you, my dear Hecate, will be watching everything he does, and will be ready to pounce, should he get out of line.”

“How shall we get him down here?”

“The same way we tempted the three-headed dog to these regions. We shall contrive the death of someone Orpheus loves. His passionate nature should lead him to follow her shade down to Tartarus.”

“You say ‘she,’” said Hecate. “Does he have a wife?”

“He does not.”

“Does he love anyone?”

“I am told he does not.”

“Then whom can be used as a hostage?”

“I leave the details to you, O Hag. You must arrange for him to fall in love. Poets are supposed to be inflammable, after all. And you have proved yourself a creature of infinite resource.”

“Not so infinite as you suppose, my king. But I have never yet shirked a difficult assignment.”

“Consequently,” said Hades, “I shall expect to see this damned versifier down here as soon as our torments are in full swing.”

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The Hag Hovers

Hecate went to work immediately. She contrived matters so that nymphs thronged the path of the poet wherever he went. Orpheus was delighted by the beautiful sleek creatures, who seemed to crystallize themselves out of his song. He sported in the sea with nereids, frolicked with meadow nymphs, danced in the grove with dryads, and went bounding from rock to rock with the lithe mountain nymphs called oreads.

He welcomed them all, reveled in their company, wrapped himself in their mixed fragrances, flowered under their touch—but fixed his affections on no one. He never stayed anywhere for more than a day and a night, but kept following his restless spirit to places he had not yet seen.

But he never forgot any of the nymphs he had met, for he forgot nothing, and wove each adventure into song.

Hecate hovered invisibly, watching Orpheus, waiting for him to fall deeply in love with someone—she watched as he flitted from blossom to blossom like a bee gathering honey. For all her ferocity, she kept her patience as only a good hunter can. Nevertheless, Hecate realized that if she did not produce results she might fall into disfavor with her moody king as quickly as she had climbed into his good graces.

“This one’s not like other mortals,” Hecate thought to herself. “He has a low boiling point, but is slow to commit himself. What I need is expert advice. I’ll go to Mount Helicon where poets swarm. I’ll find one there who’s clever enough to tell me what I need to know, and squeeze some information out of him.”

Hecate hovered invisibly over the slope of Helicon, watching a straggle of men and youths wandering about picking flowers, mumbling verse, and

trying to work up nerve enough to mount the winged horse, Pegasus, who always bucked them off.

Hecate noticed one small man with twisted legs who sat on a rock watching the others, smiling to himself. "That's the one I want," she thought. Swooping down, she caught him in her claws and carried him up the mountain to a place where no one walked. Becoming visible, she held him in one hand as she pulled the whip from her belt with the other. She drove the stock deep into the ground, then tied its long lash about his ankle, so that he was tethered like a goat.

She was amazed to see that he was still smiling, and more joyfully than ever.

"What's your name?"

"Thallo. And you are Hecate."

"How do you know?"

"I have dreamed of you. But you are more overwhelming in the flesh. I am delighted to be your captive and beseech you not to release me."

"Indeed? People do not usually welcome my attentions."

"More fools they!" cried Thallo.

"Well, little man, you're as clever as you look, aren't you? And I need your counsel."

"Glad to serve you, Goddess."

"I have a friend who is very eager to marry off her son, who is a poet."

"Does the son share his mother's enthusiasm for wedlock?" asked Thallo.

"That's just it. He's fond of girls, but in a general sort of way. He hasn't fixed his fancy on any of them."

"Well, he's young, you say."

"Not that young. Plenty old enough to settle down."

"No, my lady. Poets retain a certain childishness in such matters. That's how we manage to see the world fresh each time. We tend to look upon marriage as a trap, and babies as a burden."

"Really? I thought you fellows were of passion all compounded. Generous, tender, reckless in the heat of love, ready to dare anything?"

"That's the other side of it," said Thallo. "And if your friend's son should happen to meet a girl who inspires such passion, then, no doubt, he will make his mother happy by entering wedlock, and his wife's parents equally miserable."

“Well,” said Hecate, “I don’t see why the young fellow hasn’t found anyone to kindle his heart. He has met all the most beautiful nymphs of his generation—nereids, naiads, dryads, oreads—one more ravishing than the next.”

“And did any of these gorgeous, sportive creatures hold still long enough to listen to his verse?”

“What do you mean?”

“Any girl who hopes to snare a poet, my Queen, must adore poetry, *his* poetry in particular, or be able to imitate ecstasy while he intones his verse—at least until she has him married tight and fast.”

“Tell me more.”

“Well, it’ll help if she’s good-looking—with big eyes, and a trick of widening them while she listens, as if she were actually watching the words dance on air.”

“Must she be a brilliant conversationalist?” asked Hecate.

“She’ll need only four short phrases: ‘Sing it again’ ... ‘Don’t stop’ ... ‘Oh, marvelous!’ ... and the all-purpose ‘Yes, dear.’”

“You mean she can be an imbecile just as long as she’s pretty and submissive?”

“Nobody good-looking is quite an imbecile. Beauty is the body’s intelligence. And when a brainy cripple tells you this, it has to be true.”

“I’m not convinced,” said Hecate.

“Besides, the poet is a weaver of fantasy. Whatever she lacks he will tell himself he doesn’t want. We all invent our lovers, especially when young.”

Hecate smiled at the little man. “You’re brilliant, Thallo! If you were a few feet taller, I’d marry you myself.”

“Don’t decide against me too hastily, dear Hecate. I might grow on you.”

Eurydice

Orpheus came down from the mountains into the lowlands. He wandered from village to village, playing his lyre and singing his songs. Animals followed him as he went; trees pulled themselves out of the earth and hobbled after him. Fishermen came ashore, farmers left their plows. Hordes of people were following him now as he strolled about, playing and singing. Grown men and women, boys and girls. But as time passed and the faces changed, he noted that one face was always the same. It belonged to a young girl with eyes so big, so full of light that they seemed to linger after she left, burning holes in the dusk.

And when Orpheus went into the woods again, and his audience became animals and trees, there she was too, listening. She was very slender, with a shining fall of black hair and huge black eyes. And noon and dusk and under the moon her face seemed to gather all the light there was.

Orpheus took the girl aside and spoke to her. Her name was Eurydice, she told him. But it didn't matter where she had lived, because she would never go back there. Her home would be where he was. She would follow him everywhere, and if he could not love her, she would make no demands, but follow him anyway and listen to him sing, and serve him in any way he wished.

This is the kind of thing any man in any age likes to hear but seldom does, and never for long. A young poet hearing such praise can go absolutely drunk with joy; old ones too. Now, Orpheus had met many nymphs and beautiful young women, but he decided that this was the one he must have, this childish one with her great doelike eyes and murmuring voice and superb taste in verse. And so he married her.

All this time, Hecate hovered but did not strike. It was she who had found Eurydice and realized her possibilities, tutored her through dreams,

and then finally guided her into Orpheus's path. Hecate watched them fall in love and set up housekeeping in a thatched hut on the riverbank. The Harpy hovered but did not strike. She wanted Orpheus to live a while with his new bride. She wanted love to sink its hooks deep into his heart.

Then, at last, Hecate decided the time had come. One morning when Eurydice was out picking berries, the Harpy led a savage-tempered bear toward the blackberry bush. The famished beast arose to his enormous height and loomed over the girl. Eurydice stared up in fright.

Then the bear realized that this girl belonged to Orpheus, whose singing pleased him so. His growl changed to a snuffle. He dropped to all fours and shambled away.

Hecate was not pleased. "All the beasts in this place have been corrupted by that silly music," she said to herself. "I'll have to find something less appreciative. A snake perhaps? Some of them are musical, but they dwell in holes and may not have heard the Orphic songs. I know ... a viper! A green viper. Its brain is the size of a pea, and it's tone-deaf besides. And its venom is absolutely deadly."

Hecate flew to a certain cave and dug out a tangle of green vipers. She plucked one loose and carried it by its tail, flying to the blackberry bush where Eurydice was still picking. The girl had eaten a berry for every one she put in the basket, and her lips were stained blue.

Hecate dropped the snake at the girl's feet. The viper, furious at being handled in such a way, reared its head and struck at the nearest living thing—which was Eurydice. It sank its teeth into her taut, scratched leg, and shot its poison. The girl stiffened and fell.

Orpheus came home and found the house empty. He waited, but Eurydice did not return. He went looking for her. He ran through the woods, searching, calling. But he could not find her. Then, Hecate perched in a tree over the fallen Eurydice and raised her voice, imitating the girl. Orpheus rushed toward the sound.

He saw something on the ground. He knelt. He refused to believe what he saw. This could not be. She couldn't be lying there like that, arms and legs still, eyes quenched. That slender face, blue smeared, was the face of a child eating berries. Death did not suit her, not at all. It could not be and must not be. It was unacceptable. An enormous error had been made, an unbearable discord at the very core of things.

He would have to go tune the world again, or it would have no place for him. He would go down to Tartarus to reclaim his wife's shade and stuff it back into her unblemished body. Then he would take her to the little house near the river.

Murmuring, "I'll be back soon," Orpheus kissed her cold brow and rushed off. He didn't know where Avernus was, but knew he would find it. In the Land Beyond Death, he would seek the ghost of his murdered bride.

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The Healer

But there was one who caused Hades more trouble even than Orpheus; he was Asclepius, the greatest doctor who ever lived. His father was Apollo, the sun god, also God of Music and Medicine. His mother had been a Lapith princess, named Coronis, who hated Apollo because he had abducted her on her wedding night. She ran away from Apollo and rejoined her young husband—saddening the sun god, and, what was worse, enraging his twin sister, Artemis, Goddess of the Moon. Artemis, although only 15 minutes older than her brother, had always considered herself his protector. She sped to Arcadia where the young couple had fled and slew them with her silver arrows.

Asclepius was born during his mother's death throes. But, destined for the healing arts, he had begun his study of anatomy while still in the womb. And continued to watch the events of his own birth with such intense concentration that he uttered no cry—making his midwife think that he had been born dead.

Hermes, who had always been the kindest god, heard about the incredibly gifted child, who was his own nephew. He took charge of the babe and gave him to the Centaurs to raise. These hill dwellers, the fabled pony-spooks of Thessaly, knew more about herbs, poisonous and benign, than any other living creatures. And they taught the boy all they knew.

Asclepius developed other skills as well. He dosed and splinted, presided over the birth of the Centaur colts, and began to practice battlefield surgery at a very early age. There was plenty of need for this; his adopted tribe was quarrelsome and incredibly rash, always charging out of the hills to fight with the Lapiths of the plain—although vastly outnumbered.

After learning all he could, Asclepius left the Centaurs and began to wander the land, patching broken bodies wherever he found them.

As his talent ripened, he found himself calling on all the powers he had inherited from his father. Sunlight and music, he found, were the best medicines. He forbade his patients to lie in the dark, thinking sad thoughts, but dragged their pallets outside so that the brilliant sunlight could soak into them. Founding his own hospital, a collection of wicker huts set in a large garden on the bank of a river, he filled it with music. At all hours, the patients could hear the natural music of wind-song and birdcall; at certain hours, the flute and lyre, and voices singing. For Asclepius hired musicians, and recruited men and women with beautiful voices, and taught them to chant the praise-songs of Orpheus at sunrise and sunset and blazing noon.

Legends, of course, sprang up about the young doctor. It was said that he had been given a set of scalpels by his uncle Hephaestus, the smith god. It was said that he had stolen a skein of the vital thread used by his ancient cousins, the Fates, and that with such magically sharp knives and magically strong thread could cut someone open, whisk out a diseased organ, and sew the incision up faster than a fisherman could shuck an oyster.

Asclepius laughed when he heard these tales, but did not encourage them. He disliked cutting, and did so only when all else failed.

The Strangler

By this time, the song Orpheus was singing in the Land Beyond Death had begun to enter the four infernal rivers and on through underground streams to the rivers of earth. Reeds that grew upon the river banks soaked this song up through their roots. And when the wind moved among them, the reeds uttered the song anew. People, hearing it, learned for the first time what was happening to those who had died. Whoever learned about the torments of hell told others; and the dreadful news spread. The dead were not resting in peace, but were being tormented by demons.

So death was feared more than ever. Men and women, no matter how old, how feeble, how ill, clung desperately to the last flicker of life. And the young doctor, Asclepius, found himself working all day and most of the night. The very old, who were now refusing to die, prevented him from spending enough time among the young. This development, he felt, struck at the very core of his work; for more than any other physician, he had been able to save the lives of men and women in their prime, youths, and a multitude of children.

Using an enormous range of skills to salvage those felled by war or accident, he had snatched them from the very brink of death and restored them to health and beauty and the enjoyment of life.

But there were only so many hours to the day and to the night, and time spent by the bedside of a terrified oldster meant that some young patient, lacking medical attention, would slip into death and be handed over to the demons.

Asclepius, though, was young and strong; he trained himself to sleep less and less. So he was able to treat all who needed him, and save so many lives that Hades took note. He summoned Hecate.

“Our shipments are dwindling daily,” he said. “Do you know why?”

“Fewer people are dying, my lord.”

“That much I am able to deduce for myself. The question is, Why aren’t they dying as adequately as before? Do you have any ideas, or are you waiting for me to have one?”

“As you know, my Master, the Orpheus affair has taken me to earth frequently. And word has reached me of a certain doctor up there who is performing miraculous cures.”

“Who is this quack?”

“His name is Asclepius ... a son of Apollo, they say.”

“Is he?”

“Who knows,” said Hecate. “These days, every village wife who bears a good-looking child is rumored to have entertained a god. And, since the rumor is flattering, she doesn’t deny it.”

“Well, it makes a difference,” said Hades. “If he is Apollo’s son he’ll be harder to get rid of. I’ll do what I have to do, but I’d rather not start any family feuds.”

“I was about to suggest, your Majesty, that my Harpies may be useful in this matter. If we set a night and day guard upon Asclepius and assign a Harpy to accompany him on each house call, why then she can hover invisibly over the bedside, and as the doctor tries to fan the spark of life, our Harpy, still invisible, can reach out and snuff it. Asclepius will just think he has lost the contest, as sometimes he must, and proceed to the next patient, where the same thing will happen. And again, and again, until even he grows discouraged.”

“Sounds good,” said Hades. “Send out your hags.”

Now, of late, Asclepius had been aided in his labors by a wonderfully beautiful and gentle girl, named Telesphora. She adored the doctor but knew she wouldn’t be able to do anything about it until he was less busy. Whereupon, she was able to turn her love into healing energy, and to develop a unique skill. She learned to drain herself of strength each day and lend that strength to patients to carry them through the night—always the most dangerous time for those very ill. And, each morning, her strength renewed itself, and she was ready for that day’s task.

She accompanied Asclepius everywhere. Her strong hands became magically gentle when they touched a sufferer’s body; a vital force flowed

through her fingers and into the sick body. And, despite the Harpies, who were now hanging over each bedside, trying to push the dying one over the brink, despite these invisible hags, Asclepius and his beautiful nurse were saving more lives than ever.

Hades grew so angry that he threatened to demote Hecate and put a vicious crone, Podarge, in charge of the Harpies.

“Give me one more chance, O master,” pleaded Hecate. “I’ll go up there myself, and if I can’t do something to mend matters, why, you won’t have to demote me. I’ll simply vanish from your sight forever.”

The whip coiled at Hecate’s belt had a lash that was the tail of a stingray. Wielded by the Harpy Queen, it could scourge the flesh from the bones of anyone she flogged. But she rarely used it. Her claws and teeth were weapons enough; her long sleek body had the fluid brutality of a saber-toothed tiger. Rarely did she meet any difficulty in killing or capturing or punishing anyone she wished.

It puzzled her mightily now that she seemed unable to kill Telesphora.

For she was trying to kill the girl who was so skillfully aiding Asclepius. Even with the young woman’s help, the great doctor was working himself to exhaustion, and Hecate knew that if she could deprive him of Telesphora, he would not be able to save so many people.

When the Harpy Queen had told Hades what she meant to do, he issued certain instructions. “Yes, kill her,” he said. “But it must seem like an accident. You mustn’t attack her in your own form because everyone knows you work for me. And Asclepius will complain to his father, Apollo, who will complain to Zeus, causing endless trouble.”

“I’ll be careful,” Hecate had promised. “She’ll soon meet with a fatal but natural-looking accident.”

But this proved easier to promise than to perform.

Hecate studied her quarry carefully before determining what accident should take place. The girl went out on the river frequently to gather a certain watercress that Asclepius made into a poultice for cuts and bruises. So death by drowning seemed a good idea.

After further observation, however, Hecate changed her mind about drowning the girl. “It won’t work,” she thought. “She swims like a naiad, damn her. I’ll have to try some other way.”

The next day, Telesphora climbed a cliff to hunt for a moss that grew in high places. Hecate followed her. She hovered invisibly as the girl wandered near the edge of the cliff. Then she dropped out of the sky, hitting Telesphora with all her weight, knocking the girl off the ledge. And was amazed to see her turn while falling and dive cleanly into the water—then bob up and swim toward shore as if she had gone off a low rock instead of a high cliff.

But Hecate was hard to discourage. Being thwarted made her angry; rage sharpened her purpose. “To be crushed by falling rock would seem a natural fatality for a mountain-climbing lass,” she said to herself.

She waited until Telesphora was climbing another slope. Then, scooping up a boulder, Hecate sprang into the air, and hung invisibly above the girl. She dipped so low she couldn’t miss, and dropped the boulder. As Hecate watched, the rock plunged through the shining air, then amazed her by skidding away from the neatly braided head as if glancing off an invisible helmet. The heavy rock crashed to the ground near Telesphora, who looked up, startled—and, seeing nothing, continued on her way.

Hecate was scorched by rage, and knew that only blood could cool her. She trembled with pent fury, wanting to swoop down on the girl and dig her talons into that glowing body. But she remembered Hades’ instructions, and managed to control herself.

“Eurydice was lucky too until her luck ran out,” gritted Hecate. “I’ll get this smug bitch if it’s the last thing I do.... I know! I’ll send the same snake that stung Eurydice to death. In fact, I’ll send two.”

She uttered the snake call, a thin hissing sound. A pair of grass-green vipers whipped out of a hole and slithered toward Telesphora, so swiftly that they were upon her before she knew they were there.

Hecate watched, gloatingly. These were earth’s most poisonous snakes. Once they sank their hollow teeth into the girl and injected her with their venom, she would stiffen before she could scream, die before hitting the ground.

Hecate heard the girl laugh. Saw her stretch out her bare arms. The snakes were climbing and twining about her. Her rosy, laughing face was flanked by two wedge-shaped heads that wove about her, tongues flicking, as if whispering into her ear. She looked like a living caduceus—the serpent-entwined staff of healing carried by Asclepius.

The girl, wound about with snakes, was twirling on her toes, singing. Finally, she plucked them off, playfully braiding them about each other, and flung them away. They untwined themselves and whisked back into their holes.

Hecate knew she would have to do something with her rage or find herself defying Hades' direct order—falling upon the girl and ripping her to pieces where she stood.

Hecate flew off the hill and into the forest. She searched until she found a bear, which she immediately attacked. Locked in a deadly embrace, they rolled over and over, wrestling, biting, gouging. When the Harpy rose to her feet the bear was a heap of bloody fur.

She dived into the river and cleansed herself of blood. Letting herself dry in the hot sun, she grew calm enough to resume her task.

“This is ridiculous,” she thought. “I’m being less than I can be. What good are my diabolical wits, honed in the very fires of hell, if I act like a stupid human, befuddled by failure, reacting instead of thinking? I’ve been on the wrong course with this girl. I see now that she cannot be harmed in any ordinary way, because he whom she serves, Asclepius, son of Apollo, has invoked his father’s aid and cloaked her with an immunity. Which means that I shall have to attack her as if she were not quite mortal, but one of those superhuman creatures, hero or monster, who can only be defeated by turning its own strength against itself.”

“And what good is Telesphora’s special strength, her unique attribute? Why does Asclepius value her so? It is because she has the ability to lend a dying person her own energy, keeping the patient alive, and then somehow being able to renew that energy in herself. I can use this! I can destroy her through her own virtue. I know just how to do it.”

Whereupon, Hecate scrolled her wings so that they hung about her like a shabby cloak. She stooped, making herself dwindle, making her skin parch. She retracted her claws and pouched her eyes, dulling their yellow fire—and wrapped the stingray lash of her whip about its stock so that it became just a cane used by a crone.

Transformed into a feeble old woman, the Harpy Queen hobbled off to the hospital Asclepius had built upon the riverbank. There she pretended to collapse. She fell on the grass, and waited for someone to come.

Telesphora bent over the old woman who had been found in the garden. The girl had laid her on a pallet in one of the huts made of woven branches. Sequins of light slid across the ceiling, for one side of the hut was a wide door opening onto the sunlit river. The girl studied the old woman—the strange ashen face, the yolky eyes and shriveled shoulders. She seemed neither awake nor asleep, had not spoken, nor even moaned. Asclepius was away and would not return until the next day. The girl did not know whether the old woman would last, nor could she tell what was ailing her. For all her seeming weakness, her pulse was oddly strong. And yet ... Asclepius had taught the girl that no two people were exactly alike, and that illness was always more than its symptoms.

One thing she did know. She would get no sleep that night. She would have to sit up with the old woman and be prepared to keep her alive by a transfer of energy.

Now, through eyes that seemed shut, Hecate was studying the girl who was studying her. The Harpy screwed her eyes tight so that no gleam of joy might show. For her plan was working, and soon, soon, Telesphora would deliver herself into the hands of her enemy.

Hours later, in that coldest, clammiest grip of night, just before dawn, Telesphora found herself shuddering with a dread she had never felt before. All night long she had sat beside the bed, letting her strength drain into the body of her patient. She was accustomed to this; this was her talent, her unique virtue, but it had never been quite like this before. The old carcass seemed to be soaking up strength like a sponge, claiming every last particle of energy. And the girl needed to save one drop of vitality so that she might renew herself in the morning.

Telesphora heard a rustling—a different kind of breathing. She tried to stand up. Too late! She felt a pair of claws fasten on her throat. Her eyes widened in horror as she saw the hag sitting up in bed. The limp cloak had become wings, spread like a falcon's, and the eyes, the pouched old eyes were pools of yellow fire.

These blazing eyes were the last sight the girl saw; the last sound she heard was a screech of triumph as the Harpy finished strangling her.

The Singing Head

Telesphora slipped out of the vaporous file of shades that were being led toward Hades' judgment seat. She watched them vanish into the mist, then struck off in a different direction across a great hushed plain. She groped through the thick mist, which was not quite fog but a brownish murk, smelling of sulphur.

She kicked something that cried out in pain. She bent to see. It was a head standing on a stump of neck. It was not a skull. Parchment skin stuck to whittled bones. The pale face was framed by a fall of thick, shining white hair. Eyes and mouth were holes, but the eyeholes streamed light, and the voice that issued from the mouth hole was pure radiant power—like sunlight made into sound. Telesphora felt herself fill with a rapture she had never expected to feel again.

“Who are you?” she cried, “whose voice is of such wondrous beauty?”

“I am Orpheus,” said the head. “Or, rather, what is left of him.”

“Orpheus? And do I hear your voice? Truly, hell has its privileges.”

“But who are you?” said the head. “*What* are you? Are you sure you're quite dead?”

“Why do you doubt it?”

“You give off a strange glow—like phosphorus on the night tide. You shed a fragrant warmth that ghosts do not.”

“They think I'm dead,” said Telesphora. “They tried their best to make me so. But it's your story I want to hear, minstrel. How did you get to be the way you are? Where's the rest of you?”

“Well, I'll tell you my tale, and you'll tell me yours.”

“Oh, yes! Yes!” cried Telesphora.

“One moonlit night,” said the head, “I was singing to a party of young women, revelers, you know, who followed Dionysius as he trod the

Thracian slopes, fattening the vines. I was singing to them, and they were dancing, when Artemis, acting for the Council of the Gods, poisoned her moon rays, sending the women mad. They fell on me and tore me to pieces. They didn't realize how they were being used, poor creatures; they thought they were applauding my performance. And one of them, a very young one, ran off with my head; she intended to keep it among her dolls. But she was struck by lightning, and my head was taken to this place—and here I've been ever since."

"But why?" whispered Telesphora. "Why were the gods so cruel to you?"

"I had offended them," said the head. "My gifts were my undoing. I was born to sing, and I sang tales of the gods and goddesses, their deeds, their passions, their pets, their victims. My songs pleased men and women and children—oh, they pleased the children—but the gods were not pleased."

"Why not? Why not?"

"My praise was not absolute, you see. I told their cruelty as I celebrated their power. I sang triumphs and crimes. For truth to me is always in motion, aquiver with opposing elements, like everything alive. And the truth I sang was a celebration of total nature, which contains both good and evil. I believed that this huge, rich pageant, human and divine, was a metaphor for something above and beyond, or, perhaps, below and beyond our comprehension—all-embracing, mysteriously inclusive, sublimely total. Unknowable, perhaps, but *not* immune to questions. Thus my song. Thus I offended the gods who like their hosannas loud and simple."

"Why then have they preserved your head, which, it would seem, must continue to offend?"

"Those wildly wasteful gods can be thrifty when it suits them. Disliking me though they did, they found a terrible use for my talent. It started while I was yet alive. And it had to do with their idea of justice—which is a prolongation of punishment."

His voice faded.

"Tell! Tell!" cried Telesphora.

"I haven't spoken so much in decades. I grow weak."

Swiftly, Telesphora stuck her finger in her mouth and bit it sharply. It did not bleed. She grasped the finger with her other hand and squeezed. A drop of blood appeared. The head tilted back. She held her hand so that the blood dripped into the mouth hole.

“Thank you,” whispered the voice. “Now I know I’m right about you. Ghosts have no blood.”

The girl bit her finger again and squeezed out more blood. The head sipped again, then said “Thank you” in a voice grown strong, and so beautiful, so resonant with tales untold, that Telesphora understood why fish had risen from the depths to listen, why animals had come out of the forest, and trees had hobbled after him on twisted roots.

“Tell on, I pray,” whispered Telesphora.

“Where was I?”

“You were saying how the gods found a terrible use for your talents while you were yet alive.”

“Oh, yes,” spoke the head. “You see, ghosts can die too. They die when they are forgotten. At the precise moment that they vanish from memory, they vanish also from Tartarus. Now, this is intolerable for the gods who have prescribed eternal torment for the dead. Therefore did Hades decree that a minstrel was to be provided. He was to be taken alive, brought down here to witness the ordeal of the damned, and then sent back to the upper world to sing of what he had seen—thus, keeping memory green, and keeping the tortured ghosts conscious of pain.”

“And you were the minstrel they chose?”

“I was. They killed my wife, Eurydice, and tempted me down here while I was yet alive, implanting me with the hope that I might bring her out of this place. I came down and saw what was to be seen, and was tricked out of my wife and returned to the upper world to bear witness—precisely as they wished me to. So that now, preserved in my song, Sisyphus still rolls his stone, and starving Tantalus snaps at fruit that sways away from his mouth.”

“And that is why they want your head here now—to keep bearing witness?”

“That is why,” said Orpheus. “My voice has outlived my body, and this head is its vault—which Hecate has preserved against decay so that it can roll about among the racks, the wheels, the dungeons, and the fire pits. My testimony, drifting up from these chasms, enters the wind and whispers among the treetops, making the river reeds shudder with its tale. Fishermen hear it, men drinking, girls bathing. They tell it to others. It grows with repetition, so that every generation is taught anew of man’s duty and the

gods' vengeance. But you weep, you weep, beautiful, warm, fragrant, undead girl—you weep!”

His voice was fading again. Because she had no more blood to give him, she scooped up the head and held it to hers. Orpheus drank her tears, and his voice grew strong again. She stood there in the vast murky plain, cradling the head. Holding him like that, she told him about her life on earth. About the great doctor, Asclepius, and the way he saved people from death, and how she had helped him. She told Orpheus how she had taught herself to drain her strong body of its strength and let the vital energy soak into the dying so that they might revive—and how she would renew herself in the morning. Finally she told him how she had been surprised by an old woman who had pretended to be ill, had claimed her last bit of energy—and then, when she was too weak to defend herself, had strangled her.

“It’s as I thought,” said Orpheus. “You’re not quite dead. You must have a god or goddess in your lineage somewhere, and have inherited a freakish spark of immortality. That is why that false hag—who sounds much like Hecate, incidentally—could not quite kill you.”

“Well, alive or dead, I’m here,” said Telesphora. “And must make the most of it.”

“No, my girl,” said Orpheus. “What you must do is try to escape. The torments here are bad enough for those dulled by death; for the living they would be unbearable.”

“I am here,” said Telesphora. “And where there is so much suffering I shall find occupation. But this place is so vast, so dark ... I’ll find my way about, though.”

“You must have struck off on your own right after crossing the Styx,” said Orpheus. “You cannot have visited Lethe’s fountain, or you wouldn’t be remembering your life on earth.”

“What is this fountain?”

“A gushing spring tended by a nymph named Lethe. The newly dead are taken there first and are served a cupful of oblivion.”

“I don’t understand.”

“In Lethe’s fountain run the waters of forgetfulness. One drink and the shade forgets his life on earth, forgets those he loved and who loved him—and is able to enter upon his new ordeal without rancor or regret. It is the only kindness he will know in this place.”

“I’ll go there now,” said Telesphora.

“To drink the waters?”

“No, I shan’t drink. I want to remember, not forget. But I also want to see everything that happens down here.”

“You are absolutely resolved upon this?”

“I am.”

“Then I shall be your guide,” said the head. “I know every corner of this damned realm. I’ll roll before you as you go.”

“Won’t you be punished for helping me?”

For the first time, Orpheus smiled. “What can they do to me that has not yet been done?” he asked.

The head pivoted on its neck and rolled away. Telesphora followed.

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The Rebel Shade

Telesphora, somehow, provided herself with a huge water skin, the kind that caravanning merchants used when making a long journey across a dry place. She took the water skin to Lethe's fountain and began to fill it. Lethe saw what the strange shade was doing; she was about to protest, but forgot the matter before she could say anything. For she drank from her own fountain, and was very forgetful.

Then, Telesphora found the ghost of a horse so faithful that when its master was killed in battle it had leaped off a cliff, ending its own life so that it might follow him to Tartarus. But the warrior ghosts had forgotten their feuds and fought no battles, and the war-horse had little now to do and was glad to be pressed into service by Telesphora.

She draped the water skin over the horse's withers and, guided by the head of Orpheus, set off to visit the tormented. Orpheus understood the dreadful risk she was running, but also knew that he would not be able to dissuade her. So he led her to where the torments were worst.

She visited Tantalus, who had been denied food and drink until he was wild with hunger and parched with thirst. He stood in a stream of crystal water under apple trees whose boughs, laden with delicious fruit, bent invitingly toward him. But when he tried to reach for an apple, the boughs swayed gently away, keeping their fruit just out of reach, and he could never eat. But worst of all was thirst. When he bent to the crystal pool, the waters shrank away from his lips, and he could not drink a drop. There he stood, waist-deep in sparkling water under the apple trees, eternally reaching for the fruit, eternally stooping to drink, and eternally denied. Was denied again, but forgot again, and hoped again.

Telesphora wet her hand with Lethe's water and flicked her fingers at Tantalus. A drop fell on his parched lips, and he immediately forgot all the

times he had been refused food and drink. Now, when he reached for an apple or stooped for the water, he did so with fresh hope.

“Take me somewhere else!” cried Telesphora.

“Have you really helped him?” asked Orpheus.

“He’ll still suffer,” said the girl, “but perhaps a little less. And where suffering is concerned, my doctor teaches, a little less is more than it seems.”

The head rolled on and led Telesphora to a hill, which was the site of a unique punishment. Here, a man named Sisyphus, hated by the gods, had been condemned to roll a huge stone up the hill. But each time, just as the summit was reached, the rock rolled back, and he had to resume his task at the bottom of the slope and so on through eternity.

When Telesphora approached, she saw him just as he was reaching the summit. His back was bowed, his mighty arms braced, his legs pushing. The rock stopped. The man’s legs were working so hard his feet dug into the slope. The rock began to roll backward. The man could not stop it. It gathered speed. It would have rolled over him had he not flung himself hurriedly out of the way.

Telesphora came closer. She saw the man walking slowly downhill after the rock that had now reached the bottom—saw hopeless pain on his face. She dipped out a cupful of Lethe’s water. Sisyphus looked at her blankly. Gently, she made him drink it. His face lighted up. Eagerly, he approached the rock and began to push it uphill, as if for the first time.

Orpheus and the girl and the horse watched as Sisyphus rolled the rock up again. They watched the rock slow down, come to a halt. The man struggled with the rock. They watched him follow the rock as it rolled down. But now he wore no look of agony. He looked determined and slightly eager, like one about to attempt a task for the first time.

“You see, this is what the doctor told me,” said the girl to the head as they left the hill. “The essence of torment is hopelessness—endless performance of the same action without result. But forgetting restores hope and eases pain. Whom do we visit next?”

Orpheus didn’t have time to answer. He heard the sound he had been fearing most: brass wings clattering, brass claws chiming, and the savage shriek of Harpies hunting. The horse reared up and galloped away.

Two hags dived upon Telesphora. They lifted her into the air and flew away with her.

She was taken to the Judgement Seat. Hades sat on his ebony throne, listening silently as Hecate charged the girl with the most serious crime that can be committed in hell: Dispensing Forbidden mercies. And the assembled demons howled with glee as Hades declared her guilty and pronounced sentence.

The Harpies, led by Hecate, immediately took her to the deepest part of Tartarus and chained her to a shaft of rock. She was shackled in such a way that she could not move her head. Nor could she close her eyes, for they were propped open with splinters.

And so, Telesphora was punished in the cruelest way possible—through her compassion. She was forced to watch someone being tormented in an unspeakable manner. She became witness to ceaseless agony, and could not look away.

The Descent

Although he had known her only a short time, Orpheus had learned to love the vibrant spirit that was Telesphora. And he could not bear what was happening to her.

“If Asclepius is really a son of Apollo,” he thought, “perhaps he can get his father to help.”

So Orpheus tried to send a message to the doctor in the only way he knew—through song. His voice entered the waters of the Phlegethon, was carried by underground streams into the river that flowed through the hospital grounds of Asclepius, and invaded the doctor’s dreams.

A head floated into his sleep, and he heard a voice of such power and beauty that he felt his bones melting.

“Telesphora needs you!” called the voice. “A spark of life still burns in your murdered girl. But pain will quench it unless you can pluck her out of the bowels of hell.”

Not knowing whether he was awake or asleep, but knowing that it didn’t matter, Asclepius arose from his pallet and went out into the summer night. The head had vanished, but he could still hear the voice singing, and he followed the lingering sound. Through forest and field he followed the voice as it wound its way among birdcall. Nor did he lose it in the pounding of the surf as it led him along the shore, nor in the howling of the wind as he struck inland and began to climb a mountain.

Up one mountain, down another, through a valley, up the next mountain to the dry bed of a lake, and across that stony lake bed to the mouth of a yawning chasm, which he didn’t know was Avernus. But he realized it must be the secret entrance to Hades’ realm, known only to Orpheus.

The doctor hadn’t eaten or slept since leaving his bed in Thessaly. The thought of Telesphora filled him with a bitter energy, and he did not allow

himself to grow weary. Into the chasm he descended. The deeper he went the darker it grew, until he was groping in total darkness. He heard a thin twittering. Heard leathery wings flapping close to his head. Felt claws skimming his hair. He picked up two stones and clapped them together as he walked. For the keen-eared bats, he knew, disliked loud noises.

All this time, he was following the thread of Orpheus' song, winding up to him from far below.

Finally, the path seemed to level off; blackness grew brown. A brown fog swirled about him. He came out of the cave and was in the open now. A wind blew, laden with mist, tinged with the smell of sulphur. It blew the fog into tatters, but Asclepius still had difficulty seeing where he was going. Something gleamed near his feet. He stooped and saw that it was a pair of eyes, and that the eyes were in a head that stood on a stalk of neck, the same head that had floated into his dreams.

And the same melodious voice said, "Welcome, doctor."

"Greetings, Orpheus. Thank you for leading me here. But how cold this mist is. It chills me to my marrow. I thought hell was hot."

"A common delusion. Hell is cold—not specifically, but indifferently. Only our roasting pits are hot."

"Do I see lights far off?" asked Asclepius.

"That is the pearl and crystal roof of our lord's palace, in Erebus. In the great throne room sit Hades and Persephone. Huge, black-robed, and terrible is Hades, receiving the twittering petitions of the drifting dead—which he always ignores."

"Is that where we're going?"

"It's a splendid sight, but I do not recommend it. You are an intruder here. If discovered, you will be horribly punished. There is a pleasant sound of bells in the dusk of those palace grounds, but that chiming is made by the brass wings of Harpies, whose queen is Hecate. Should they sniff a living mortal—and with all due respect, your spoor is strong, brother, carnally strong—if they should sniff you out, they would swoop upon you, seize you in their brass claws, and scourge the flesh from your bones with their stingray whips. However, I know a way to bypass the palace."

"Never has detour seemed more attractive."

"This way then," said the head.

They went in silence until they came to a broad cypress-lined avenue. “This is the Road Away,” said the head. “We must follow it.”

Asclepius saw shapes beneath the trees. They stood in a silent double row, facing each other.

“What are they?” he whispered. “Sentries?”

“Statues. Come, we must pass between them.”

The head rolled swiftly, leading Asclepius through the aisle of statues. He followed very slowly. A strange reluctance clogged his pace. He felt the air grow thick and resistant, as if he were pushing through an invisible hedge. A torpor invaded him. He looked up into the stone faces. They were in pairs — middle-aged men and women, mostly, who stood upon their pediments, facing each other. Some were younger, some older, but most were in their middle years. He saw that the couples were looking at each other out of their stony eye pits. They were carved of dark marble, stiff and lifeless, but it was their stares, he knew, meeting in midair, that made the space between them so resistant.

“We must take another way,” he cried. “I cannot pass between.”

“You must. It is the only way.”

“Who are they? Why do they glare at each other so?”

“They are those who, in life, turned each other to stone.”

“I don’t understand,” said Asclepius.

“You have heard the story, no doubt, of the young sculptor favored by Aphrodite because he carved one hundred statues of beautiful young girls and gave every one of them her face and form. Finally, he fell in love with the most beautiful statue of all—and was going mad trying to make it respond. But Aphrodite was so pleased to know that even a marble likeness of herself could rob a man of his wits, that she turned the statue into a living girl, and made the sculptor happier than any mortal had ever been. His name was Pygmalion, and hers, Galatea.”

“A charming tale,” said Asclepius. “But what does it have to do with these statues here?”

“These people were Pygmalions in reverse. They chose each other as mates, lived with each other—but in time, froze each other’s responses. They took warm living creatures and turned them into stone. Now, having shed their mortal casing, they are imprisoned in marble effigies of their own

deed, and must stand face to face through eternity, staring at each other in silent reproach.”

Asclepius was weeping. Hot tears burned his face. But the sadness of the tale turned his attention from himself. His torpor fled. He was filled again with bitter salt energy, and walked swiftly, following Orpheus between the statues.

A cold wind blew. The cypress needles clashed. There was another sound—low and hollow. Asclepius stopped, aghast. “They speak!” he cried. “The statues speak!”

“It is the wind whistling through their earholes,” said Orpheus.

“It sounds like voices saying, ‘No! No!’”

“That is the word they spoke most often while alive,” said Orpheus. “It is the only word left to them now.”

Asclepius stopped again. He was standing between two taller statues of extraordinary beauty—a young man and a young woman, and even in cold hard stone, their faces glowed with quenchless vitality. A light clung to the carved faces as if a rosier marble had been used. Both wore short tunics. The man held a leaf-bladed hunting spear. The woman held the collar of a stone hound, lithe as a panther.

“Come,” said Orpheus. “I pray you, hasten. We are still too near the palace grounds.”

But Asclepius could not stop looking at the marble woman. Her legs were so long, so suavely powerful. The cant of her shoulder and the thrust of her hip as she held the great dog reminded him of Telesphora, and he began to weep once more. The hot tears fell on the stone feet. He wrenched himself away and stumbled on.

“I hate this place,” he said.

“Of course,” said the head. “That’s the idea.”

The avenue wound among cypresses. There were no more statues. The head rolled faster and Asclepius picked up his pace. He heard a rumbling and whirled in his tracks. The statue of the woman was walking after him. Her live feet had broken the stone; her big, bare, sinewy feet were stepping through the dust on the road. Pieces of marble still clung to them—like eggshell to a new chick. The stone dog ran alongside. Behind them strode the statue of the man.

Asclepius paused. They approached and stopped. He was flanked by two towering stone figures. They looked down at him.

“Thank you, stranger,” said the young woman in her windharp voice. “The hot juice of your compassionate heart overflowed your eyes and awakened my feet from their stone sleep. I have come off my pedestal to abide with you as you walk your dire ways.”

“I abandoned her in life,” boomed the stone man. “Where she goes now, there must I also go, through every avenue of hell. I thank you also, live little fool, who comes at your own invitation. And shall abide with you in dire ways.”

“Come!” called the head. They moved on.

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A Hellish Battle

Walking between the statues of hunter and huntress, Asclepius followed the head as it threaded its way among shafts of stone. The huge pillars of rock thrust straight up and lost themselves in darkness. Asclepius didn't know it, but he was moving among those spurs of rock belonging to the root system of Olympus.

Chained upright to the most massive of these pillars was a naked body towering higher than the tallest tree. Its ceaseless sobbing was like wind in the top branches of a cedar. Harpies wheeled about the great bearded face. They had long since torn out his eyes, but dipped, sipping at the blood, which welled like tears out of the empty sockets.

"Who?" whispered Asclepius.

"Tityus," said the head of Orpheus. "Mightiest of the ancient Titans, who led a revolt against Zeus."

Asclepius breathed a foul stench. The Harpies had torn the Titan's stomach open and were gorging themselves on the stinking viscera—which grew again, as they were being eaten, so that his pain might never cease.

"Come," said the head. "We must pass under him."

"Why?"

"She whom you seek is in the deepest part of Hades' realm, called Tartarus. And the Titan's legs frame the portal of that place."

The head rolled on. And as Asclepius followed, he knew that he was entering the entrails of hell.

The air darkened. The heavy sulphurous light became tan, then brown; there was a smell of smoke, but no flicker of flame. Asclepius toiled on. The head rolled before him. The stone couple and the stone dog rumbled behind.

He heard men and women screaming, demons laughing. Agonized rattling screams that became small, helpless, puppy-like whimperings. The laughter was wild and mirthless, rising as the screams died. Asclepius froze. He could go no farther. The head rolled back.

“This is no place to stop and gawk, my friend! Spectators are too often persuaded to play more active roles.”

“Is this the place of torment?” asked Asclepius.

“One of them,” answered the head.

“Who is screaming so dreadfully?”

“The younger brother of Tityus, who also conspired against Zeus. We are coming to his site of punishment.”

“I don’t want to see it.”

“Unfortunately, she whom you seek is also there.”

The head rolled swiftly on. Asclepius raced to follow, and came upon the worst sight he had ever seen. Chained to a shaft of rock was a magnificent young Titan being eaten by a serpent. Although his capacity for pain was as limitless as his strength had been, his pride was even stronger, and he was trying to bite back his screams as the huge speckled serpent twined about him, devouring his flesh. Through his horror and outrage, Asclepius felt his doctorly instincts stirring, and found himself studying the anatomy of the Titan’s ordeal.

Being of divine stock, the Titan could not wholly die, but his flesh was not wholly renewed, and Asclepius recognized that the spectacle of his own mutilation would be a special cruelty to the beautiful young giant who had exulted so in the strength of his body. Thus it was that he had lost an arm and a leg. His head was intact, but the thorax had been eaten away; only the mighty spool of his backbone linked the mangled cavity of his chest to his pelvis.

The serpent twined, weaving colors; grey melted into green, and tan into grey again—a looping, sliding dance of colors, climaxed by a smooth thrust of tapered head as it touched the Titan and pulled away, swallowing a goblet of flesh. And then, Asclepius saw something even more horrifying.

Beyond Titan and serpent was Telesphora, shackled to another pillar of rock. Asclepius heard her moaning. He drew his sword.

“Put it back!” said Orpheus. “That beast will take you in one gulp, like a grass snake eating a frog.”

“I have to do something!”

“Not with a sword. That is Hades’ own serpent, the simplified shape of evil. It moves faster than the eye can see. If you come near, it will cast a single loop, wrap you in a cable of living muscle, drag you to its maw, and swallow you alive. You will not even be granted the boon of fangs, but feel your bones pulping on the way down.”

“Nevertheless,” said Asclepius, “I must do what I can.”

Again he raised his sword.

“No!” cried Orpheus. “Let me try something first. Once, when I was young, courting a nymph who lived in Libya, I was attacked by a tiger. I had no weapon but my lyre. I began my song as the beast crouched to spring—a lullaby, so slumberous the tiger fell asleep. He slept until I awakened him, then followed me like a house cat. I know my voice has become rusty, but let me see what I can do.”

Asclepius lowered his sword. The head began to sing:

Who quenched your eye and muffled your sense?

Who has enslaved the ancient king?

It was she, she.

She was created before all creation;

Out of her came the first darkness.

She divided into light and darkness.

From her womb flowed snakes of light;

And she named you Ophion or Moon-snake.

Ophion was your name.

Her belly swelled like a storm cloud;

She bore a son who swore to kill you.

You were angry, serpent, with a terrible anger,

Your mother sang to you—a lulling song, a spell;

The wind was in it and the few created things.

The song was a spell, the first charm,

Full of sleep and magic—like bees buzzing,

Like a spinning wheel. She spun life on the wheel,

And you turned it—spun goats, fish, mice.

She cut the earth with a sharp piece of bone,

Your leg bone. Your legs folded
Into your belly. You had to crawl on your belly.
She filled a bladder with moon-fire and mice;
It burst into rain. For forty days,
The moon-fire rained jewels and flowers and tigers.
The mice became demons to serve your angry son.

And that infant, guarded by spiked demons,
Grew apace, maturing in eight days.
On the ninth day he put his heel to your head
And pronounced himself king.
Who quenched your eyes and muffled your sense
And stole your name? Do you know? Do you know?

So Orpheus sang, and the snake seemed to listen. Its loops slackened; it ceased to forage the Titan's raw bones. Its lifted head was weaving slightly to the music.

The statue had moved closer and stood silently, listening.

Who quenched your eyes and stole your name?
Do you know? Do you know?

And, as the beast seemed to be yielding to the honeyed slumber in that magic voice, the head of Orpheus advanced, not rolling in its usual way, because that would have blotted the sound, but hopping on its neck stump.

Ancient sire, fallen king, do you know?
Do you know?

The tapered head swayed heavily, sleepily. Orpheus moved closer, singing. Then slowness melted horribly into speed. The snake's head dipped as the living cable of the 60-foot body uncoiled in a blur of movement. In a loathsome mime of kissing, the rubbery lips moved over the song-rapt bearded face. Asclepius tried to close his eyes, but it happened too fast. He saw the snake swallow the head of Orpheus like a child eating an apple.

He heard himself yelling. He rushed forward and slashed at the serpent with his sword.

But the blade never touched the mottled scales. The serpent moved too swiftly, sliding away from his blow and casting a single loop about

Asclepius, binding his arms to his sides. He felt a paralyzing constriction. The sword fell from his hand. The breath rushed out of his lungs in a moaning gasp, and he could not draw another. The pressure was unbearable. He felt his arms mashing into his ribs. Darkness swarmed.

He heard a rustling, a grinding, a phlegmy scream, and thought, "I am dead. My shade has been taken to the Lake of Fire. I hear the voices of those swimming in the flame."

The pressure eased. Air rushed into his lungs. The loop had slackened. He fell out of the coil. He tried to stand but could not. He coughed and spat blood. He moved his arms. The pain blinded him, but pain pierced his fog. His sight cleared. He pulled his sword to him and, using it as a cane, climbed to his feet. Retching and spitting blood, he leaned against a rock and watched the statues fighting the serpent.

The stone hands of the hunter were clamped about the serpent below its head, and he was trying to throttle the beast. The snake had cast its loops about the statue and was squeezing him to a pulp. Marble had begun to crack off the petrified shade of the dead hero, and Asclepius saw the pink pulsing mist of his spirit at the core of stone.

The huntress was helping her husband. Her tall legs were flexing in a beautiful curve of marble threw as she leaped high in the air and fell with all her tremendous weight on the middle part of the serpent's body. The stone girl was leaping twice her height and falling upon the giant snake, crushing the thick cable of bone and muscle like a gardener crushing a worm with a spade. Again and again she leaped and dropped, breaking her own body with every fall—until she lay motionless upon the mottled green coils, her stone carapace shattered. The pink mist of her spirit was fuming out and mixing with the hissing blood of the serpent.

All this while the great jaws of the stone dog were savaging the snake, striking here and there, driving stone teeth into leather body.

And the stone man still grappled the monster; it was now a death grip. Blood spurted from the lidless eyes. The tapered head lolled. The coils went slack. The stone man collapsed, tried to rise, but could not. Asclepius watched him drag himself toward the huntress. She pulled herself to her shattered knees and crept toward him.

They stretched out their hands. Both collapsed. With their last strength they reached toward each other. Their hands met, clasped, and were still.

These two, hunter and huntress, whose marriage had failed, and whose shades had been frozen into stony shapes of reproach and remorse, staring at each other out of great scooped eyes—these two, wakened from rancorous stupor by the hot tears of a living man, had attached themselves to his deed, and, sanctified by generous risk, had, in their last gesture, annulled their failure. Shells shattered, they forgave each other before an expert witness, departed hell, and entered legend.

Asclepius had no time to mourn them. He ran toward Telesphora, leaping over the fallen statues, trying not to look down at them but unable to avoid a glimpse. He saw that the shattered stone, spirit departed, had lost luster and individuality, and had merged with the rubble of that penitential field.

Asclepius stepped over the coils of the dead serpent and reached Telesphora, who stared at him in wonder. He lifted his sword and struck twice. His blade sheared through her chains.

Tenderly, he drew her out of her shackles. They embraced. “Come ... let us return to earth,” he said.

“Can we really leave?” she whispered. “They’ll be after us, won’t they, those horrible winged hags?”

“They can’t be worse than that serpent. And we escaped him.”

“Yes, we did!” cried Telesphora. “Let’s go, dear doctor. Let’s start.”

Hand in hand, they began their journey out of the underworld. Harpies observed them, and reported to Hecate, who hurried to confer with Hades. He listened to her silently, then said:

“What do you propose?”

“To take them, of course,” said Hecate.

“Consider this, O Hag. If we keep them down here with their obsessive yen for easing pain and their combined skills, they will always be trying to disrupt our torments. They’ll be a constant source of trouble.”

“But,” said Hecate. “If we allow them to return to earth they will continue to postpone death for their patients, and reduce our intake.”

“Only so long as they live,” said Hades. “And by the nature of things, that can’t be much longer than the mortal span. So if we wait for a bit, they will fall into our hands in a natural way; no fuss, no family quarrels. Yes, we can afford to let them go. We’ll get them back one day. When we do, we’ll teach them to regret their damned good works, won’t we?”

“We will, master, we will! And perhaps relish our vengeance all the more for the delay.”

So Asclepius and Telesphora were allowed to return to earth and take up their practice where they had left off. And, it is told, the doctor began by restoring the girl to full health. It is also told that they interrupted their labors long enough to get married. They had many children and grandchildren, and all of them, legend says, practiced medicine.

What happened later to their shades, we do not know. And, perhaps, we don't want to.

Things have shrunk since then. Giants are freaks; dragons are flies; heroes are sandwiches; monsters eat cookies. Demons have shrunk too, become so tiny that they are invisible, but still plague humankind, more expertly than ever, attacking from within. We don't know where Hecate is, exactly, but Harpies still fly.

And sometimes, when the wind is right, and if we listen very, very, carefully, we can hear the voice of Orpheus singing of things that happened long ago.

BERNARD EVSLIN

MONSTERS OF
GREEK MYTHOLOGY

VOLUME TWO



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Monsters of Greek Mythology

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THE HYDRA

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In one version of this tale, it was not Hercules but the heroic physician, Asclepius, who fought the monster and cut off its hundred poison heads—which immediately turned into a hundred streams of pure healing waters. And this, in turn, led to a whole theory of pharmacology. In the spirit of that earlier legend, I dedicate this book to

BILL EVSLIN

wonderful son and superb doctor

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Characters

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods
(ZOOS)

Hera Zeus's wife, Queen of the Gods
(HEE ruh)

Hermes Zeus's son, the Messenger God
(HUR meez)

Hecate Queen of the Harpies
(HECK uh tee)

Iris Rainbow Goddess, messenger to Hera
(EYE rihs)

Titans

Boreas The North Wind
(BOH re ahs)

Eurus The East Wind
(YOO ruhs)

Notus The South Wind
(NOH tuhs)

Zephyrus The West Wind
(ZEF ehr uhs)

Mortals

Hercules Strongest man in the world
(HER ku leez)

Iole Daughter of Iris, a very determined girl
(EYE oh lee)

Eurystheus King of Mycenae, Hercules' taskmaster
(yoo RISS thee
uhs)

Copreus Doer of dirty jobs for Eurystheus

(COH pre uhs)

Monsters

The Hydra A hundred-headed reptile, extremely lethal
(HY druh)

Cancer A giant crab

Others

Meadow Nymphs

Frost Demons

Arctic Wolves

Arctic Owls

Polar Bears

A Flock of Tiny Tailors

War of the Winds

Long ago, when the world was very new, the silver-eyed Titan, Astraeus, trysted in a corner of the sky with Eos, the dawn goddess, siring the Four Winds and a litter of stars.

The Wind Titans quartered the earth, each dwelling in his own castle—Notus in an ivory pile on the southern edge of things; Eurus in a jade palace on the eastern edge; kindly Zephyrus in an oaken tower on the western rim, while brutal, blustering Boreas dwelt in the north in a castle whose beams were walrus tusk and mammoth bone, whose walls were solid blocks of ice.

Boreas slept through the summer and awoke in early autumn, raging with hunger and evil tempered, ready to howl across the sky, bending trees and breaking ships, toppling hillside villages into the valleys below, and sweeping coastal villages into the sea.

Eurus, the East Wind, was of a less violent nature than Boreas but could be deadly in his own way, striking suddenly out of fair skies. He was a menace to shipping when his mood was foul, and was much feared by mariners. He was especially cruel and capricious in the springtime, and seamen then were careful to keep lee shore to the eastward. At other times he would hover over swampland, drawing in great breaths of pestilential air and letting them out in malarial gusts so that people sickened and died.

Notus was also treacherous. At times he would blow warmly out of the south, scattering clouds and drying the fields. Often, though, he drove cold rain before him, and savage hailstorms that could scythe down a season's crop in a single night.

But the West Wind, Zephyrus, was a friend to man. He came in the spring with warm gentle showers. And the waters of the melting snow and the warm rain sank into the earth and brought up flowers and young trees and all the crops that feed mankind.

The Wind brothers were not sociable. They did not mingle with the other Titans, nor, indeed with any of the god tribe—with one exception.

They passionately followed Iris, the rainbow goddess, who appeared after storms, casting her arch of colors across the new-washed sky. The Winds hovered, watching as she danced on her radiant bow and sang a fair-weather song. For three of the winds had fallen madly in love with her.

But she ignored the tempestuous wooing of Boreas, and the rich gifts of Eurus, and the honeyed words of Notus. She preferred Zephyrus—who loved someone else.

So the Winds went to war.

Eurus and Notus, although rivals for Iris's affections, were quite willing to join forces against Boreas, who was much the strongest of the brothers. Once rid of him, they thought, they would be able to fight it out between themselves on more or less equal terms.

Choosing a time when Boreas was sleeping his summer sleep, the South Wind blew into the arctic wastes, melting the ice floes, making the sea swell into a mighty flood. The East Wind, who had been waiting to strike, now blew at an angle, whipping the swollen seas into a huge torrent that rushed toward the North Wind's castle, threatening to drown him as he slept.

But it was very dangerous to arouse Boreas. Awakened too soon by the roaring of a strange surf, he saw a mass of wind-driven waters cresting toward his castle. Angrier than he had ever been before in his wrathful life, he filled his chest with icy air and blew it out in a blast that froze the waters, forming an ice mountain where there had been a flat stretch of permafrost.

But the stilling of the waters did not quench his fury. He immediately launched a counterattack. Blackening the sky with his cape, he stormed out of the north, hurling gales before him—which grew to hurricane force as their coldness met the warmer airs. Leaving a swath of destruction in his wake, Boreas flew farther south than he had ever been—over deserts and jungles. And the people there, and the apes and elephants and lions and zebras, whimpered and shuddered and stared at the sky from which strange white stuff was falling. The terrible cold whiteness lay on the ground like a shroud. Indeed, hordes of those who dwelt in southern lands froze to death.

Then the North Wind turned east. He roared over the rain forests, freezing man and beast, and sheathing the trees in ice so that they glittered

and chimed. All the way to the eastern rim of the world Boreas flew, and blew down the wonderful jade palace belonging to Eurus before turning north again.

Eurus and Notus knew when they were beaten. They sent messages of surrender to Boreas, humbly begging his pardon and asking to meet with him so that they might apologize properly. Traveling north in abjectly gentle breezes they visited Boreas in his ice castle, and begged him to grant a truce.

Huge, fur clad, he sat on his walrus-ivory throne, frowning down at them as they stammered out their apologies. In the enormous, freezing throne room, where arctic wolves prowled like hounds and great white arctic owls flew like parakeets, the North Wind sat in state, and his younger brothers trembled before him.

“I shall pardon you on one condition,” he growled. “You must promise to abandon all claim to Iris.”

“We do! We do!” cried Eurus.

“But,” said Notus slyly, “we are not the problem, you know. She looks with favor upon none of us. For some weird reason she seems to prefer Zephyrus.”

“Nonsense!” roared Boreas. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I happened to meet a meadow nymph whose clan gathers wildflowers for the colors that Iris flings across the sky. And she told me that all the nymphs are gossiping about this. For when Iris touches earth, she wanders about, murmuring ‘Zephyrus ... Zephyrus ...’ and gazes yearningly westward.”

“I’ll give those gabby sluts something else to wag their tongues about,” said Boreas. “Iris will be mine before the month is out.”

“How will you manage that, noble sir?” asked Notus.

“In my own way, the simple direct North Wind way. I’ll snatch her out of the sky and bring her here. And keep her close until she agrees to marry me.”

“A brilliant plan,” cried Eurus. “Bold and brilliant. Is there any way we can help?”

“I need no help from pitiful puling puffs of nothing like you two. Just skulk back to your own lairs and stay there until I give you permission to leave.”

“Thank you, mighty Brother,” cried Notus. “May your courtship be prosperous.”

“Get out,” growled Boreas.

And the South Wind and the East Wind bowed and smirked their way out of the ice castle, vowing to each other never to cross their powerful brother again, no matter what.

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Young Hercules

At the age of fifteen Hercules was still only half grown, but bigger than most men, and much stronger. He had stopped wrestling with other boys because he was afraid of hurting them. Yet, he knew, he had to find some way of using the perilous strength he had been given. At times he felt that only the iron hoops of his ribs kept his energy caged, kept it from bursting his keg of a chest and splitting him like an overripe melon.

So he sought ways of spending his energy. He uprooted small trees and wrestled yearling bears. It was at this time that the vengeful North Wind blew too far south, bringing arctic weather to places that had never known real winter before. And when Hercules went out that day to seek bears to wrestle, he found a land transformed by snow. Although his body was almost hairless, his skin was tough as horsehide, and he was untroubled by the cold. In fact, he found the snow helpful. It held animal tracks, among them the imprint of bear paws—and this clear spoor, he knew, would save him hours of searching.

Now he had wrestled all the yearling bears in the Theban forests. They knew him well and enjoyed the wrestling as much as he did, and never used their teeth and claws against him. And now, when Hercules heard a bear growling savagely in the underbrush, he couldn't believe it was growling at him, but that it had been attacked by a lion—the only beast about that would dare attack a bear.

Hercules raced toward the sound to see if he could help. He had run only a few steps, however, when something came charging out of the brush. He stared in amazement. What he saw was a giant wearing armor, and it was growling like an angry bear. Looking more closely, he saw that it *was* a bear rearing up on its hind legs, but such a bear as he had never seen—a full-

sized one, sheathed in ice. The sun striking off the ice made it glitter like armor.

It moved toward him, growling more savagely than ever. Now bears do not usually grow angry unless they feel themselves threatened, or, in the case of a female, if she sees someone approaching her cubs. Thinking fast, Hercules realized what must have happened. This bear, emerging from a swim in the lake, had been caught in the sudden frost, and the water froze on its fur, sheathing it in ice. This made the beast very uncomfortable. And now, in confused rage, it sought someone to fix the blame on.

The huge glittering animal was very close now, and Hercules prepared to fight. It was his custom, in a fight, always to charge first. But he hesitated. He did not relish the idea of those arms closing about him in a mighty icy hug. Nor did he particularly want to hurt the bear. But it was coming at him; he had to do something. He cast his spear with the full-armed throw that could split a tree—and was astounded to see it skid off the bear, just chipping away a few flakes of ice. He realized then that the thick ice sheath was indeed like armor, but even better protection because it was slippery.

So Hercules, who had never avoided a fight in his short life, whirled now and raced away.

Denied his wrestling that day, and feeling himself aflame with the unfinished fight, he galloped home through the heavy snow, seeking the thickest drifts to plow through.

The weather warmed again, and spring resumed. The fund of wild energy that was in Hercules seemed to grow and grow. He wandered far from the city and began to climb mountains, the steeper the better, not plodding up, but running as hard as he could, and never stopping to rest.

One day, he came upon a range of foothills, not too high but quite steep, and he happily raced up one slope, over the top, down the back slope, and on to another hill—until he had done every one of the eight hills without stopping.

It was a hot day, and coming down the last hill he was delighted to find that a fast-moving stream was tumbling over a rocky ledge to become a waterfall. Without doffing his tunic, he jumped under the fall and stood under the icy shower, shouting with joy. Cooled off now, he began to explore, and found himself on a high meadow, cupped by the eight hills. It was the loveliest meadow he had ever seen, carpeted by wildflowers, a

great mix of them, filling the air with fragrance and the sleepy hum of bees, and blazing with sudden pure colors among thick grass and loose underbrush.

This meadow became young Hercules' secret place, and he came there as often as he could after wrestling bears, and uprooting trees, and racing up and down the hills. He was further delighted to find that the meadow was inhabited by a clan of flower nymphs, who spent part of each morning plucking the wild blossoms and steeping them in a great vat of springwater. As soon as they saw Hercules, though, they would leave the flowers to steep themselves and run across the meadow to dance with him.

At first, he thought they were making wine in the vat, but when he asked for a drink they laughed at him.

"That is not wine we're making," said a nymph named Numa, "but various dyes. For know, oh handsome youth, that we serve Iris, the rainbow goddess. Every so often she comes down here and dips her gauze into our vat; they become the colored streamers which she flings across the sky after a storm, and which then gather themselves into a great bridge of colors."

"Do you think I might see Iris sometime?" asked Hercules. "Will you tell me when she's about to visit?"

"No, we don't think so," said Numa. "She's enchantingly beautiful. Once you saw her you would fall in love with her and forget all about us."

"Love? Love ..." said Hercules. "I don't know. I told my mother I thought I was in love with all of you, but she laughed at me and said I was much too young to know what love was."

"Tell her we'll teach you," said the nymph.

When Hercules next came to the meadow, it seemed deserted. He listened for the happy voices of the nymphs, but did not hear them. Then he did hear something. It was not a happy sound. It seemed like the sound of weeping—not an ugly aggressive sobbing, but like the mourning of doves. He searched and found the nymphs huddled in a glade. All were weeping, but each one was trying to comfort the one next to her, while still weeping herself.

"What's the matter?" cried Hercules.

They lifted tear-stained faces to him. Then arose and surrounded him, all talking at once.

“One at a time,” said Hercules. “I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

Then Numa gestured the others to silence, and said, “Let me tell him. Remember that rainstorm we had last week? Well, when the air cleared, we watched the sky because we knew that after so hard a rain Iris would appear. And she did. She stretched her bow across the sky, and we rejoiced to see that one foot of it was planted here because that meant she would slide down and visit us. Then we saw her sliding. She grew larger and larger as we watched until we could see the yellow hair whipping about her face, and were calling to her joyously when, suddenly, the sky blackened, blotting the rainbow. An enormous black-caped figure came hurtling down toward Iris. It engulfed her, snatched her off her bridge of colors, took her into its darkness—spread the wings of its cape and flew north. Oh woe and wail away, our Iris was gone, our lovely goddess. She’s gone, gone, gone, and we’ll never see her again.”

“She’s a goddess, after all,” said Hercules. “And can escape from whatever monster it was that took her.”

“Ah, no,” said Numa. “It was no monster but a Titan, a Wind Titan, the most powerful of all. It was Boreas, the North Wind; we recognized him. And from his clutch no one escapes.”

“And he flew back north, you say?”

“Yes,” she said. “There he dwells in an ice castle on the very northern rim of the earth. And there, no doubt, he means to cage up our poor bright Iris, and freeze her into submission.”

“Farewell,” said Hercules.

“Where are you going?” cried the nymphs.

“North,” he said.

The Frost Demons

The fleet, joyful goddess who had used the entire blue vault of heaven as her playground was unprepared for captivity. As soon as she knew the great clutch of the North Wind upon her, when his black cloak quenched her colors, she felt so grossly violated that she wished to shed her immortality and die.

But she was a goddess. She could not die. She could suffer, but not die.

She tried to call for help. The terrible icy clutch froze the screams in her throat and she could utter no sound. Boreas clasped her to him as he flew northward. His cloak covered her body, but her head poked out, and she could watch the water sliding away far below.

She swooned briefly then. When she came to, she saw a whale spouting; its spume froze, glinting in the weak sunlight and casting fractured colors. The shards of light reminded her of her own blotted colors, and a hot pang of grief pierced her breast.

But the heat thawed her. Her courage awoke, and she began to think how she might free herself. "I'm supposed to have many friends," she thought. "Will they dare? Will they attempt to save me? Who among my admirers on Olympus will brave the North Wind's wrath? Oh, the gods can be courageous where their own interests are concerned, but they don't like to put themselves out for anyone else. There may be someone though. I can only hope there may be one who will follow me here and seek to rescue me. But how will anyone find me? Who could possibly guess that I've been taken to this icy waste? If I could only leave some kind of sign. But of course! There is one unmistakable sign of my presence. How stupid of me not to think of it before."

But she knew she could do nothing yet, so she bided her time. And when Boreas came to earth and began to drag her toward his ice castle, she

slipped his grasp and flung her colors into the sky—where they immediately froze.

And that arch of color frozen into the leaden sky was what Hercules saw as he approached the rim of the world. He knew then that he must be nearing the North Wind's castle and pressed forward with renewed hope.

Now, Boreas knew that he was well hated, and that many enemies wished his destruction. And while he also suspected that they were too much afraid of him to attempt an assault, he did not believe in taking chances and had surrounded himself with creatures so fearsome that no one would dare trespass.

The icy plain about his castle was the hunting ground of great wolves that would attack any stranger. Polar bears also prowled; they would devour anything that moved except their own cubs. Above hovered arctic owls, larger than eagles. Boreas used them like falcons. At his whistle they would stoop upon any living thing passing below, raking with their meat-hook claws, stabbing with their murderous beaks.

Worst of all, though, were the frost demons. They looked like living icicles, but were not made of ice. They were made of translucent metal with a vital thread of pink fire pulsing inside. Stumpy legs propelled their long tapering bodies with terrific speed. After a short run they would launch themselves, traveling through the air faster than any arrow shot from any bow. When their pointed heads hit their targets—tree, wall, beast, or armored man—they would pass right through and come out the other side.

Hercules' first impulse when faced by an enemy was to attack. And at this time he was very young and exceedingly rash. Nevertheless, he realized that this array of beasts and demons was far too formidable for him to make any headlong assault. His only remote chance of any kind of success, he knew, was to make a plan.

First he had to hide himself, for the wolves were already beginning to growl as if they had caught his scent, and the great owls were screaming overhead. Fortunately, the castle grounds were littered with bones and skulls of beasts that had been hunted and eaten. He dived among this rubble of bones, burrowed in and made a nest. From there he could peer out and see what was happening without being seen himself.

He stared in wonder at the enormous polar bears and the gigantic white wolves. He carefully studied the canopy of white owls. Most of all, though, he was impressed by those living weapons, the frost demons. He watched in astonishment as they hunted.

For the frost demons used themselves as augers. One of them would hurl itself into the air and come down headfirst. Its iron-hard pointed skull would drive a hole into the ice. Again and again it would do this, enlarging the hole. When it was large enough, the demon would crouch at its edge and wait there until a walrus poked its head out. Then the demon would seize the walrus by its tusks, flip it out of the water onto the ice, and eat it raw.

After the demons were sated and left their water holes, the polar bears would come and squat in their turn, waiting for walruses.

Watching them, Hercules began to put together a battle plan. It meant utter risk, he knew, but it was his one slim chance.

He waited until the frost demons had left the largest water hole and the polar bears had gathered. Then he burst from his nest of bones, hurtled across the ice, leaped mightily, turned in the air, and dived over the circle of bears—into the hole. He had gulped a great breath of air while diving and held that breath as he entered the water and felt the viselike cold trying to crush his rib cage.

He didn't linger in the water. All he wanted to do was to get wet. Groping with his hands, he found the rim of the hole and pushed down with all the strength of his arms while doing a frog kick with his legs—lifting himself into the air again, soaring the other way over the circle of bears.

The water froze on him before he hit the ground. Now he was encased in ice—just as that bear had been back in Thebes, that bear whose icy armor had stopped his spear.

Two polar bears closed with him. He stood there, legs planted. They couldn't knock him over. They tried to rake him with their claws, tried to crush him in their jaws, but neither fang nor claw could pierce the hard ice. He swung his arms like clubs; they cracked against the bears, smashing skulls. The polar bears fell.

Wolves attacked. They leaped upon this icy form, detecting the meat underneath. They tried to drag him down, savaging him with their teeth. They could not budge him; their fangs could not pierce the ice. He swung

his arms again, clubbing the wolves. They dodged away from him and fled, whimpering.

Now the frost demons attacked. On their stumpy legs they whizzed across the ground with terrific speed, launched themselves into the air and came toward him like a flight of living arrows. Pointed heads hit him, seven of them at once, and bore him to the ground. Then the demons leaped, turning in the air, diving down at him, trying to pierce him with their spearlike heads.

Chips of ice flew but the armor held. Hercules scrambled to his feet, grasped two of the demons about the middle, one in each hand, and, using them as weapons, stabbed each to death with the other. They kept attacking. Hitting him with such force that the ice chips flew, and he felt himself bruising inside his armor. But he kept catching the demons in his hands and two by two he stabbed them to death, using one against the other. Finally, those left alive retreated; they sped toward the castle to receive further orders from Boreas.

Whereupon Hercules proceeded with the rest of his plan. He fell to the ice and sprawled there, pretending to be too weak to arise. He lay still, waiting for an owl to attack. Sure enough, one of the great white birds, seeing him lie there, dived upon him, raking him with its meat-hook talons, stabbing with its beak. It chipped ice, but could not pierce it.

Hercules waited. Having wandered the beaches of his homeland all during his boyhood, he had become acquainted with seabirds, especially gulls, and one habit of theirs had kindled an idea. So he waited. The owl clutched him in its great talons, tried to pull him into the air. Hercules felt himself being pulled, but he knew he was too heavy for one bird. He heard the owl scream, heard others scream in response. Felt the shock as they landed on him.

Then, four of them fastened their talons on him. Beating their great wings, they labored upward. What they meant to do, he knew, was to take him high then drop him, hoping to crack his icy carapace—just as gulls drop clams onto rocks to break their shells.

Up, up they flew, up above the top of the frozen rainbow. At that point, Hercules suddenly thrashed his arms and legs—kicked free, and dropped. Reaching as far as he could, he just managed to grasp the rainbow and

clutch it fast. He balanced himself on the arch of colors and fought off the owls as they dived at him again.

He caught one by its beak, and with a whiplash movement broke its neck and flung it away. The others flew off, screaming. Hercules perched on the rainbow and fixed his eyes on the castle, waiting for Boreas to come out. He was one big bruise. Strangely enough, though, despite his casing of ice, his violent activity and the battle rage kept him warm.

He sat there, waiting. He knew that Boreas, when a wind, moved through the air as a vast disembodied force, too strong to be contained in any physique ... but that when he came to earth resumed his Titan form. Nevertheless, Hercules gasped when he saw what emerged from the castle. For Boreas was perhaps the largest of all the Titans.

Wrapped in his black cape, he looked like a hundred-foot cedar tree moving over the ground. Hercules held very still. The owls were still screaming above him. And Boreas, hearing them scream, strode toward the foot of the rainbow. Closer and closer he came.

Hercules waited. And when Boreas neared the foot of the rainbow, Hercules moved. He arose and leaped. Encased in his massive ice armor, he fell a quarter of a mile toward the Titan, picked up speed as he went. And fell upon Boreas like a thunderbolt, knocking him into the permafrost, driving him under.

Blood spread beneath the ice—the curious pink blood, called *ichor*, which runs in the veins of gods and Titans. Hercules knew that, wounded as he was, Boreas would have trouble floundering up again. How much time, though, this would give him he did not know. He raced toward the castle, calling, “Iris! Iris!”

Slow footed in his heavy casing of ice, he lumbered on, and tried to run faster when he heard a glad cry. Without stopping, he crashed into the bronze portal, burst it open, swept up Iris, who had been running to meet him. Cradling her in his arms, he raced away from the ugly pile that was the North Wind’s castle.

“Thank you ... thank you ...” said Iris. “Whoever you are, young stranger, thank you. For you alone have come to save me when no one else would.”

Reaching up, she wrapped her arms about his head and kissed the icy helmet that covered his head. Hercules, who had never been kissed by

anyone but his mother, blushed so hotly that his frozen casing melted, drenching the rainbow goddess. But she was crooning in delight, so overjoyed that she did not feel the icy cascade.

And Hercules ran faster than ever. For without his armor he did not wish to meet the frost demons again.

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Daughter of the Rainbow

Iris was a very busy goddess. In addition to her after-storm duties she served as Hera's messenger. And was so sweet natured and obliging that all the gods had fallen into the habit of asking her to do favors for them. Her popularity also enabled her to act as peacemaker. And she flitted about Olympus, seeking to patch up the feuds that simmered like heat lightning about the crags of the sacred mountain.

For all her busyness, however, she took better care of her child than most goddesses. She managed to spend at least one day a week with Iole, and had arranged with the flower nymphs to care for the little girl the rest of the time. Iole was very fond of the sleek laughing creatures, and was happy dwelling among them. She missed her mother, nevertheless, and was overjoyed when the gorgeous young goddess came to visit her.

Her favorite times were when they perched on top of the rainbow together, telling each other things. The little girl was growing very clever, and her quality of listening had a way of drawing the stories out of Iris. She would chatter by the hour, telling tales of the gods and goddesses, their loves and their quarrels, and their adventures among mortals. And Iole would listen and listen, and never forgot anything she heard.

But her favorite story was the one Iris told about herself—about the time she was abducted by the North Wind, and her fear and loathing of the brutal Boreas, and how she had grieved during her captivity, and how she had been rescued by the young Hercules. That was a story Iole could not get enough of; she made her mother tell it again and again, and if she changed a word, made her correct herself and tell it exactly the way she had told it the first time.

Iole, daughter of the rainbow, grew into a vivid girl—with curly red hair, golden skin, and jade-green eyes. Her short tunics were dyed in the

wildflower colors that her mother cast into the sky. And when she followed her mother, sliding joyously down the arch of colors, people watching below thought that a piece of the rainbow was breaking off.

Many a night the girl dreamed of the huge shy youth who had rescued her mother and melted the snow with his blushes when she tried to thank him with a kiss. And Iole resolved to make herself known to Hercules before she was twelve years old. As it happened, though, she was to meet him sooner than she expected.

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An Angry Goddess

Hera had summoned Hecate to Olympus. The two towering goddesses were conversing in the Garden of the Gods.

Hera said: “You know that Zeus has fettered us with a new law. No god, except for himself, of course, may kill more than five mortals a month. I, as Queen of the Gods, am allowed a larger quota—twelve. Now, that may sound sufficient but there’s a tricky clause to the law. A demigod’s life is valued at a much higher rate. And this is particularly irksome to me. I rarely concern myself with mortals; the chief targets of my wrath are demigods—as my husband well knows. For most demigods are his own children—by other females. That is why I hate them so. But I’m not allowed to kill any of these ill-begotten spawn without special permission from Zeus, who always denies me that permission.”

“Nevertheless,” said Hecate, “despite the law, demigods seem to be meeting with as many fatal accidents as they ever did.”

“Yes,” said Hera. “I’ve been able to contrive many such episodes. What I do is arrange for them to meet gigantic wild beasts and various monsters—encounters that they rarely survive. Which brings us to Hercules.”

“Yes, Hercules,” said Hecate. “We of the infernal regions have been observing his career with much distaste.”

“Distaste!” cried Hera. “Of all Zeus’s slimy sons I hate him the most. And am determined to kill him before the year is out.”

“Anything we can do to help?” asked Hecate.

“Indeed, yes. That is why I asked you to come here. So far he’s managed to vanquish everyone and everything I’ve sent against him—dragons and sea serpents and giants. What we need is something truly extraordinary in the way of monsters. And no one knows more about such matters than you do, oh Queen of Harpies.”

“Offhand I can think of two who might do the trick,” said Hecate. “The first that comes to mind is the Nemean Lion.”

“*Lion?*” said Hera scornfully. “No good against Hercules. He kills them like rabbits.”

“Not this one,” said Hecate. “The Nemean Lion is very special. Big as an elephant. Its teeth are ivory daggers, its claws like razor-sharp baling hooks. And its hide cannot be pierced by sword, spear, or arrow.”

“Sounds good,” said Hera.

“The second is even more deadly. It’s called the Hydra, and is the most dreadful of the monstrous brood spawned by Typhon and Echidna. It’s a dragon basically, but much larger, and has a hundred heads. And each of these heads has a hundred teeth—hollow teeth from which it squirts poison, the most potent ever known. One drop of this venom will burn a hole through a bronze breastplate and scorch flesh from bone, roasting the warrior inside his armor in a matter of seconds. The Hydra is so strong that even without poison it would be completely invincible. With one flail of its spiked tail it can scythe down a grove of trees or shatter a stone wall.”

“Sounds even better,” said Hera, smiling. “Hercules will meet the Hydra first, and I’ll save the lion for the next one on my hate list. I thank you, oh Hecate. Please do not hesitate to call upon me for any boon I may bestow.”

“I thank you, oh Queen,” said Hecate. “I’m sure the occasion will arise.”

“Farewell. Convey my greetings to my brother Hades.”

“Good hunting.”

Iole's Plan

Iole, who had taught herself to speak with various animals, was frisking with a fawn that day, when a nymph came running up to tell her that Iris had come to the meadow. Iole dashed across the radiant grass, crying, “Mother! Mother!”

Passing through a fringe of trees she heard a sound of weeping, and was amazed to see that it was her mother—who never wept—sitting on a tree stump, sobbing.

“What’s the matter, Mother? Why are you crying?”

“I’m grieved to the heart, Iole.”

“Why ... why?”

“Hercules is in dreadful danger,” whispered Iris.

“But he’s always in danger. That’s what he does, fights dangerous things ... and always wins.”

“Not this time, I’m afraid.”

“Why not? Why not?”

“Well, you know that I serve Hera, who is Hercules’ worst enemy. And I have done this more willingly because I thought that one day I might learn something that would help him. And now I have. But what I’ve learned is so dreadful that I fear no one can help him. For the past few months, you see, Hera has been growing angrier and angrier. For not one of her attempts to kill Hercules has succeeded. Our brave young man has vanquished dragons, giants, and a murderous selection of wild beasts. And with every one of his triumphs Hera’s temper has grown worse. Yesterday she sent me to the Underworld to fetch Hecate—and a dreadful trip it is, my child. Oh what agonies down below; how those poor shades are tormented in that ghastly realm.... Anyway, I did find Hecate, and gave her Hera’s message. And when she came to Olympus this morning, I hid in the garden so that I

might overhear their conversation. As I expected, Hera had sent for Hecate to seek her counsel. And that vicious Harpy was happy to oblige. She suggested two monsters that Hera might send against Hercules. And either one of them will finish him off.”

Iole had been stroking her mother’s head all this time, and Iris had stopped weeping. Now the girl asked, “Can you describe those monsters to me, Mother?”

And Iris did. Iole listened very carefully. When Iris had finished, the girl asked, “Which one is he to fight first?”

“Oh, the Hydra—because it’s the most deadly, and because Hera wants to kill our brave boy as soon as possible.”

“Mother, I have an idea. Did you say that this lion has a hide that no weapon can pierce?”

“So Hecate says, my child.”

“Listen then...” And Iole began to explain her idea. But Iris clapped her hand over the girl’s mouth.

“Hush,” she whispered. “Not here! The vengeful Hera sends her tattle-birds everywhere. One of them may be hovering now, trying to hear what we say. And will fly back immediately to tell all she has heard. Come to the waterfall, Iole, where the sound of the falling water will cover your words.”

The rainbow goddess and her daughter raced over the meadow to the waterfall. So light footed were they, the grass seemed scarcely to bend. Standing by the fall then, Iole explained her idea.

“Very clever indeed,” said Iris. “But for it to work, Hera must change her schedule.”

“That is up to you, Mother. You must find the wit to persuade her.”

“Alas, my child, you get your beauty from me, but I had no wit to bequeath you. You get that from your father—who has little else to recommend him.”

Iole furrowed her smooth brow, then smiled. “Mother, Mother, I think I know a way to persuade Hera. This is what you must say.”

She glanced up to make sure no tattle-bird was hovering, then, taking no chances, she put her mouth to her mother’s ear and whispered...

“Yes, that might work,” murmured Iris. “But let’s go over it again a few times. Tell me exactly what to say.”

“I will, Mother. And we’ll rehearse it again and again until you get it right.”

On Olympus the next day, Iris said to Hera, “I admire you for many things, my Queen, but most of all, perhaps, for your merciful nature.”

Hera stared at her in astonishment. Being so powerful and dangerous a goddess, she was used to overblown compliments, even from those who loathed her. But the most ardent flatterer had never called her merciful.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I am delighted to know that you plan to spare Hercules much suffering.”

“Do I? How?”

“Well,” said Iris, “from my perch in the sky I have been able to observe both the Nemean Lion and the Hydra. They are both fearsome, of course, but of the two, the Hydra is worse. It’s so poisonous that hounds sniffing at its footprints keel over and die. A single bite from any one of its ten thousand teeth kills instantly. Hercules won’t last the wink of an eye against the Hydra, but against the Nemean Lion he would last longer. He could not prevail; he would be mauled, clawed, chewed. The lion, in fact, would play with him as a cat does a mouse, and he would die in agony. But now, thanks to your tender heart, he will be spared that slow anguish. For he will not have to meet the lion, according to your plans. The Hydra will kill him first, and so quickly, so painlessly.”

“Why is his fate of such interest to you?”

“Well, my Queen, you know that he saved me once, some years ago, while he was still a lad. When the North Wind abducted me, it was Hercules who came after us, who penetrated those icy wastes, combated legions of frost demons—had the incredible bravery to assault the North Wind himself, and was able to carry me back to safety. My heart swells with gratitude whenever I think of him.”

“And mine with loathing,” cried Hera. “Do you not know that he whom you praise is the creature I find most hateful in the entire world?”

“I know you do, Hera, I know you do. That is why I so much admire your compassion in allowing him you loathe so much to avoid great suffering by pitting him against the Hydra before he has to meet the terrible lion.”

“I am afraid you have done your friend an ill service by speaking thus,” said Hera, letting every word drop from her lips like distilled poison. “I

have decided to reverse the order of events. He shall be thrown into the path of the lion first. Shall know those ripping talons, those enormous jaws full of dagger teeth. He shall be played with—slowly, excruciatingly—as a cat entertains itself with a mouse before killing it. Now, get out of my sight! I am very angry with you for still remembering with affection this mortal whom I hate and loathe and despise. Go—before you feel the full weight of my displeasure!”

Iris moved swiftly. Her draperies were a blur of color as she vanished from Hera’s sight. But when she was alone, she laughed aloud. For she had accomplished her purpose. She had to follow this up, however, by making sure that Hercules would know what to do when he met the lion. She sped off then to find her daughter.

Blood Price

Zeus looked down upon earth and was displeased. He summoned Hermes and said: "I need your advice, Son. I have been observing my human herds and do not like what I see. The mortals I have most favored seem to be the most murderous. Kings, for example; they're always killing someone, including members of their own family."

"Yes, indeed," said Hermes. "To be a king's brother these days is almost fatal, particularly if you're the one next in line to the throne."

"It's getting monotonous, this mayhem," said Zeus. "How do you propose that I deal with it?"

"Blood price," said Hermes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Honored Sire, I propose that you pass an edict forbidding murder within a family and impose a heavy fine upon anyone breaking that law."

"Fine? For a king?" exclaimed Zeus. "They have vast treasuries, and if they run short of funds, they simply rob their subjects through new taxes. No fine will discourage any king from braining his brother with a scepter."

"Make the penalty heavier then. Make your law say that anyone killing any member of his family within the second degree of cousinship must place himself in servitude to the head of that family for an entire year."

"But," said Zeus, "suppose a king, who is automatically head of his family, does the killing. Whom would he serve?"

"A neighboring king," said Hermes. "Which, by the nature of things, would put him at considerable risk."

Zeus guffawed. "There's a lot of meat in your idea, Son. I can see trouble administering such a law, but we'll work things out as we go along."

Hera was pleased by this new edict. Not that she had any distaste for killing, but she saw how the provisions of this law might help to solve her most urgent problem.

For she fully expected that one of the monsters proposed by Hecate would put an end to Hercules. His death, however, would cause a great sensation on earth, and in heaven. And she, Hera, known by all to have sworn vengeance against Hercules, would surely be suspected by Zeus, whose suspicions always hardened into certainty, and such certainties always turned into violence.

What she needed then was to contrive the young hero's death in a way that would absolve her of blame. And the new law suggested such a way.

She followed Hercules one day when he went out into the woods. For she had studied his habits and knew that he spent part of each morning practicing archery and spear throwing. She guided him over the Theban frontier into Mycenae, a realm ruled by his cousin, King Eurystheus. She hovered invisibly as he shot arrows at a tree, bending the bow only halfway, for his full-armed pull would send an arrow through the tree. His hand flashed from quiver to bowstring, notching each shaft and letting it fly ... each one planting itself exactly above the other so that a line of arrows, precisely one inch apart, climbed the tree.

While he was doing this, Hera had been misdirecting a party of young Mycenaeans out hunting. Princes they were, brothers and cousins of Eurystheus, the king. The merry youths were riding with a loose rein, laughing and chatting as their horses picked their way among the trees. Hera guided the horses toward Hercules, brought them within bowshot, and, as the archer shot his last arrow, Hera deflected it in midflight. It sailed past the tree and into the chest of a young prince, killing him instantly.

Hercules was horrified. He had no way of knowing that Hera had deflected his arrow; the idea never occurred to him. Innocently, he thought that he had missed his aim, that his own poorly shot arrow had killed the prince. Roaring with grief, he burst out of the brush and rushed to where the man lay, tore open his tunic, and examined the wound. But the man was dead.

The others sat their horses in utter shock, staring at the gigantic young stranger, who was shouting and sobbing, accusing himself of criminal carelessness, and offering to pay the blood price.

Hera, still hovering invisibly, uttered a snarling laugh. “Now,” she said to herself, “I’ll visit King Eurystheus in a dream and instruct him to extort the blood price from Hercules—to become, in fact, his taskmaster for the space of a year. But it won’t take a year, not even a month. For the first task I’ll make him give the lout will be to slay the Nemean Lion. And we know who’ll slay whom. Yes, Hercules will die now, and his death will be entirely legal. No one will be able to blame me.”

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New Girl at the Palace

Iris and Iole perched on the rainbow, gazing down at a drenched meadow sparkling in the slanting rays of the sun. The daughter looked excited; her mother was trying to look cheerful.

“It won’t do,” said Iris. “You’re simply too vivid to pass unnoticed in the Mycenaean court. We’ll have to tone you down, my girl.”

“How?”

“Can’t do much about your eyes or your skin. But we’ll have to darken your hair.”

“Whatever you say, Mother.”

“You’ll be able to wash the dye out when you come home ...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not.”

“Let’s slide down and get you attended to by the nymphs.”

They slid down the arch of colors, but neither of them sang joyously this time. When they reached the meadow and were greeted by the nymphs, Iris spoke privately to Numa, who listened earnestly and then took Iole’s arm and led her to the far end of the glade where the dyeing vats stood.

The nymph dropped a handful of roots into clear boiling water. The water thickened, foamed, went black. Numa took a pair of silver shears and began to cut Iole’s hair. It was a glorious red-gold mane, hanging down to her waist. Numa cut it so that it barely reached the girl’s shoulders, then cut bangs. Finally, when the dye had cooled, she blackened Iole’s hair.

Iole dashed to a stream, knelt, and looked at herself. She squealed in excitement and raced across the meadow to Iris. “Mother, Mother, look!”

Iris took her daughter by the shoulders and gazed down at her, winking back a tear.

“How do I look, Mother?”

“Like a cat, my dear. With those black bangs and jade-green eyes you look exactly like an Egyptian temple cat.”

“But quite unnoticeable, don’t you think? I’ll be able to slink around the Mycenaean court like a shadow and help Hercules all I please without anyone knowing. Don’t you think so, Mother? Who pays much attention to a black cat, after all?”

“But you will be very careful, won’t you, my child? Eurystheus is an exceedingly cruel king. And while he’s very stupid himself, he’s surrounded by crafty councillors. So take no unnecessary chances.”

“I won’t, Mother. I’ll go there, find Hercules and do what I have to do. Then I’ll come right back. I swear.”

“Farewell then, dear girl ... brave darling girl ...” Iris ran off then so that Iole would not see her weep.

The girl then shed her rainbow draperies, and donned a plain brown tunic. She bade farewell to the nymphs and set off for the court of Eurystheus.

Iole had no experience of the mortal world, no idea of how anything worked ... and when she wanted something, she went after it with utter simplicity.

On reaching Mycenae, she went directly to the royal palace, melted into the shadows, and observed things for a while. It was midmorning; the king had not yet awakened, and seven maids with seven mops were swabbing a flight of marble stairs. Every so often, one of them would take the bucket of dirty water away and return with clean water. This meant carrying the heavy wooden bucket out to a well in the courtyard and drawing water. While she was gone, the other maids leaned on their mops and chatted, and slowly, with many groans and sighs, began to mop again when she came back. For these servants were not young, and it was a very broad, long stairway, and extremely dirty. Because the king often rode his horse up the stairs to his bedchamber.

The next time the water needed changing, Iole flashed out of the shadows, swung the bucket up, and ran out. She took her time about drawing water from the well, for the sun was shining brightly and the birds were singing ... and she knew that the moppers would welcome a rest. Then she trotted back, swinging the bucket lightly, took a mop from the eldest

servant and joined the others. Since she was very strong and quick and did as much work by herself as the other six together, she was made welcome and no one questioned her presence. They all thought she was simply another servant girl taken on by the majordomo.

By the time the king descended, the enormous stairway was spotless. The servants stood with their face to the wall as the king passed. They had been trained to do that, because the king did not like to look at servants. This suited Iole, for she wished to attract as little attention as possible. But she did sneak a glance over her shoulder as he went by, and gasped with surprise. Eurystheus was not what she thought a king should look like. He was enormously fat, with a triple paunch and a multitude of chins. His face was red and bloated; his nose was a snout; he wheezed and grunted as he waddled down the stairs.

By this time a group of courtiers had gathered in the reception hall and followed the king into the great dining hall where breakfast was served. Iole slipped among the horde of servants who were busy bringing in the breakfast, bearing great platters of food from the kitchen to the dining hall. And again she proved herself so swift and graceful, and bore the heavy platters with such ease, that she was welcomed among the servants and no one challenged her right to be there.

After a few days Iole felt that she was fully accepted; it was as if she had worked in the palace all her life. And she began to plan her next move.

Now, the juiciest topic of gossip in the court was Hercules, who had come and gone a week before. How the king had feared his coming, and stationed soldiers beyond the castle walls so that he might be warned when Hercules approached. How a soldier had rushed into the throne room, crying, "I have seen him, oh King! He approaches the wall. And he's gigantic!" And how, when the king heard this, his red face had turned a ghastly purplish white, and he quivered like a great pudding. "Don't let him enter!" he bellowed. "Don't let him pass through the gate! Copreus! Copreus! Where the hell is Copreus? Oh, there you are. Copreus, you go and relay my wishes to Hercules. Tell him he must slay the Nemean Lion and bring me its hide. But meet him outside the walls. Run! Run!"

Copreus rushed away. Awaiting his return, the king had behaved like a madman, gnawing his knuckles, roaring at people, hurling his scepter at them, threatening this one and that one with execution before the day was

out. He quieted down only when Copeus returned and described his meeting with Hercules.

“He *is* huge, Your Majesty,” Copeus had said. “About nine feet tall and with shoulders like a span of oxen. But very gentle. He greeted me courteously, and listened quietly as I told him what you wanted him to do. And received the news calmly. ‘Tell the king I thank him for his confidence in me,’ he said. ‘And when I return with the lion’s hide, I hope to meet him personally.’ And he strode off.”

“That big, eh?” said the king. “You don’t think he has a chance against the lion, do you?”

“Oh, my lord,” said Copeus. “No chance at all. A hunting party went out against that lion in Nemea, I’m told. Tested men, warriors all, the strongest archers and spearmen in the land. The lion stood under a shower of spears and arrows, and they were like a fall of dry leaves. The beast wasn’t even scratched. Then he charged and killed the huntsmen, every one. Their bones lie bleaching in the Valley of Nemea.”

“Very well,” said the king. “But set the sentries. Station lookouts on the road to Nemea. When Hercules is killed I want the tidings of his death relayed to me without an instant’s delay.”

And,” said the old woman who was pretending to dust a vase as she whispered to Iole, “he’s been waiting several days, and going crazier each day.... Oh, my goodness, listen to that!”

For the king was shouting in the throne room: They could hear his scepter clattering on the marble floor. Copeus rushed out, pale and trembling. He looked about frantically, then beckoned to Iole. “You there—girl! Come here!”

“Me, sir?”

“Yes, you! Quickly, I say!”

Iole went to him. “You have long legs,” said Copeus. “You look like you can run fast. Can you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t send a horseman; the way lies through thick brush. Do you know the hill that lies a mile to the east, beyond the oak called the Gallows Tree?”

“Yes.”

“Halfway up that hill you’ll find a cave. Within that cave you’ll see little people making clothes. Don’t ask any questions now—run, run!”

“Just one question, sir. What shall I do when I get there?”

“Oh, yes. Of course. You are to tell the head tailor to come here as quickly as he can. Perhaps you’d better carry him because he has very short legs. Bring him back here. For the king wants new ceremonial robes by tomorrow afternoon. And if he doesn’t get them my head will fall on the block. I’ve never seen him in such a state. Anxiety about Hercules, of course, but whatever it is, it means the axe for me if he doesn’t get his damned robes by tomorrow. Run, girl, run!”

“I’m off, sir.”

Iole dashed away.

The Little Tailors

Iole stood at the mouth of the cave, trying to see inside. The light was tricky. Rush torches stood in niches in the wall and cast flickering shadows. The sounds were confusing, too. A busy, scolding hubbub: She couldn't distinguish any words, nor could she see who was uttering the sounds.

She moved farther into the cave. There was a rush, a rustling—then a deep pulsing silence. Iole stared in amazement. The place seemed to be inhabited by headless statues. She went among them. They weren't statues; they were stuffed cloth figures, male and female. They were draped with scraps of tunics, gowns, hunting costumes, court robes. In a space all its own stood an enormously fat figure, clad in a half-finished cloak of royal purple.

“The king!” whispered Iole to herself, and realized what she was seeing. These figures were tailors' dummies, representing all the nobles of the Mycenaean court. The fat one was the king.

She heard another rushing sound, the patter of footsteps, a thin babble of voices. Something clutched her tunic. She looked down. She was surrounded by a swarm of tiny people. Men and women alike wore leather aprons. The men were bearded, the women wore their hair very long. The tallest of them didn't quite reach to her waist.

This one was jumping up and down in a fury, shouting at Iole. “Who are you? Why have you come here?”

He turned to the others. “To work! To work!”

Iole paid no attention to the raging little fellow but gazed in wonder as the others began to work. It was a most curious sight. The men plucked long hairs out of their beard and wound them on a kind of bobbin. The women pulled hairs out of their head and did the same thing. And Iole realized that their hair was thread. They cut cloth with their teeth, which were seemingly

as sharp as scissor blades. Click, click, click, they bit the cloth, shearing it cleanly to the shapes they wanted as they clambered up onto the dummies. Perching there, they draped cloth over the figures, cut with their teeth, and sewed with both hands and feet. For they were barefooted and clutched long needles with their toes as well as with their hands ...

The little head tailor was still hopping and shouting, and pushing now at Iole's legs, trying to shove her out of the cave. "Get out, get out, get out! You see how busy we are. And we don't welcome strangers."

Iole made her voice as deep as she could. "I come by order of the king," she said. "Copreus sent me. You are to come to the palace immediately and make ceremonial robes for the king. He wants them by tomorrow afternoon."

"Tomorrow afternoon? Impossible! Besides, we just made him ceremonial robes—just last week."

"They don't fit," said Iole. "It seems he's gained twenty pounds this week. I have no time to argue with you. Come on."

"Impossible I tell you."

"Tell it to Copreus," she said.

She scooped him up, tucked him under her arm, and ran out of the cave.

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop!" He kicked and waved his arms.

"Hush—or I'll smack you!"

"Don't you dare, you wicked bullying girl. I can't stand pain."

"Well, you'll have to stand it if you don't hush. But I'm afraid you won't be able to sit for a while."

He must have believed she meant what she said because he stopped kicking and uttered no sound. She giggled and ran faster. She was feeling very happy, very lucky. For she suddenly saw how these magical little tailor folk might fit right into her plans for helping Hercules—if he only helped himself first by vanquishing the terrible lion.

The Lion's Hide

The little tailors had indeed finished the king's garments by the next afternoon, and Copreus felt his head resting more securely on his shoulders. But not for long.

The next day a horseman came thundering into the courtyard. He reined up when he saw Copreus, and cried, "He's done it, sir!"

"Who's done what?"

"Hercules! He's killed the Nemean Lion."

"Are you sure?"

"Shepherds brought us word. They were pasturing their flocks on the Nemean hills and saw six vultures feasting on a carcass. It had no head or hide, but it was so enormous that it had to be that lion. It's good news, isn't it, sir? Just what the king wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," said Copreus. "And I'm about to do you a great favor, young man, one that will advance your career considerably. I'm going to let *you* bear this good news to the king. He'll probably promote you on the spot, and give you a rich bonus."

But the guardsman didn't hear the last sentence. He had wheeled his horse and galloped out of the courtyard. This did not surprise Copreus. He knew that everyone feared the king. He went slowly toward the throne room, trying to prepare himself for the worst. For he fully expected to receive a skull-shattering blow from the king's scepter before he finished his tale.

Eurystheus was staring at him as he approached the throne, bowing deeply. He couldn't read the expression on the king's fat face. "Sire," he cried. "The people of Nemea are hailing you as their savior."

"Are they?" asked Eurystheus. "Why?"

“Because of the young hero you sent them. He has slain the Nemean Lion that has been terrorizing the countryside.”

“I warned Hera,” muttered the king. “I advised her to let him fight the Hydra first because it is more deadly by far.”

“What’s the Hydra, Sire?”

“A monster that will be Hercules’ second task, and should have been his first. Listen carefully now because you are to meet this accursed hero outside the gates and give him his assignment.”

“But, Your Majesty, he’ll want to meet you personally. He told me before he left that he wished to receive your thanks when he returned with the lion’s hide.”

“I won’t see him! I won’t,” bellowed the king. “Make some excuse. Tell him anything, I don’t care. Meet him outside the walls and dispatch him immediately upon his next task. Be clever now. Try to use your head while it’s still on your shoulders. Convey to him my gratitude for his great deed, and assure him that I’ll thank him in person when he comes back after killing the Hydra. Which he won’t do, of course, if I can believe Hera.”

“What is this Hydra exactly? I’ll have to describe it to Hercules.”

“I’ll tell you what Hera told me.”

And Eurystheus described the Hydra to Copeus, who felt his bones turning to jelly as he listened. He didn’t linger in the throne room. He bowed his way out. By the time he reached his own chambers he was reeling with despair.

“Oh my,” he moaned. “When I try to tell Hercules about this horrible beast, he’ll take me between those big hands of his and twist my neck like a chicken. On the other hand, if I don’t tell him, I won’t have any head for him to twist off, because the king will cut it off. Woe is me ... Woe ... Woe ...”

“Don’t be sad, sir,” said a voice.

He whirled around. It was Iole.

“How did you get here?” he cried.

“I followed you from the throne room. I wanted to tell you not to be sad because I’ll go tell Hercules about the Hydra.”

“You? What do you know about that monster?”

“I was in the throne room, hiding behind the throne. I heard what the king said to you.”

“What do you mean sneaking around, eavesdropping, you little fool? Do you know what will happen if the king catches you?”

“Oh, he’s too full of himself to notice anyone else. Besides, that old throne room is full of shadows. And it’s hard to see me when I’m hiding.”

“But Hercules is a very dangerous fellow. He’s liable to get furious when he hears what his next task is to be.”

“He won’t hurt me. He likes children.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I know ...”

When Hercules came to Mycenae bearing a huge bundle that was the hide of the Nemean Lion, he found the gates locked against him. He thought about ripping them off their hinges, but decided not to. Instead, he camped outside the city. He thrust his spear into the ground, draped the lion hide over it, making a big tent, and went to sleep.

When he awoke the next morning, he found a child waiting outside his tent—a curious cat-faced girl who stared at him with enormous green eyes. He stared back. He saw that she was trying to look very serious but couldn’t quite do it because her face was brimming with glee.

“Good morning, Missy,” he said.

“My name is Iole. And you are Hercules, prince of Thebes, champion of mortal against monster, and vanquisher of the Nemean Lion whose hide now serves as your tent.”

Hercules shook his head in wonder. “How old are you?”

“I’m not sure,” said Iole. “We don’t do that kind of counting where I come from. I’m supposed to be quite young though. Not old enough to be married yet, if that’s what you mean.”

“I don’t mean that at all,” said Hercules.

“But I’m ready to be betrothed.”

“Are you? To whom?”

“To you, of course,” said Iole.

“To me?”

“What you must do is ask me to marry you. And I’d say yes. And you’d tell me you know I’m too young but you’d gladly wait till I’m old enough. That’s how you do it.”

“You’re an amazing child. Very pretty, and almost too clever. But I’m in no position to ask anyone to wait for me. In this line of work, I don’t figure to last too long.”

“Oh, I’ll help you with your work.”

“How?”

“That’s what I’ve come to do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“First of all, I’m the one who comes from Eurystheus to tell you what your next task will be.”

“My dear girl, you have a very nimble imagination. The one who assigns me my tasks is the king’s doer of dirty jobs, one named Copreus.”

“I know, I know, but not this time. For what you must do next is so dreadful that Copreus was afraid you’d kill him on the spot when he told you about it. So he sent me instead.”

“Sent you? What kind of man is he?”

“Not bad in some ways. A coward, of course. But the king is worse. Don’t you want me to tell you about your next task?”

“I take it you’re not afraid of me?”

“Not a bit. Should I be?”

“No. Go ahead with your story. I’m prepared for the worst.”

“Oh, it’s as bad as can be all right,” said Iole cheerfully. “You are to go to Argos, to a river named Lerna, where dwells the Hydra.”

“And what may that be?”

“The last word in fearsomeness. A kind of dragon basically. Seems to have a hundred heads though, every one of them filled with teeth. And one flail of its spiked tail can mow down a phalanx of armored men. It eats a pastureful of cattle in one meal, plus any herdsmen who happen to be around. It spits out sheep because it doesn’t like the taste of wool, but leaves them dead, nevertheless. In fact, the people of Argos are in a very bad way because of this monster and have sent their bravest warriors against it. And not one of them came back.”

“This thing dwells in the river Lerna, you say?”

“It hunts during the day and sleeps in the river at night. And comes out again in the morning.”

“Very well. Thank you. I’m off.”

“So soon?” asked Iole.

“It’s my task, you say. The sooner you get to these things, the sooner they’re over.”

“No sir,” cried Iole. “You can’t go yet.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“There’s something that must be done first.”

“What?”

“One item I forgot to mention about the Hydra is that each of its hundred heads has a hundred teeth—hollow teeth. And they’re hollow because he squirts poison through them, a venom that kills instantly. One scratch from any one of those teeth and you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.”

“What do you suggest, that I duck this fight? I don’t do that.”

“Oh, no,” said Iole. “I know you don’t. That tent you’re living in—it is the hide of the Nemean Lion, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my dear. It is.”

“And it’s unpierceable by any weapon, is it not?”

“True. Even my weapons could not pierce it—not arrow, nor spear, nor sword.”

“Well, I want to know all about how you managed to kill it, of course. But you’ll have time to tell me as we go.”

“As we go? What do you mean?”

“Never mind that for now. What I want to suggest is that you make that hide into a suit of armor, and wear it when you fight the Hydra. That way his poison teeth won’t be able to pierce you.”

“But I never fight in armor. It’s too hot. And it doesn’t let me move freely.”

“You’ve never fought a Hydra before either. Don’t you see, you *must* wear the armor. Don’t you want to kill that monster? Or do you want him to kill you? Do you want all the cattle of Argos to keep on being eaten as all the people starve? You must make a jacket and trousers of the hide, and a pair of boots. Gauntlets, too. Every inch of your skin must be covered. And you can wear its skull as a helmet and look out its eyeholes.”

“That will take a lot of tailoring, little girl.”

“And I know where there’s a lot of tailors. A whole cave full. Magical ones, who can make your armor in one day. Roll up that hide and follow me. You’ll have your lion-skin armor by tomorrow.”

He looked down at her without moving.

“Don’t think I’m bossy,” she cried. “Please don’t. I came to Mycenae from a very far place just to save you. And worked as a servant in the palace, mopping a filthy staircase because that fat lazy slob of a king rides his horse up and down it. Please, Hercules, come with me and get your armor made. You’ve almost promised to marry me someday, and you can’t if you’re not alive. I may be about to cry.”

“No, no, don’t do that!” roared Hercules. “Don’t cry.”

He snatched the lion hide off the spear that was its tent pole, rolled it up with the skull inside, hoisted it to his shoulder, scooped Iole up, and set her on his other shoulder. “We’ll make better time this way,” he said. “Just show me how to go.”

Hercules was too tall to fit into the cave. So the tailors moved outside. They used their entire work force, and Hercules served as his own dummy. He stood stock-still as the thread-haired, scissor-toothed little folk climbed all over him, measuring, draping. They couldn’t do any sewing because no needle would pierce the lion hide. They used an extraordinarily powerful glue, brewed by themselves for tough leather garments.

All this time, Iole prowled about the glade, watching closely to make sure that everything was done the way she wanted—that the suit of armor covered Hercules from head to toe, which included fitting the lion-skull helmet and making lion-hide boots. But the head tailor, who had never forgiven Iole for carrying him off the first time, objected.

“No helmet, no boots,” he hissed. “We’re not hatters or cobblers, you know.”

Iole studied the sullen little fellow for a moment and wasted no time arguing. She snatched him up and, holding him upside down by the ankles—the way a butcher holds a goose—walked to where Hercules was standing and asked, “Are you hungry, sir?”

“I could eat something,” said Hercules ... “How about you?”

“Your breakfast will be served shortly, sir.”

She bore the head tailor into the cave, took him to the cave end where the tiny folk did their cooking, swung him onto a stone slab, and slowly began to unhook his tunic.

“Help! Help!” he shrieked, but there was no one to hear but Iole. She held him down with the palm of her hand and fixed her green eyes upon him.

“What are you doing?” he screamed.

“Trying to decide how to do you. He’s a meat eater, you know. Prefers it roasted, usually, but you look pretty tough and stringy. Probably need boiling. Where do you keep the salt and pepper?”

“Please, please, don’t cook me. I don’t want to be eaten.”

“Don’t want to feed a guest? That’s not very polite.”

“Oh, mercy... Feed him something else. Please!”

“Will you do everything I say?”

“Yes, yes, everything!”

“Helmet and boots?”

“Exactly as you want them, dear girl.”

“All right. But don’t make any more mistakes. This is your last chance.”

She lifted her hand then. He squirmed away and scrambled off the slab—rushed out, shouting, “Boots and helmet! Get to work! Quickly, quickly!”

Iole came out of the cave, smiling.

Finally, the work was done. Hercules stood in the glade like a gigantic lion rearing up on its hind legs. Iole stalked about him, inspecting the armor.

“Hurry up,” he said, his voice muffled by the helmet. “I’m sweltering in here.”

“Looks good,” called Iole. “Come on out.”

He doffed the armor, bundled it up, thanked the tailor folk courteously for their labors, and turned to Iole.

“And I thank you, little girl,” he said. “And when I come back from Argos—if I do—I shall tell you all about my fight with the Hydra, and about my fight with the lion before that.”

“Oh, you’ll have time to tell me the lion story on our way to Argos,” said Iole. “I’m going with you, you know.”

“No you’re not.”

“I am. I want to.”

“Do you think I’d let you go anywhere near that dreadful monster?”

She stamped her foot. “I want to go! I want to go!”

He heard the tears behind her voice. He lifted her then and set her on the branch of a tree so that they could be face to face. Holding her by the shoulders, he said:

“Listen to me, Iole. This Hydra sounds more dangerous than any creature I’ve ever faced. Which means that I’ll have to give every bit of my attention to the fight. And I won’t be able to do that if you’re there, because I’d be worrying about you. Your presence would put me in more peril than if I were to face the beast without any armor at all. Is that what you want?”

She winked back her tears. “No-o-o....”

“Very well, then. Wait for me in Mycenae. And if I live, I’ll come back to see you. I promise.”

He kissed her gently on the forehead and loped off. She looked after him, trying not to weep because the little folk were still there, looking up at her.

“This is ridiculous,” she said to herself. “I can’t bear it. I won’t try to. I’ll follow him there. He won’t even know it.”

She climbed down the tree and raced after Hercules, keeping him in sight but taking care not to be seen herself.

The Hydra

Trees run down to the bank of the river Lerna. Water nibbles their roots and the trees lean over to watch their reflection in the shining river. At one point, though, the tree line stops short, and grass grows between river and wood.

It was in this meadow that Hercules stood. He wanted a clear view of the river. For it was from there that the Hydra would come. It was early upon a summer morning but the sun was already a brass ball, flaming hot. The young man felt himself slowly broiling inside the thick lion hide.

“It better come out soon,” he thought. “Or it won’t find anyone to fight—just a breakfast, all cooked and ready to eat.”

Now the last monster Hercules had fought, the Nemean Lion, had announced itself by roaring so loudly that the boulders shook. Hercules didn’t know that evil has more variety than goodness, and that monsters differ. So, waiting for some kind of horrid sound, he was almost caught off his guard. For the Hydra came with a faint scraping and was slithering swiftly across the grass before he saw it.

It was a crocodile, but the size of ten crocodiles. “This can’t be it,” thought Hercules. “It has only one head. But how many monsters that size can dwell in the river?”

Happy that he had only one head to cope with, big as that one was, he cast aside bow and spear and held only his sword. The Hydra scuttled toward him with astounding speed. Weighed down as he was by the heavy pelt, Hercules leaped straight up, turning in the air, and landed at the Hydra’s shoulder. He raised his sword in a two-handed grip, and struck down in a tremendous shearing blow that cut through hard leather scales, through bone and muscle and flesh, slicing the head off so swiftly that it

jumped off the neck. Blood spouted, a black vile broth that scorched the grass where it fell.

And Hercules was shocked to see the severed head turn and slide back toward him, rising from the ground and snapping its jaws in the air. Hercules struck it down with his clenched fist, whirled to face the Hydra again, and was horrified by what he saw. The stories were true; he had congratulated himself too soon. For the stump of neck had split into two; from each sprouted a new head.

Two heads now. Hercules charged, struck, cut off the new heads. They fell to the grass, but stayed alive, snapping about his legs like vicious hounds. They could not pierce his lion-skin trousers, but they clamped their jaws on his legs and tried to drag him down. And now, where there had been two heads, there were four.

Four heads struck at him with sickening force. Four sets of enormous jaws fastened on his arms. The awful teeth could not pierce the pelt, but Hercules felt them slowly crushing his bones. He tried to raise his sword, but could not; his arms were held by the jaws. He tore himself away, staggering, as the cut-off heads pulled at his legs. He fell to his knees, kicked free, and his sword became a glittering blur as he whirled it, cutting the heads off, one after the other.

But where the four heads had been, there were now eight. They came at him from all sides. Again they closed upon his arms and shoulders. Jaws clamped his midriff. He felt his ribs caving in. Jaws locked his head. They did not pierce the lion skull, but they were crushing it, and crushing his own head inside.

Worst of all, though, he saw that one of the new heads was spitting fire. The lion skin turned the flame, but he felt himself growing unbearably hot inside his armor. He could hardly breathe. With a desperate effort, he whirled and kicked and struck, hacked and stabbed. The cut-off heads ravened about him, clamping on his legs, pulling him down. The Hydra struck with a single head. In an instinctive counterstroke, which he instantly wished to recall, Hercules swung his sword again, shearing off that head. Two heads sprouted in its place. Now, he knew, there were too many heads for him to combat; he could fight no longer.

With the last flaring of strength, he caught up a fallen bough from the grass, held it in front of the fire-spitting head. The dead wood kindled

immediately. Hercules sprang up with his torch in one hand, his sword in the other. He sliced off a head and seared the neck-stump with his torch. A hideous stench of roasting flesh fouled the air, but no head sprouted from the seared stump. Now, he knew, if he could only keep striking with sword and torch, cutting off heads and searing stumps, he might have a chance. But all the severed heads were upon him, a multitude of them now, fastening their jaws upon his legs, dragging him down.

Iole, watching from behind a tree, saw him fall. She flashed out, raced across the grass, scooped up the fallen torch. Using it as a club she beat off the severed heads that were fastened to Hercules' legs. She thrust the sword at him, crying: "Cut off the heads and I'll burn the stumps! Get up! Get up!"

He looked up at her. Dazed as he was, he realized that she was clad only in her short tunic. One scratch of a poisoned tooth would kill her on the spot. Her peril filled him with fresh energy. He leaped up, snatched the torch from her; with his other hand seized her about the waist and hurled her across the meadow—into the river. He held torch in one hand, sword in the other, and crouched as the Hydra came at him.

He was afire now. His veins ran with starry wrath. He whirled and leaped, spun, dodged, weaved—striking as he moved, ducking the jaws, darting in, striking again. Each blow of his sword cut off a head. Then, striking with his torch, he immediately seared the stump so that no new head could sprout.

A dizzying mist arose from the spilled blood. Hercules peered through and saw that the Hydra had two heads left. He charged the monster and struck again, and again. He thrust twice with his torch, searing the last two stumps. Now the Hydra was blind. Its armored body twitched violently; its neck stumps were great charred worms, still wriggling. But it was dying. The body stopped twitching, the necks stopped wriggling. The spiked tail ceased its flailing. And as the huge body died, its fallen heads died also.

All this time, Hera had been hovering overhead, watching the battle, rejoicing when Hercules fell, filling with thwarted fury when she saw him arise and kill the Hydra.

"All the fault of that meddlesome brat," she hissed to herself. "I'll teach her a lesson."

Hera descended, reached into the river, pulled out a great tangle of drowned tree roots. She breathed life into them and they became a huge

crab, big as a chariot wheel. She dropped the crab into the water. It sank swiftly, and began to crawl over the river bottom, hunting its food. Spotting something above, it rose to the surface and fastened its claws on Iole's leg. She screamed.

Hercules heard the scream. He charged toward the river, kicking through the litter of dead, grinning heads. He reached the river, dived in, seized the crab, and broke off the claw that held Iole. As she climbed upon the bank, Hercules arose, holding the crab. He dropped it to the grass and stamped on it, crushing it under his foot.

Iole threw herself into his arms. He hugged her to him, then shoved her away, crying, "Crazy girl! Sweet brave crazy wicked child! I don't know whether to kiss you or spank you."

"Better let me decide," she purred.

Catlike, she sprang into his lap and wrapped her arms about his neck. "You have many tasks before you," she murmured. "Please try to last a few more years—at least until I'm old enough to marry you."

"How many years will that be?" he asked.

"Four, perhaps. Three, if I hurry.... Let's go swimming before the sun sets. We're very smoky and bloody."

Hera could bear to hear no more. She flew off in a fury, vowing to avenge herself upon both of them, no matter how long it took. And, it is said, she put together the crushed crab, named it Cancer, and stuck it in the sky as a sign of her vengeance.

But something better happened in another part of the sky. Pieces of Iris's frozen rainbow still burn above the North Wind's castle, and are called the Northern Lights. Boreas, when he remembers what happened long ago, flies into a rage again and tries to blow them out ... but never can.

LADON

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For TANYA EVSLIN
halfway across the world, but very near

OceanofPDF.com

Characters

Monsters

Ladon
(LAY don)

An enormous serpent, the scourge of the sea and its islands

Gods

Hera
(HEE ruh)

Queen of the Gods

Ares
(AIR eez)

God of War

Aphrodite
(af ruh DY tee)

Goddess of Love

Demeter
(DEM ih tuhr)

Goddess of Growing Things

Artemis Goddess of the Moon
(AHR tuh mihs)

Iris Caster of Rainbows
(EYE rihs)

Hecate Queen of the Harpies
(HECK uh tee)

Atlas A condemned Titan
(AT luhs)

The Hesperides Daughters of Atlas, now apple nymphs
(hess PEHR ih deez)

Hypnos God of Sleep, Master of Dreams
(HIPP nohs)

Demigods

Hercules Son of Zeus, strongest man in the world
(HER ku leez)

Iole Daughter of the Rainbow
(EYE oh lee)

Mortals

Thyone A young Amazon
(thee OH nee)

Nycippe Friend of Thyone, another Amazon
(ny SIH pee)

Hippolyte Queen of the Amazons
(hih PAHL ih tee)

Malo A poet
(MAH loh)

Nameless Poet Nycippe's captive

Animals

Pegasus A winged horse
(PEG uh suhs)

The Silver Stag

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Hero Meets Monster

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Food that Isn't Fish

Not long after things began, certain homeless gods were offered a garden called Earth where they might grow fruit and grain and flowers. Animals, too, were promised, and a special clever one who would look like a cross between ape and god, and be prone to the kind of misadventure that most amused the Mighty Ones.

At first, though, this new place was just a bowl of red-hot rock full of water that hissed and boiled and bubbled. Gods hunched above it, trying to peer through the steam. When the bowl cooled they saw that it held a vital broth. Powerful new life was sprouting, casting itself into a wild variety of shapes, which swam off and began making more of themselves. And when they weren't breeding they were eating. Down through the entire life chain, what was bigger fed on what was smaller. But creatures of every size bred so fast that there was always enough to eat.

During those earliest years when a few islands had thrust themselves out of the roiling tides, another form of life was slowly blossoming. When it appeared, even the gods were dismayed.

Monsters!

Deep undersea, enormous eggs cracked and the first monsters wriggled out. They began growing as soon as they left the egg, and reached full size in a single day. These huge misshapen beasts not only ate everything in sight but seemed to be of a different nature, seemed to kill not only for food but for pleasure.

Dread and Evil had entered the world—which was now ready for man to appear.

The first humans in the Garden of Earth found themselves among fruit trees, and fed upon olives and figs, quinces, pomegranates, and the rich

seeds called nuts. All this kept them alive and healthy, but there was something else they wanted; they didn't know what. This craving led them deeper and deeper into the orchard until, finally, they came upon a tree that bore golden fruit.

Uttering glad cries they rushed upon the tree, tore fruit from the branches and crammed it into their mouths. It was so delicious and they were so happy to be eating it that they ignored the thing that was wrapped about the trunk in huge, green coils—or, perhaps, they took it for a thick vine.

It was not a vine. It was a serpent called Ladon, one of the first monsters, and the very first to crawl out of the sea in search of food that wasn't fish. On his way through the orchard he had eaten a stag, a bear, and a flight of wild geese, and still wanted more.

Obeying some instinct, he stopped hunting; he wrapped himself about a tree and waited for a meal to come to him. It came—a troop of naked men and women, all fresh and shining, and very hungry. He watched them eating fruit for a while, then began eating them.

When he was finished he fell asleep, still draped about the tree, but more tightly because he was fatter.

Islands kept rising from the sea; on every one of them animals began to breed, including men. Ladon swam from island to island, stalking the larger animals through field and wood, but stopping always at a village when he could find one, because he had formed a special craving for human flesh.

When he returned to the immense sea-cavern where monster eggs were hatched, he told his family about these new islands where the hunting was so good and the game was so delicious. And certain of his brothers and sisters followed him when he surfaced again. They crawled ashore after him and began to hunt.

These were his sister, Echidne, the sea viper; her son, the three-headed dog named Cerberus, who refused to eat humans and fed on wild boar; a cousin, Polypos, the sea blob, who had no jaws but simply dropped his jellylike mass on his prey and digested it alive; and Ladon's niece, the Sphinx, a winged lion with a woman's head. Once ashore, she discovered the use of her wings, sprang into the air and began to hunt like a giant hawk, striking from above and devouring bears as if they were rabbits, and eagles as if they were doves.

But Ladon's parents, Ceto, the triple snake, and Phorcys, the sea hog, refused to leave the depths of the ocean. They didn't like the land or anything connected with it, and fed happily on sharks and octopi and enormous turtles.

Thousands of years passed—only a few months in the life of a god or monster—and islands were sliding together to form continents. On the most beautiful peninsula, where hills ran down to the Middle Sea, there stood a high mountain, called Olympus. Upon its peak, Zeus, the King of the Gods, built his cloud castle, and dwelt there with his wife, Hera, Queen of the Gods.

But Zeus courted a young princess of Thebes, Alcmene, Lady of the Light Footsteps. She bore twins. One was the son of her husband; the other—a giant, shining babe—was the son of Zeus. She named this one Hercules. And from his infancy on, Hera hated him and vowed to destroy him. She couldn't kill him herself because Zeus favored the lad and would be most displeased.

So she employed monsters.

But Hercules slew the first two she sent against him—the Nemean Lion and the Hydra, each of whom had wasted their districts, devouring herds, herdsmen, villagers, and warriors. And with each of the young man's victories Hera's hatred festered and swelled, filling her to the brim with its venom.

The Harpy Queen

Hades, Ruler of the Dead, also loathed Hercules and had taught his fiends and demons to do so. For by killing monsters the young hero saved the lives of mortals, depriving Hades of subjects, and the fiends and demons of those they might torment. So it was that Hecate, Queen of the Harpies and Hades' most trusted murderess, was often sent to the upper regions to confer with Hera—who welcomed her advice.

Hecate knew that it was Hera's habit to finish the day by strolling in the Garden of the Gods, when dusk bewitched the sight and the evening breeze was heavy with fragrance. The hundred-handed giant who tended the garden did his best to please Hera, who was very hard to please. Each day he wove her a different chaplet of flowers. And upon this dusk, as Hecate folded her brass wings and landed on the grass, she saw that Hera wore a crown of iris and rose and gentian. Soft flames of blue and deeper blue and crimson mingled in her dark hair.

Hecate gasped with pure pleasure. "That creepy gardener of yours has worked well today, O Queen. His chaplet of flowers burns upon your head more gorgeously than any wrought of jewels."

"I'm glad to see you, dear friend," said Hera. "I've been in a foul mood all day long."

"Any reason?"

"The same reason. The same damned thing has happened again despite all my efforts. Hercules has killed the Hydra and come out of the battle without a scratch. I can't understand how it happened."

"Let us reason it out together, My Queen. Reports of the battle have drifted down to us, remote as we are from your business up here. And from what I understand Hercules went in very well prepared. He was armored from head to toe in the hide of the Nemean Lion—his first kill, as you will

remember—and that hide cannot be pierced by any weapon. Yes, his entire body was covered; he made leggings and boots of the hide, gauntlets too, and wore the lion's skull as a helmet. So he went untouched by the poison fangs of the hundred-headed monster. We must ask ourselves why this rash youth prepared himself so carefully this time."

"Any ideas?"

"I think someone is feeding him valuable information."

"You're saying my secrets are being betrayed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By someone you confide in. Someone close to you."

"I confide in almost no one beside you."

"Then the traitor should be easy to find. How about that creature who flits about on your errands?"

"Iris?"

"I mean the loony thing who flutters out after storms, flinging those stupid colors around."

"That's Iris, Caster of Rainbows, and my messenger."

"Does she know your secrets?"

"A few, perhaps. Not all."

"Something tells me she's the one," said Hecate. "She has a treacherous look. All smiles all the time, and soft words. No one can be that sweet."

"You just don't like her."

"Do *you*—really?"

"Well," said Hera, "I admit her sugary ways gripe me sometimes, but she's been useful to me."

"I think she's been even more useful to Hercules."

"As it happened, I kept her close to my side before the battle. She wasn't out of my sight for a second. There was no way she could have gotten to him."

"Couldn't she have sent anyone?"

"She has a daughter," said Hera. "Impudent, nosy brat. I suppose she could have sent her. But I can't believe she'd dare to. She knows what would happen if I found out."

"If I were you I'd start making it happen," said Hecate.

"I can't—not yet."

“Why not?”

“We have no hard evidence of her guilt. If I do dreadful things to her out of mere suspicion there will be an uproar in Heaven. She’s a general favorite up here, you know.”

“I’ll go digging for evidence, My Queen. I’ll visit the grove at Lerna and try to find someone who actually saw the battle.”

“No people would have been there,” said Hera. “Mortals fled the very name of the Hydra.”

“Birds would have been in the trees or flying overhead,” said Hecate. “Birds make excellent witnesses. And I know how to question them. They trust me because I have wings.”

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Flight of the Rainbow

In a great meadow in Arcadia dwelt a clan of flower nymphs. It was their task to gather wild blossoms and steep them in a vat, making dyes for the rainbow goddess. Iris visited the meadow before every storm, dipped her streamers in the dyes, then, when the storm was finished, flung them across the sky in an arc of colors.

The flower nymphs were her most trusted friends. She left her child, Iole, in their care. And here the tiny girl had grown into a lovely, long-legged one, supple as a sapling.

Now, upon this blue and gold day, the nymphs were surprised to see Iris floating down. "Greetings!" one cried. "We did not expect to see you today. The sky is clear and the wind is from the west."

"Another kind of storm is brewing," said Iris. "I'll explain later, dear friends. Right now I must speak with Iole."

She drew her daughter aside. "What is it, Mother?" cried Iole. "You look so serious. Oh, I know, I know!"

"What do you know?"

"You've learned that Hera is planning a new peril for Hercules, and you want me to warn him. Well, I'm ready. I've been longing to search for him anyway, but had no excuse."

"Well, my child," said Iris. "It is we who face peril. Hera suspects that we helped him against the Hydra. We must flee."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere ... everywhere. She'll ransack every corner of the earth, and the seas also."

"But we move lightly and swiftly, Mother. And know how to melt into thin air or merge with the shadows. So perhaps we can elude her."

“Perhaps, but we must separate,” said Iris. “If we stay together she’ll surely find us. You go one way and I’ll go the other. And we shall meet in better times, my darling.”

“I’m ready. Farewell.”

“Farewell, lovely child. Kiss me.”

They embraced. Wept a tear or two. Then smiled bravely at each other, kissed again, and parted.

Iole fled so lightly over the meadow that the grass didn’t bend beneath her feet. She disappeared into a fringe of trees, singing as she went. Released from her mother’s care, she could now search for her beloved Hercules. And this made her very happy.

On brass wings Hecate flew back to Olympus, and alighted in the Garden of the Gods. It wanted an hour till dusk—Hera’s time to walk in the garden. And Hecate amused herself by taking a twig and scratching lines in the damp earth. An idea had struck her for a new torment to be called the Marrow Log, and she was sketching its design. When she saw Hera coming she flung the twig away and arose to greet her.

“I’ve done it!” she cried. “I have the proof we need. It was indeed Iris and Iole who betrayed you. Iris overheard our conversation about the Hydra’s poison fangs and sent her daughter to warn Hercules that he must wear lion-skin armor.”

“How did you find out?”

“I caught a flower nymph and tortured her a bit. She wasn’t much fun. I’d hardly gotten started before she yammered out all she knew.”

“Very well,” said Hera. “Let’s go catch them. We’d better hurry, though. Iris may suspect something. She can read my mood even at a distance.”

“I’m ready,” said Hecate.

Hera whistled up her swan chariot. In a rush of white wings the great birds drew the chariot to the garden. Hera jumped in. The swans beat their wings again and the chariot arose. Hecate spread her wings and flew easily alongside.

They sped high and low, searching sky and earth. They dipped into the valleys, searched the slopes, skimmed the treetops. Hecate descended sometimes to question birds. But search as they might, they could find no trace of the rainbow goddess or her daughter.

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A Suitable Monster

Hera prowled the mountaintop, raging. “What’s the use of being Queen of the Gods if I’m thwarted every place I turn? I can’t punish Iris or Iole because I can’t find them. Nor can I find a suitable task for Hercules. Since he slew the Hydra, monster activity has slowed down to a crawl. All the best serpents and dragons and spear-birds and giant boars seem to be stuck in their holes or dens or undersea caverns or wherever the hell they lurk ... This can’t go on. Surely, somewhere, there’s some powerful, murderous beast I can use. But I hear of no countryside being ravaged, no crops uprooted, no herds devoured, no villagers massacred. And that muscle-bound young lout is lolling at his ease somewhere, safe from my vengeance. It’s unbearable! I simply must find a suitable monster and arrange a fatal encounter.”

On impulse she whistled up her chariot and ranged over the Middle Sea from the southern shore of Attica to the northern edge of Africa. For the most dreadful monsters, she knew, were to be found in the sea.

Flying west toward Iberia, she saw a three-decked ship running before the wind. She watched it idly as the wind dropped and the sail flapped, causing the men to spring onto the rowing benches and unship their long oars. The oar blades flashed and the ship crawled over the glittering water. Then she saw something else.

A huge, wedge-shaped head poked out of the sea. Coil upon coil, the impossibly long body of a serpent heaved out. The head swiveled toward the ship; its loops flattened and it began to swim after the vessel. It seemed to be gliding through the water without effort, yet it was catching up to the ship.

The sailors hadn’t seen it. They kept rowing, and sang as they rowed. Hera had dipped her chariot closer and could hear them sing. But the song

turned to wild yells as the serpent cut in front of the bow and began to uncoil. Up, up it went until it towered above the mast. The men had cast away their oars and were wielding swords and spears and axes.

The serpent flexed until its head was level with the deck. Then it opened its jaws, and the horrified seamen were looking down a hundred yards of gullet, lined with teeth. The jaws closed over the entire ship from stem to stern. Hera heard the hull cracking, heard muffled screams as the men vanished.

The serpent lifted itself slightly again and spat out mast, oars, cordage, weapons, bits of sail. The debris floated in the reddening water. The serpent slid under and was gone.

“Magnificent!” cried Hera. “That’s the monster for me! I must find out more about him.”

She returned to Olympus and sent a message to Tartarus, summoning Hecate, who came immediately. This time Hera received the Harpy queen in the courtyard of the cloud castle, and described what she had seen the day before.

“Sounds like Ladon,” said Hecate.

“Tell me about him.”

“He’s the son of Ceto and Phorcys, and of all the monster brood is probably the most powerful. Uncoiled, he would stretch higher than that cedar. And his jaw hinge is located near his tail. While hunting in the sea he seeks whales because of his size but, as you have seen, will swerve away from a pod of whales to chase a ship.”

“Yes, yes!” cried Hera. “And when his jaws closed he was crunching the ship—mast, oars, sails, and all. It happened too fast for anyone to escape. He swallowed the whole crew and spat out the wood. Not a man was left alive. I saw it happen, O Hecate, and the darkest closet of your Hell can offer no sight more stimulating.”

“We have our moments,” drawled Hecate. “You haven’t visited us lately. We’ve added an interesting torment or two.”

“Forgive me, dear. All I can think of at the moment is Ladon. What a splendid beast—exactly what I need for Hercules. I can just picture those wonderful long jaws closing on that misbegotten cur. Chomp ... gulp ... nothing left but a bloody rag of lion skin and some splinters of oaken club. I can’t wait.”

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Another Hunger

Iole was wandering through a wood. She heard voices raised in terror—yelling, shrieking, sobbing. Moving swiftly as a cat she climbed a cedar that towered over the other trees, so that she was able to look down past a fringe of willows into a clearing where a village stood.

There she saw a serpent with huge, gaping jaws. He lay in a circle. His lower jaw rested on the ground; his upper jaw was lifted high, high. With his tail he was sweeping people into his mouth. He had encircled the entire population of the village, had eaten most of them, and was now finishing the rest. When the last one was gone, he spat buttons and bits of cloth, then carefully arranged his bulging coils and went to sleep.

“What a brute!” said Iole to herself. “I hope Hercules hasn’t heard about it. Because my brave darling thinks he’s been put on earth to protect people against monsters, and he’d surely challenge this one. But it’s too big even for Hercules ... Makes the Hydra seem like a tangle of earthworms ... It’s gorgeous, though, in its own horrid way. Those mottled leather coils, green and yellow, like patches of sunlight on the forest floor ... Is it awake? Yes ... It has very big eyes for a snake. I can feel the heat of them. It’s a male, I think. Is he looking at me? He is! I wonder if he’s still hungry? How could he be, after that meal! ... I’m not afraid. I refuse to be afraid. I’ve always liked snakes, and they’ve always liked me. That cobra who used to visit the meadow—the flower nymphs were scared, but I used him to jump rope with. Perhaps this one would be friendly, too ...”

Snakes have no eyelids; they can’t blink. And Ladon very much wanted to blink. Something absolutely strange was happening high up in the cedar. Like all reptiles, tiny or monstrous, he was color-blind; things were different shades of gray to him.

But it was the mission of Iris to blazon the sign of the gods' occasional mercy across the heavens. When she hung her rainbow, she mixed a magic in its colors so that they might be visible to all creatures who walked, flew, swam, or crept. Iole had inherited this gift without knowing it. Her own colors blazed, banishing grayness, and came to Ladon now not only as a wonderful dance of light, but as a fragrance of flowers; more than that—almost like the maddening odor of game when he was famished; but different from that too, quickening another hunger, one he had never known.

He wanted to blink, but he couldn't. He wanted ... wanted ... He wanted to enter that weird dazzling and take what it held—that red-gold fall of hair, those green eyes, those ivory-bronze arms and legs. His entire length shuddered with dread and delight.

Ladon was in love.

Iole saw the serpent unwind himself. His lower coils stayed where they were; the upper part of him glided across the clearing, through the willows, toward the cedar. She saw him slide up the tree. He came halfway up. The great leather wedge of his head was weaving near the soles of her feet. His eyes stabbed into hers. They seemed to whirl, making her dizzy. She clung to the branch but did not look away from him. She did not wish to show fear.

“Greetings,” he said.

His voice came as a huge rustling, chopped into words. “You’re not a person ... What are you?”

“Demigoddess.”

“I am Ladon.”

“My name is Iole.”

“Iole ...”

“*Oh-le*, not *you-le*.”

“Will you marry me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t.”

“Can we be friends?”

“Well ...”

“Why don’t you like me?”

“You eat in an unkindly way.”

“Unkindly?”

“You kill first.”

“No. I prefer live meat.”

“That’s even worse.”

“No live meat, no dead meat. What can I eat?”

“Things you don’t have to kill.”

“Like what?”

“Grass ... hay ... stuff that cows eat, and sheep.”

“What I do is wait until a cow or a sheep has its meal, then I eat the cow or sheep or buffalo, or whatever. That way I get my meat and greens at the same time.”

“Your meat eating doesn’t stop at cattle, sir. You’ve been eating people.”

“Mmm ... delicious. Easy to catch, too.”

“That’s why we can’t be friends.”

“Just because I eat people?”

“That’s right.”

“What do you care what happens to them? You’re a goddess.”

“Only half—on my mother’s side. My father was a mortal man. And I can’t be friends with anyone who eats human flesh.”

“When would I have to stop?”

“Immediately.”

“That’s very soon. Can’t I sort of taper off?”

“Absolutely not! Bad habits must be stopped immediately, or they go on and on and on.”

He stared at her. She stared back. She was very young, but woman enough to know that she must not cool his ardor by telling him she loved another.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked. “Stop thinking. Just say yes.”

“To what?”

“That you’ll marry me.”

“We’re quite different, you know.”

“Well, you’re trying to change me. If I stop eating people that will make us less different. And we can go on from there.”

“Anyway, I’m too young.”

“Much?”

“A few years, I guess.”

“What’s that? Nothing at all. I’m thousands of years old. Been here from the beginning, you know. Seems now as though I’d been waiting for you all the time.”

“That’s sweet,” she murmured.

“So I can easily wait a few more years. But you must stay with me while I’m waiting. Or I’ll get impatient.”

“Will you stop eating people?”

“I’ll just browse on that putrid herbage, I promise. Come down now. You can ride on my neck.”

“You’re almost totally neck, aren’t you?”

“I mean just behind my head. You’ll be comfortable.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll go anywhere you like. Cruising, perhaps. Would you like to go to sea? Would you like to visit the underwater cave where my family lives?”

“Are they monsters?”

“Certainly, purebred.”

“Will they like me?”

“Who can help it? Besides, they won’t dare not to. I’m the eldest son.”

Hera, walking in the garden, saw a tall, green-clad figure approaching her. It was her sister Demeter, Goddess of Growing Things.

“Greetings,” she said. “It’s rare that one sees you in the time of harvest.”

“Yes,” said Demeter shortly. “I understand that you take an interest in Ladon.”

“What of it?”

“I must ask you to restrain that gluttonous beast. He’s been ranging up and down the land, devouring my crops. He can consume a wheat field in a single day, or finish off an entire orchard. All the Boeotian harvest has fled down his maw. Now he’s starting on Thessaly. I won’t stand for it.”

“Barley Mother,” said Hera, “you must be mistaken. That serpent is totally carnivorous. He touches nothing that is not meat.”

“Once, perhaps. Not now. He’s fallen in love and turned vegetarian.”

“I don’t believe it!” gasped Hera.

“Believe it, Sister. Why would I be saying this if it weren’t so?”

“What vile enchantress has tamed that splendid ferocity?”

“Oh, you know her well,” said Demeter. “It’s Iris’s daughter—Iole.”

A windy dusk had flowed over the garden. The first pale stars were printing themselves on a great blowing lilac sky. Hera’s screech of rage made them shiver on their axes.

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The War God

Ares, God of War, needed hours of violent exercise before he could speak politely to anyone. Since Aphrodite was coming to visit him that afternoon, he spent the morning with a wild bull he had just added to his herd. It was a magnificent animal—huge, pure black, with coral nostrils, ivory hooves, and polished ivory horns. It had been sent as a gift by a tribe of Ares' most ardent worshipers, the women warriors of Scythia, called Amazons.

Ares knew that he had to teach the beast some manners before introducing it to his cows. The way to do this, he thought, was to master the bull on its own level—that is, by fighting it as if he, Ares, were a rival bull.

They were on a grassy meadow on a plateau north of Olympus, where Ares grazed his herds and trained his horses. Wearing nothing but his helmet, Ares circled the bull, crouching, moving very slowly. The bull simply turned as Ares circled, watching him always. Ares was patient. Again and again he circled the bull, until its eyes became holes of red fire and it began to paw the ground.

Suddenly, it charged. It bowled terrifically over the grass, a throbbing mountain of muscle, driving its sharp horns with enough force to pierce a stone wall. Ares stood his ground. He lowered his head, hunched his shoulders, and took the shock full on. Now the forehead of a bull, the space between its horns, is a heavy ridge of bone, solid as iron plate. And this frontal bone dented itself against Ares' helmet. One horn grazed his shoulder. Blood spurted.

But his legs were planted like tree stumps: He was immovable. The bull shook its head and trotted off a few yards. Blood streamed from its rubbery nostrils. Ares twisted his neck to look at his own bloody shoulder. Gods do not have red blood like humans. What runs in their veins is called *ichor*. It is

pink and has a fragrance like fermenting honey, and clots very quickly, healing its own wound.

Swiftly, the bull moved again, hooking under now with one horn, trying to stab it into Ares' belly and rip his entrails out. Ares caught the horn, caught the other horn with his other hand, and vaulted between horns, landing on the bull's back. All in one motion he whirled, raised his rocklike fist, and slammed it down in a spot just in front of the bull's hump and in back of his skull.

The bull staggered, but did not fall. Ares slid off. He watched as the bull staggered a few more steps, then righted itself and turned to face him. The fire was gone from its eyes. It was too proud to admit defeat, but did not claim victory, and did not attack. It dropped its head and began to graze. And Ares knew it was fit to meet his cows—just as he himself was now, drained of rage, and calm enough to show courtesy to Aphrodite.

He heard her laughter. He turned and saw her. In the heat of battle he had not seen her coming. She had hidden behind a bush and had watched the whole thing. She flowed across the meadow, still laughing. She reached up, took the helmet from his head, and kissed the last drops of ichor from his shoulder.

“What a splendid beast,” she said. “Where did you steal him?”

“I didn't.”

“No, of course. You are Ares. You do not steal, you take.”

“Wrong again.”

“Purchase? Never!”

“It was given to me. A gift from a grateful congregation. From the Amazons, thanking me for granting them success in battle.”

“Those wild women, eh? What a crew.”

“Finest cavalry in the Middle Sea basin. And considered quite attractive by those who like their women big and fierce. As for me, I admire them, but would rather court a she-bear. Let me dive in the river. I'm too sweaty to converse with the most beautiful creature on Earth, or in Heaven.”

“You're so nice after you fight,” she murmured. “So dreadful before ... Go take your swim. I'll be waiting.”

Some time later, they were lounging on a grassy bank near the river. Aphrodite was singing softly ... a song dedicated to her by a poet named Thallo, who dwelt on Helicon.

“Very nice, I suppose,” grunted Ares. “But I have absolutely no ear for poetry.”

“I know you don’t, dear.”

“Tell you what, I don’t care much for those who churn out the stuff, either ... Gabby, worthless lot ... D’you know those Parnassus and Helicon fellows praise every god except me? They don’t do Hades much either, but me even less. Not one single solitary verse. And they praise nongods too. Reams of stuff about those they call heroes. And yes—here’s the sickening part of it: They’ll praise warriors also, and feats of arms, and victories—and never a good word for me, who goes to all the trouble of starting those wars.”

“You’re working yourself up again, dear. And I don’t think that bull’s ready for another go yet. You’ll have to wrestle a couple of bears, or something.”

“Never mind, I’m serious now, and—hey! I’ve just had a great idea.”

She looked at him in a way that said, “Tell me your idea and I’ll say it’s wonderful, no matter what I think.”

He said nothing. He was gazing out across the river and there was a growl of laughter in his throat.

“When he laughs like that,” thought Aphrodite, “it means someone’s about to suffer. Or some city or some nation. I don’t think I want to know what that idea is.”

An Amazon's Dream

That dusk, Ares visited Lemnos, where dwelt Hypnos, God of Sleep. He was the son of Night, little brother of Death, and father of Dreams. He lived in a cave with his wife, Aglaia, most brilliant of the Graces. Outside the cave was a garden where the poppy grew, and the lotus, and other flowers that compel sleep.

Ares came with gifts: a necklace of jet and pearl for Aglaia and, riding his wrist like a hawk, an enormous black eagle with unwinking yellow eyes. "This eagle," he said to Hypnos, "will draw your chariot more swiftly across the sky than you have ever traveled before. That way you'll be able to crisscross the night, dropping more dreams than ever."

"I thank you, Brother," said Hypnos.

"But you know," said Ares, "when I bring gifts I ask favors."

"Name it," said Hypnos.

"I wish to send a dream to Scythia."

"To whom in Scythia?"

"To the strongest young filly among the Amazon tribe."

And he told Hypnos what he wanted the dream to do.

"I need a hair of your head and a drop of your blood," said Hypnos.

Ares pulled a hair from his head and squeezed a drop of ichor from the wound on his shoulder that had not quite healed.

"Now I can make your image appear to her," said Hypnos. "And I promise you she will dream so vividly that she will be up at daybreak to ride on your mission."

The lives of the Amazons were so entangled with the lives of their horses that they gave themselves horse names. Hippolyte, the name of their queen, means "horsebreaker." Melanippe means "black mare," Leucippe, "white mare," and so on. The young girls, those who had to chop their own wood,

and cook their own food, and wash their own clothes, because they did not yet have a man to do these chores, were called “fillies.” Big, sleek, powerful girls they were, bursting with health, full of restless energy because they had not yet ridden out on a husband-raid.

The tallest and strongest and swiftest of these was named Thyone. She had pale brown hair, almost silver in a certain light, and gray eyes. Lying now in her bearskin tent she seemed to glimmer as she slept. Hypnos slid in, and stood looking down at her. He stepped into her sleep, wove a colored dream, and glided out.

It was Ares she saw. He was clad in brass armor, and stood on a cloud, raising a fiery spear. His voice, when he spoke, was war cry, spear-shock, and the clang of shield against shield.

“Thyone,” he said. “Do not wait for the next husband-raid. Go out alone. Mount at dawn, ride to Mount Helicon. There, among a rabble of poets, you will find one named Thallo. He is to be yours. Bring him back and work him hard.”

The voice ceased. The image faded. Thyone woke up. Knowing she had to arise at dawn, she tried to go back to sleep. But she could not. She was afire with eagerness and curiosity and unanswered questions. She came out of her tent and ran to that of her cousin, Nycippe, a blonde spearwoman of the First Troop. She stopped outside the tent and made wolf noises, two soft howls and a snarl—the signal of her clan, meaning, “Come quickly!”

Nycippe’s hair gleamed in the pale starlight as she slipped out of the tent. “Thyone! What do you want?”

“I must talk to you.”

“Can’t it wait till morning?”

“No, no ... listen!” She clutched Nycippe’s shoulder, and poured out the tale of her dream. “... So I must obey him, Cousin. I ride at dawn.”

“You don’t want a poet,” said Nycippe. “My sister had one and he was very lazy. Get yourself a herdsman or a fisher-lad or something—someone used to hard work.”

“I can’t. Ares clearly said I was to bring home a poet.”

“Well, you’d better start training him on the way back, so he’ll be ready to work when you reach your tent.”

“Good idea, I guess.”

“But be careful. Men are more fragile than we are, and poets even more so. They bleed easily. So don’t use a whip. And don’t use a stick. You might break his bones.”

“How, then?”

Grinning, Nycippe held up her big palm. “This way, dear, hard and frequent.”

“Really? Over my knee?”

“Three times a day, more if he needs it.”

“Is that how you do yours?”

“At first, but I use a hickory switch now. He doesn’t need much beating anymore. He’s learned what I expect and what he’ll get if I don’t get it.”

“How about that poet? Your sister still have him?”

“Traded him for a donkey. Caught herself a woodsman and is much happier.”

The girl left Nycippe’s tent, confused and excited—too worked up to get back to sleep. So she whistled up her mare and was on her way before dawn.

Thyone Goes Hunting

Thyone was riding her mare up a slope of Helicon. Far above, a stallion trumpeted. She searched the heights but saw no horse. Again she heard the trumpeting, seeming to come from directly above. She looked up, startled. There in the sky, balanced on golden wings, was a magnificent white horse. From tales she had heard she knew it was Pegasus, the winged steed belonging to the Muses, whom generations of bards had tried to ride.

He bugled again. Thyone felt her mare trembling. She tethered her and climbed a winding path. She had expected to see a mob of haggard, hairy creatures strumming lyres and humming to themselves. But the place seemed deserted. Finally, she saw someone perched on a rock, gazing up at Pegasus.

She approached and stood above him. He was slender as a weasel, with dark, curly hair and a pointed beard. Curious eyes, tilted like a goat's, filling with yellow light as he looked up at her.

“Do you know someone named Thallo?” she asked.

“We all know one another here.”

“Where can I find him?”

“You can't. He's holed up somewhere trying to finish some tedious epic. Take him all summer, probably.”

“I'll go dig him out of his hole.”

“What do you want him for? Did you commission some verses? Actually, he's nowhere near as good as people say. *I'll* write you a poem. I'm much better than people say. Any subject, two drachmae a line. Discount, over fifty lines. Be twice as much for anyone else, but I always make a special price for goddesses.”

“You take me for a goddess?”

“Certainly. You're Artemis.”

“Are you sure?”

“Recognized you immediately—so tall, so silvery, bearing bow and arrows. You’re the moon, come at noon. See! I’m rhyming already. How about it? Two drachmae a line. Forget about that old has-been. Take me.”

“I’m not Artemis, little man. Not a goddess at all. And if I take you you’ll have no time for writing.”

“Not write? What will I do?”

“You’ll be taught your duties soon enough. Come along.”

“Where to?”

“Scythia.”

“Oh, no, too cold. Freezes the ink.”

“What’s your name?”

“Malo.”

“Come along, Malo.”

He smiled at her, but did not move. She swooped, swung him off the rock, tucked him under arm, and trotted to where her mare was tethered. Amazons rode into battle bareback, but used a saddle when traveling so that they could hang their gear. She was about to fold him over the withers of her mount, then remembered that her water bag would have to be refilled for the journey home. This meant that she had to leave her captive and find a spring. She stretched him on the ground, face down, pinning him under her big bare foot, as she unlooped a rope from the saddle. Kneeling, she trussed him like a calf, then lifted him again and carried him into the shade of a tree.

She found a spring, filled her water bag, and hurried back. From far off she saw a tangle of ropes under the tree. Long legs flashing, she raced like a deer to where she had left him. He was gone! She heard his voice, and whirled about. He was plucking grass and feeding the mare, talking to it softly.

In two steps she was upon him—swung him off the ground, lifting him until his face was level with hers. “How did you get loose?”

“I was a deck boy once. Learned about knots. I can slip any bond.”

She set him down but kept his shoulder clamped. “Why didn’t you run away while you had the chance?”

“Run away—after being captured by the moon? Flee the light? What kind of poet would do that?”

Her grip tightened on his shoulder as she bent to him. His eyes were dancing. “Are you mocking me?” she growled.

“Would I dare?”

“I’m not a goddess, I told you.”

“How do you know? It’s the worshiper who decides. Let’s not go to Scythia, though. Vile climate. We’ll stay here. I know a nice vacant cave on the south slope.”

“You *are* mocking.”

“No, my silvery huntress, no.”

“You’re too clever for me.”

“And you’re too big for me. But we can work things out.”

She sat on a rock and lifted him into her lap. “Show me,” she murmured.

Artemis in Scythia

News travels fast on Olympus, twice as fast if it's spiced with malice. And there were many who delighted in telling the haughty Artemis that a tall, fleet, lovely Amazon had come to Helicon and was being worshiped as a goddess. Every bard there had dropped all projects to sing her praises. At first they kept comparing her to the moon goddess, but now declared that she was more beautiful.

Enraged, Artemis flew to Helicon. She hovered invisibly, observing everyone, getting angrier all the time. She was about to descend and slay them with her silver arrows, but remembered Zeus's decree forbidding any god to kill more than six mortals a month.

"Never mind," she said to herself. "I can contrive a more painful vengeance."

She flew then to Scythia, coming to earth on a vast plain where stood the bearskin tents of the Amazons. It was a busy scene. The tall young women milled about—breaking horses, practicing archery, disciplining their men. A rich clamor filled the air: the neighing of horses, swish of arrows, meaty thwack of hand against husband, women yelling, dogs barking, men sobbing.

Artemis spotted the one she was looking for, the largest woman, almost middle-aged, very stately, wearing a crown. It was Hippolyte, the Amazon queen. The goddess made herself visible, appearing before Hippolyte in all her brightness.

"Come into the glade," she said.

"I am your servant," said the queen.

"I bring you news of Thyone."

"Thyone! Our silver filly! She went a-raiding and vanished. We thought her dead."

“Not dead. Wed.”

“What?” cried Hippolyte. “A wife?”

Artemis then told her what she had seen on Helicon. “... And she’s living very contentedly in their cave, hoping to bear his child.”

“Then she really loves him?”

“Certainly seems like it.”

“But he’s so very small, you say.”

“Very tricky, too. Knows how to transform handicaps into attractions. He uses his smallness.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He works up close. And has convinced her that his exact size is the ideal of manly beauty.”

“Goddess, are you really telling me that this runt has so befuddled our proud young filly that she’s doing unwomanly house chores?”

“Just the heavy work. Chops wood, lifts things that are beyond his strength—which are most things. She does the hunting, of course. He does the cooking. He’s good at it.”

“Well, it’s all too disgusting,” said Hippolyte, “and cannot be permitted to go on. This Malo must be a wizard of some kind, and has bound her with vile enchantments.”

“Indeed ... he can weave a spell with words.”

“Our sister must be rescued, and those evil ones taught a lesson. We’ll ride to Helicon and finish them off. Keep a few of the biggest, perhaps, and kill the rest.”

“I must warn you,” said Artemis. “She’ll fight like a tigress to protect him. You’ll have to kill her too.”

“If necessary, we will,” said Hippolyte. “Death before dishonor.”

Hypnos was the kindest of the gods, and could not forget the dream he had brought to Thyone. He knew that Ares had meant mischief, but didn’t know what kind. So he decided to keep his eye on things.

As it happened he had much business over Helicon. Poets use up dreams at an alarming rate, and don’t always wait until they’re asleep. So Hypnos overflowed Helicon every night, and was pleased to see that Thallo was unhurt, and that the young Amazon was living happily with someone else.

But then he learned that Artemis had begun to hate the Heliconians even more than Ares did, and was mobilizing the Amazons for a murderous raid. He fretted about this. But he was of a very peaceable nature, and never opposed anyone in anything.

Finally, though, he decided to do something in his own way. “It will take a truly heroic effort,” he said to himself, “to keep those wild women from wholesale bardicide. They’ll simply mangle the poor poets unless they’re stopped. But who can help? No god will take the trouble, and the Muses need a year to make up their minds about anything. It will have to be a mortal. But who? ... Hercules, of course! He is the one most willing and most able to help the weak against the strong. I’ll do a dream for him this very night.”

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Hecate's Idea

Botanus, the hundred-handed giant who was the gods' gardener, traveled the world over seeking the most exquisite blooms so that he might bring them back to Olympus. He was now showing his latest cuttings to Hera.

"Yes, very nice," she said.

He told then about a very curious plant he had discovered in a distant jungle. "Gorgeous, My Queen. Something like an orchid, but evil. Twice a day, at dawn and dusk, its blooms open—then snap shut on whatever insect or small bird is sipping its pollen."

"Does it eat them?"

"It does, it does."

"Are there any large enough to eat men?"

"Not that I know of. The ones I saw were orchid size."

"Well," said Hera. "You'll oblige me if you can find some really big ones. I'd like to give a bouquet to someone."

Just then Hera heard a shout from above, and turned to see Hecate coasting in on brass wings. The giant sidled away. For all his size he was afraid of Hecate. The Harpy queen ran toward Hera, shouting.

"Good news!"

"About time," said Hera. "What's happening?"

"Fortune, which favors the fortunate—namely us—has called poetry to our aid."

"I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"As it happens, Hercules is on his way to Mount Helicon, where the Muses dwell. He's on one of his absurd missions of mercy—to rescue some oppressed bards. They're always whimpering about one thing or another, you know."

"How does all this help us?"

“Listen carefully,” said Hecate. “We shall manage the weather and clamp a great heat on Helicon when he gets there. So he’ll be very thirsty and drink deeply of the pure crystal waters of the Hippocrene Spring, which casts those who drink it into a gentle frenzy. They believe their own visions and grow drunk on the music of words. In short, the hero you loathe will be transformed into an apprentice poet. Bits of verse boiling within him will slacken his warrior fibre. His wits will be addled. He’ll lose muscle tone, and his reflexes will falter, then vanish. So he should be easy prey for Ladon.”

“Don’t speak to me of Ladon!” cried Hera. “I’ve told you he’s useless now. He’s slobbering over that redheaded slut. It’s absolutely disgusting.”

“No, it’s good.”

“Good? What can you possibly mean?”

“I mean,” said Hecate, “this unlikely love affair can play into our hands also. I have thought the matter through, O Hera—forward and backward—and I have a further idea, one that will bind things together so that we may solve all our problems at once.”

“Sounds like fantasy,” said Hera. “But please tell me. I need something to lift my spirits.”

“We’ll get word to Iole that Hercules is on Helicon. She’ll hurry there, and Ladon will follow, for he can’t bear to let her out of his sight. When she sees Hercules she’ll rush into his arms, of course, and this—mark my words now—this will make the serpent madly jealous. He’ll forget all that vegetable nonsense and attack Hercules, who, weakened by poetics, will be unable to defend himself.”

“Sounds all right,” said Hera glumly, “but a lot of things do till you start doing them.”

“You’ll feel better when we go into action,” said Hecate.

“Where shall we start?”

“The first thing is to get word to the wench about Hercules’ whereabouts. She’s at sea, probably, with her snake. Your brother, Poseidon, can help us here. He has shoals of gabby Nereids who can spread the news.”

“I’ll send him a message immediately,” said Hera.

She did. Poseidon spoke to his Nereids, who fanned out, jabbering to each other. Now gossip spreads even faster underwater than on land. And

before long, Iole, who often dived off Ladon's head to frolic with sea nymphs, learned that Hercules was visiting Mount Helicon.

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The Raid

A waking from the night-vision sent by Hypnos, Hercules knew that a mountainful of poets was in dreadful peril. He didn't quite understand the nature of the threat, but knew that he was being called on to help. Whereupon he set off for Helicon, beginning a journey that was to cover more distance than he thought.

But the Amazons were already on their way, riding swift horses, while Hercules went on foot. So the warrior women reached the mountain before he did. They climbed until they reached a grassy plain cut by a stream. Here, Hippolyte called a halt.

"Hearken, sisters," she called. "Dismount and let the horses drink; then proceed on foot. Fan out and comb the slopes. Those you hunt are on their home ground and know every hiding place. They'll dive into holes, wedge themselves in hollow trees, and burrow into caves. But I want them taken, every last one."

"Do we kill them on the spot?" called one girl, unfurling a whip. "Or can we have some fun first?"

"Neither," cried Hippolyte. "This will be our collection point. I want them all brought right here so we can sort them out. There may be a few we'll want to take home. The others you can do with as you wish before finishing them off. But I want them all here first, cleaned up and ready for sorting. The Second Squad will be the scrubbing detail. Take 'em downstream for their bath, and scrub hard; they're a filthy lot, I hear. Better burn their clothes too, or we'll catch fleas. That's it, ladies. Good hunting!"

Yelling and laughing, the girls ran up the slope. Each bore bow and quiver as well as a length of rope, or a net. Long-legged and effortlessly fierce as storks hunting frogs, they fanned out in a skirmish line as they raced up the mountain.

The stream purling swiftly downhill formed a natural pool at the end of the meadow. Here was where the captives were to be bathed. While waiting for the first men to be brought in, the girls of the scrub detail flung off their tunics and dived into the pool. Singing and laughing, they cavorted in the cool water; they were sleek and powerful as dolphins.

Nycippe was stalking through an oak grove. Somewhere in the wood men were screaming, which meant they were being captured. But she hadn't caught anyone yet, and itched for action. She felt a sudden craving for something sweet, and began to search for honeycombs. She found a hollow tree and reached in—and touched something alive. It moved. She closed her hand on what seemed like an animal's pelt. Bracing her legs, she pulled a little man out by the beard. He made no sound, but looked at her out of big black eyes. She hoisted him over her shoulder and trotted downhill.

Her companions were streaming downhill, too. Each had caught at least one man. They carried them over their shoulders or tucked under their arms, or upside down, dangling by the ankles. One group of girls who had caught two men each had tied their nets together, stuffed their whole catch in, and were dragging the net downhill. The men struggled like herrings, trying to get to the center of the net bag because the outside ones were being bruised as they bumped over rocks.

Nycippe took her man to the pool and was about to throw him to the scrub girls, but suddenly decided to bathe him herself. She carried him into the pool, and after ducking him a few times and swishing him back and forth in the water, she pulled him out and stretched him on a flat rock. She had taken sand from the bottom and now began to scour him. The dirt came off, but she kept scrubbing. A fierce curiosity had seized her; she felt she was unpeeling him to discover what was within. She scrubbed harder and harder, then saw that his skin was actually peeling off. He was in pain, she knew, but he made no outcry—although the other men in the pool were weeping and screaming as the girls worked on them.

“What am I doing wrong?” called Nycippe.

“You want to mix oil with the sand before scouring,” said a scrub girl.

“No use bothering with that one anymore,” said another. “Look at the poor thing. You might as well drown him.”

Nycippe was rambunctious, but not really cruel. Now, she didn't recognize her feelings. She turned the little man in her hands to see how she had misused him. He looked like a half-flayed rabbit. He was a rabbit, and she felt herself turning into a leopard to rummage his bones. She saw the others looking at her, and knew they expected her to drown him.

She pretended to be pushing him under the water, but hid his face under her hand so that he could breathe. When the others were too busy to notice, she bore him to the shore and scooped some moss over him. He didn't say anything but his black eyes questioned her.

"You're not much to look at, but you've got guts," she whispered. "Maybe I can whip you into shape. Stay right here until I come back."

Now, Thyone had not let herself be lulled into carelessness while living happily with Malo. She had always suspected that the Amazons might come after their lost sister, and she had prepared against invasion. High up, near the mountain peak, she had arranged huge, round boulders, balancing them so that a slight shove would send them thundering down to crush anyone who might be climbing the slope.

Now, when the first sounds of the manhunt reached her cave, she snatched Malo up, set him on her shoulders, and raced toward the peak, letting him off only when they had reached the circle of rocks. She said, "I know you want to go down there and help your friends, my brave darling, but I won't let you."

"You won't?"

"Absolutely not. You'd never come back. One of the sisters will take you to Scythia and peel you like an onion to see where the song comes from."

Now, Malo's courage was confined to daring metaphors. The last thing he wanted to do was go down and fight. But he had always encouraged her to overestimate him. He heaved a deep sigh and said, "Very well, I'll stay up here—but only to please you."

"Oh, thank you, sweetheart."

In the pure hush of the mountaintop they heard faint screams drifting up from below. "Listen to them," said Malo. "They're having an awful time. I really should—"

She swung him off his feet and hugged him tightly to her. "You can't go! You promised! Anyway, you told me you write better about battles you

haven't been to. Didn't you tell me that? Didn't you?"

"True, true," he murmured. "I shall want to write about this one, and had better not confuse myself with facts. Put me down now; you're breaking my ribs."

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The Hippocrene Spring

The Amazons, coming from Scythia, had ridden up the northern slope of the mountain. Hercules, coming from Thebes, was mounting its steeper southern slope, and was unaware of what the warrior women were doing on the other side.

He climbed steadily, and it was hot work. Hera had bribed Apollo to swing his sun chariot low that day, and the land lay sweltering. Nor was it much cooler on the mountain. Hercules was parched. He had to drink, and soon. Nostrils quivering, he snuffed the wind like a horse and tried to pick up the scent of water. A faint, cool odor did drift to him. He strained his ears and heard a distant splashing. He turned off the path and made his way over rough ground to a natural cupping of rock. Here, from deep in the mountain, a spring spurted with such force that it made a plumed fountain. Flowers grew there, wild roses and iris and hyacinth, and the one known as heliotrope because it always turns to face the sun.

Hercules knelt and plunged his face in. It was the most delicious water he had ever drunk, ice cold, sparkling, tasting faintly of mint; it was like drinking some pure essence of earth. He had no way of knowing that this was the Hippocrene Spring, whose coolness touched those who drank it with the incurable fever called poetry.

Hercules pulled his dripping face from the spring and gazed about in wonder. Everything had changed. Colors pulsed. Things presented themselves, insisting that he see them—a cypress, a berry bush, a soaring eagle, a goat far off. They uttered their names, and he heard them as if for the first time. This became a dance of names, seeming not only sound but colored music. The eagle he was watching became a white stallion balanced on golden wings, proclaiming the reliability of magic and the necessity for transformation—which poets know.

Hercules had drunk of the Hippocrene Spring and was becoming a poet. But he was unused to words and felt himself choking on a song unsung.

The fountain mist was making dim, gauzy rainbows, and Hercules couldn't quite see what had come to the other side of the spring. It was huge, a looming brightness. He stepped to one side and looked past the plume of water. He saw a stag, larger than any he had ever seen, and of a blinding whiteness. Its hooves were silver; its antlers were a candelabra of silver fire.

"A moon stag!" he said to himself. "Wandered away from the chariot. Artemis must be searching for him high and low. I shall catch it and bring it to her."

It was not a stag belonging to Artemis, although of the same breed, and it had always run free. But beginners in poetry are apt to prate wildly about the moon.

"Yes," thought Hercules. "Surely he is one of the team that draws the moon chariot across the night. And Artemis, maiden huntress, who swings the tides on a silver leash and hangs a torch for lovers, will thank me when I return this stag to her."

He thought these things, but could not say them. He didn't yet know how. In that big, superbly wrought body, poetry bypassed words and became action. And he began to chase the stag as it bounded away. The stag fled, became a white blur going up the hill. Hercules watched it race to the top, then bound over, to go down the other side.

"Terrific sprinter," thought Hercules. "We'll see how well he goes the distance."

But Hippocrene fever was coursing through his veins. He half forgot about the stag even while following it.

Some miles off Attica, a wedge-shaped head split the water. It was the serpent, Ladon, swimming toward the coast. Iole rode his head, her red hair snapping like a pennant behind her in the wind of their going.

Informed by the sea nymphs that Hercules was on Helicon, she had asked Ladon to take her there, without telling him why.

Ladon crawled ashore and began to undulate across Attica. His body moved by contraction like a giant worm, and he moved very fast. He was

heading northward through the Peloponnese, then would angle northeast toward Thessaly, where Mount Helicon stood.

Hercules ambled down the slope toward the encampment. Tall, suavely muscled young women milled about. Some were grooming horses. Some were in a pool, scrubbing little men who spluttered and wept. Others were sharpening swords against flat rocks. One group was playing with ropes, making their captives run and lassoing them as they ran. A pair of frolicsome twins, aglow with the excitement of their first raid, had tied their men to trees and were giving them a taste of the lash ... not hitting hard—it was just an introductory flogging—the girls chatted and laughed as they swung their whips. Four Amazons were practicing archery with a human target. He was spread-eagled against the bole of a thick tree, and the women were shooting in turn. The idea was to come as close as possible without hitting him. And the archers were so expert that arrows outlined his body but none had touched him.

Then they spotted Hercules. Saw a towering, bronzed, wide-shouldered youth wearing a lion skin and bearing an oaken club. They immediately stopped what they were doing and gaped in wonder. Their voices mingled.

“Look at him, would you? What a big one!”

“Can’t be a man; must be a woman!”

“Must be, absolutely!”

“What does *she* want here?”

“She’s on a raid of her own. Hurry, or she’ll take the best ones.”

“It’s no woman!” bellowed Hippolyte. “It’s a man, definitely.”

“A man that big, can’t believe it.”

“Let’s take him and throw the little ones back. He’d be more use than a mountainful of these runts.”

“A prime cut! After him, girls!”

They shouted with eagerness, uttered war cries, beat sword against shield. The clamor came to Hercules like a dim murmur. He was trying to find a rhyme for tree and had forgotten why he was on the mountain. He waved absently to the ranks of warrior women, then wandered off, mumbling to himself.

Thinking always in terms of warfare, the sisterhood thought this stranger might be leading them into ambush and followed him warily. But, danger or

no, they were determined to catch so fine a specimen.

“When I give the signal, we’ll move in,” called Hippolyte. “And don’t forget, he’s mine!”

No one answered, but every young Amazon there, except for Nycippe, had decided that Hercules must be hers alone, and was ready to fight Hippolyte for him.

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The Silver Stag

Hera and Hecate hovered, watching. They had been pleased by the Amazons' campaign, delighted when they saw Hercules drinking of the spring, but were dismayed now as they saw him bounding down the mountain after a stag.

"I thought that springwater was supposed to do things to him," said Hera. "Scatter his wits, drain his strength. That's what you told me. But look at the brute. Look at him chasing that stag. He's tireless."

Indeed, as the stag raced down the mountain and onto the Thessalian plain, Hercules had put on speed and was managing to keep the animal in sight. He had no idea he was being pursued, but it didn't matter. For he was running faster than the Amazons could gallop their horses.

Furiously disappointed, the warrior women reined up and galloped back to retrieve their captives. But the battered poets had fled, finding holes and caves for themselves and burrowing so deep that the Amazons abandoned the search. They had been hunting listlessly anyway. The memory of the glorious big youth who had outrun their horses made these scruffy little cowards seem most unappetizing. As for the lost sister, Thyone, they had never even caught a glimpse of her. Hot and disgruntled, they trooped off the mountain and headed for Scythia—all but Nycippe; she had deserted.

In the darkest hour of night, she had gone to where she had hidden her captive, slung him across the withers of her horse and ridden toward the peak. She meant to find a cave and oil his cuts and bruises, and find out whether his silence meant song.

It was then that Ladon arrived, bearing Iole on his head, and began to climb the slope. The girl was wild with excitement. She stood up on the head to look about. She had come, finally, to the place where Hercules was supposed to be. Her gaze traveled up, up. She was at the foot of the

mountain; its rock walls towered above her. He could be anywhere up there, or on the other side. She saw a flash of gold and stared in disbelief. A white horse was poised on golden wings, hanging between sky and peak. She was flooded with joy. She knew that wonders never came singly. Perhaps another wonder, the most wonderful of all, was about to happen ... It did! A silver stag fled by, followed by Hercules running almost as fast.

She jumped off Ladon's head, crying, "Farewell!"

"What do you mean, 'farewell'?" asked Ladon.

"I must go now."

"Why?"

"To catch up with that man who just ran by."

"Why?"

"That's Hercules. He's why we've come here."

"Don't go."

"I must! I have something to tell him."

"What?"

"That's my affair! We're not married yet, you know. And never will be if you go on this way."

"What way?"

"All this hissy jealous stuff. 'Why ... what ... when ...' It's unbearable!"

"You don't care for me then?"

"I do, I do, but I don't know how much. I have to go away to see if I care enough to come back."

She heard herself lying, she who had always been too much of her own girl to bother lying to anyone. But she would have said anything that would help her get away from the serpent and go to Hercules.

Hera and Hecate hovered invisibly over Hercules, watching him jump rocks and logs as he chased the stag. "Well," said Hera. "Why hasn't that ruffian been enfeebled by poetry, as you promised?"

"I made a slight miscalculation," said Hecate. "Hercules is a demigod. And I suppose poetry acts differently on him than on a mere mortal. It doesn't become song but a white-hot intellectual activity, igniting all his vital forces. But be easy, Hera. It's all happening for the best."

"The *best!*" cried Hera. "How can you claim that if he's getting stronger instead of weaker?"

“Patience, patience. Drinking of the Hippocrene Spring has suspended his judgment. He has forgotten about consequences, and has suddenly dropped everything to serve the moon. He will be chasing that stag across the wide earth, through the deepest valleys, over the highest mountains. It will flee and he will pursue. Such a chase must exhaust even a Hercules. And—I said this before, and I say it again—he will be easy prey for any monster you send against him.”

Northward raced the stag, Hercules following, and Iole following him. And Ladon following all of them. The serpent didn’t know what to do. He knew that Iole, unlike the others, would have to sleep some time, and he didn’t know whether to stay with her and try to win her affection again, or to follow his enemy, Hercules.

“Perhaps she’s lost her love for him in this grueling chase,” thought Ladon. “If so, I won’t have to kill him.”

Therefore Ladon made himself go slowly, keeping the same distance behind Iole till he saw her finally fold herself beneath a tree and fall asleep. Moonlight sifted through the branches, making sequins of silver on the forest floor, and making him almost invisible as he crept toward the sleeping girl. He rose up on his coils and arched down to look upon her. In the gauzy moonlight she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. And love fought with murder in his untried heart.

He heard her voice. Was she awake? Was she speaking to him? He lowered his head close to her face, and saw that she slept. Was she speaking out of her sleep? Was she calling to him from that deep place where truth abides? That would be good, very good.

“Hercules,” she moaned. “Oh, Hercules ... Wait for me. Please?”

It was to be murder then; she had decreed it from her sleep. Ladon uncoiled and glided away, going much faster now. After several miles he caught sight of Hercules but did not attack. He was very confident of victory in the battle that was to come; nevertheless, he wished that that man, that entangler of young girls, that enemy, would exhaust himself running. Then he, Ladon, the patient one, the eternal waiter, the one who killed and fed at his own pleasure, would close in for the best kill of all—would drink the young Theban’s blood and crack his bones.

At the very western edge of the world lay a small island that had been chosen for gigantic events. Here the Titan, Atlas, who had rebelled against Zeus, was condemned to stand forever, holding the sky on his shoulders. In happier times, he had wed a starry Titaness named Hespera, and she had borne him three beautiful daughters called the Hesperides. They had gone with their father to his place of punishment, had become apple nymphs, and guarded an orchard where grew a wondrous tree bearing golden fruit. This was the very tree that Ladon had wrapped himself about when he first climbed out of the sea and where he had first tasted human flesh.

And it was here, to the Island of the Hesperides, that the stag had come. Without pause, it had raced through Thessaly, northward through Thrace, through the land later to be called Rome and now called Italy, north again across mountains not yet called Alps, then through a fair, forested country that was to become France. Westward then, running as fast as it could, but beginning to slow down a bit—and all this time with Hercules still the same distance behind.

The stag came to an arm of the North Sea. It was as cold and choppy and foggy then as it is now under the name of the English Channel. Without hesitation, the stag leaped into the water and began to swim west.

Hercules had slowed down too now, and had not gained on the stag by the time he reached the water. He looked westward. A strong wind had begun to blow, sweeping the fog away. Across the water he saw dim white cliffs. He squinted, trying to locate the stag. Far off upon the water he spotted the silver gleam of its antlers.

He plunged into the channel. The icy water revived him. He began to swim very fast, faster than the stag was swimming, and had gained slightly on the animal by the time it reached shore. But when it did wade to the beach, it seemed as if it had been storing speed for a last sprint. One huge bound carried it over the sand past a fringe of trees, and it vanished. By the time Hercules reached shore the stag was nowhere to be seen.

He began to press inland, but was weary now. He had enjoyed the swim, but it exhausted him, and he knew he needed to rest before resuming the chase. Nor did he have any idea that he was upon the Utmost Isle. For the wind had dropped again, and an evening fog cloaked the figure of Atlas, so that it looked like a mountain peak.

Hercules slept, and awoke to a sunny morning. He arose immediately, swam in the sea, ate a handful of blackberries, and struck inland to search for the stag. All at once he found himself surrounded by three rosy young nymphs who joined hands and danced about him, singing:

Welcome, stranger,
welcome, man!
Don't try to leave us;
no man can!

"Greetings, lovely nymphs," he said. "Have you seen a silver stag?"

"No, but we have golden apples. We'll give them to you if you stay."

"I must go. I'm hunting that stag. It's somewhere on the island. But I'll come back when I've caught him, I promise. And we'll dance the night through."

"Daylight is fine for dancing too, almost as good as night. Dance now and hunt later."

"That cannot be."

"But you'll come back?"

"I always do what I promise—sooner or later."

Make it soon,
make it soon ...
We'll dance up the sun,
dance down the moon ...

"As soon as ever I may," said Hercules.

"Be careful of our father, though, sweet lad."

"He doesn't like us to have friends."

"When they come he starts avalanches."

"Who is your father?"

"Atlas is his name. There he is standing on that mountain, holding up the sky."

"That snowy peak?"

"It's not snow; it's his white beard."

"Farewell until I return," said Hercules.

He left the nymphs and went on his way, going through a grove and crossing a plain and coming to the foot of the mountain. He searched the slopes, trying to spot the stag. No matter how high it had climbed, its silver antlers, he knew, would catch the sun.

The mountain loomed. It rose and rose and ended in a plateau on which stood Atlas, legs braced, arms raised, holding the edge of the sky on his bowed shoulders. Hercules heard thunder rumble. But the sky was clear, and he realized that the Titan was calling down to him.

“What are you gawking at, little rat?”

“I come in peace,” said Hercules.

“Depart in haste! I welcome no visitors. Have you come to steal the golden apples?”

“No, My Lord.”

“To steal my daughters?”

“Not that either.”

“Well, you look like a thief, and thieves steal.”

Atlas stamped his foot, dislodging a huge rock that tumbled down the mountain. Hercules sprang aside. The rock just missed him and buried itself in the earth.

“Begone, begone!” roared the Titan. “Or I’ll stamp up an avalanche that will cover you in tons of rock.”

“He can’t turn his head,” thought Hercules, “or he’ll shake the sky. I’ll just go around behind him and search for the stag at the other end of the island.”

But he was to find more than he wished on the other shore, for that was where Ladon had landed an hour before.

As soon as he touched shore, the serpent thrilled with recognition. This was the first island he had crawled upon when he had left the sea, ages before. Here was the first place he had eaten a meal that wasn’t fish. That tree, gleaming afar ... it was there he had couched until men and women came to eat its golden fruit, and he had eaten them. Remembering this, a savage craving for meat seized him ... Live meat!

“I can eat what I want now,” he thought. “She doesn’t love me anymore.”

He saw something else gleam. He couldn’t tell what it was. He crept closer, and saw that it was a stag grazing. White fire glanced off its antlers;

they were of pure silver, and its hooves were silver, too. But in between was a ton of venison, for the animal was huge.

Ladon circled, moving downwind, so that the stag could not pick up his scent. He crept closer. He was invisible against the grass. His entire length stiffened like a cable and became a blur of speed as he struck. His head was a battering ram, knocking the stag down. He opened his jaws and slowly engorged it. The head went in last, and it was still screaming as it vanished.

Ladon spat out the antlers, spat out the hooves, and crawled off to digest his meal.

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Hero Meets Monster

Hercules, hunting the stag, saw a patch of white fire, and rushed forward. He stopped in horror as he saw the broken antlers on the ground, and the silver hooves. Where they lay, the grass was trampled and bloody.

When Hercules was priming for battle, he grew both hot and cold. The heat was rage coursing through his veins. At the same time, he was sheathed in coolness. Wit and thews were fusing, thought becoming action. He stood where he was and searched the meadow. Finally, he was able to distinguish the mottled coils of a serpent from the mingled light and shade where it lay. It seemed to be sleeping.

Hercules circled until he was downwind, then crept forward. He wanted to see whether the coils were bulging. They were.

“Yes,” he said to himself. “The silver stag reposes in the belly of the beast. And now I shall prepare a bitter sauce for that meal.”

Ladon awoke, and thrilled with ferocious glee to see Hercules coming toward him. But he pretended to be asleep still, and did not open his jaws, for he wanted his enemy to come within reach. Hercules kept creeping forward.

Ladon lashed out suddenly with his tail, a powerful, sweeping blow that could cave in the planking of a ship. Hercules saw the terrible tail scything at him, and leaped straight up, hacking down with his sword. But the serpent’s scales were hard as armor plate; the blade skidded off.

Hercules fled. He dodged behind a tree as the tail swept back. He crouched low, letting the tail pass above his head and wrap itself about the thick bole. Hercules slipped away as the tree was wrenched, groaning, out of the earth. It came up, roots and all.

Ladon raised the tree like a club and smashed it down on Hercules’ head. It could not dent his rocklike skull, but the blow drove him into the earth

like a tent peg. At that moment, as Hercules was struggling to pull himself out of the hole, the serpent could have wrapped its tail about him and crushed him to death right there.

Instead, Ladon chose to whip about and come at him, jaws agape. Hercules snatched up the fallen tree and wedged it between the serpent's jaws. Ladon roared, swinging his head violently, trying to shake the tree out. But the sharp branches pierced the roof of his mouth.

He flailed about in agony, and Hercules had to dodge the sweeping tail. He saw now that the wedge wouldn't last. The serpent was biting down on it. Despite the agony, he was forcing his jaws together, crushing the tree. Hercules knew that if those jaws closed, they would spring open again, and close again—on him.

"He's bleeding," thought Hercules. "The roof of his mouth is bloody—must be the only place on his body not armored in leather. And this, perhaps, gives me one last chance."

Risking all, he sprang right into Ladon's mouth. Trying to balance himself on the slippery, heaving mass of the beast's tongue, he drove his sword upward, stabbing the unarmored palate again and again. Now, the palate lies beneath the head. And the sword, driven with Hercules' last desperate strength, finally stabbed through the palate into the brain.

The serpent's eyes dulled. The great cable of its body went limp.

Hercules leaned on his sword and gazed down at the beast. It was dead. The stag was gone. The chase was ended. He was hungry and thirsty, and lusted for the orchard's fruit. He was cut and bruised, but nothing that frolicking in the moonlight with three luscious nymphs wouldn't cure.

He grinned up at the dim figure of Atlas. "I'll take them to the edge of the sea to dance," he said to himself. "And be able to dodge the avalanche by diving in."

The nymphs welcomed him joyously. They wreathed themselves about him, dancing up the sun, dancing down the moon. Their arms were smooth as apple blossoms, and their fragrance was of windfall apples. Atlas stamped furiously. But his daughters only laughed and made a dance of dodging rocks.

And Hercules, drunk on apple fragrance and blossoming touch and the whirling spirals of the dance, knew that he would have to leave at dawn or stay there forever, courting nymphs, dodging avalanches.

As if sensing what he felt, the Hesperides pressed closer. Their fragrance beat about him, and the hurtling rocks seemed harmless as falling blossoms. But the sky was flushing pink, shading to rose; there was a wash of lilac and a promise of hot gold. And he remembered a girl with a red mane of hair and jade green eyes and long ivory-brown arms and legs, and a tunic of lilac and rose.

“Farewell,” he cried to the nymphs. He swept them into his arms and kissed each blooming face, kissed their crystal tears away. “Do not grieve; rejoice, rejoice! Others shall come to dance with you, my lovelies, and stay as long as you wish.”

“Why are you leaving us? It must be for a girl.”

“I have seven more monsters to face. And, in between, I must search for the girl who is searching for me.”

He dived into the sea and swam eastward as dawn became day and the grieving voices of the Hesperides mingled with the cry of gulls.

Iole, being a daughter of the rainbow, whose home is the sky, could sometimes read the passage of birds and the pattern of stars for signs of what was to be.

When a black arrow of cranes crossed the sunset, and later that night was followed by a falling star, she knew that she must climb a cliff the next morning—for her destiny would move upon the waters.

She stood upon a cliff in Troezen and gazed out over the sea. Her hair was a red-gold pennant in the wind and her fluttering tunic was of lilac and rose. Far out, she saw something coming, and prepared to flee. For it was big, big; it could only be Ladon. Nevertheless, she waited until she could see it more clearly, then began to laugh and cry at the same time.

For it was a raft made of huge logs bound together, the slowest, clumsiest craft in the world, but it was scudding along like a canoe under the powerful strokes of a bronzed youth in a lion skin who was rowing with an uprooted tree.

She saw the raft swerve toward the beach, and she began to race down the cliff, her sobbing laughter turning to song as she ran to meet him.

As we have seen, monsters were not immortal; they could be slain by heroes and other monsters. But a dead one could always find employment

with Hades. It took its place among his fiends and demons, and roamed the plain, terrorizing and mangling whomever it met, just as it had in life. For the theme of ancient Hell was that death changed nothing—and that hasn't changed either.

So it was that Ladon was welcomed into Tartarus. Although officially dead, he kept his hopes alive. He knew that Iole, being a demigoddess, was only half immortal, and that in a thousand years or so her shade would descend—and find him waiting, as he had waited since the beginning of time.

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For my granddaughter
KELLY EVANS
whose eyes once turned a stony heart
into enamored mush.

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Characters

Monsters

Ceto
(SEE toh) Matriarch of the First Family of Monsters; half woman, half serpent; wife of Phorcys and mother of Echidne, Ladon, the Gray Ones, the Gorgons, Medusa, and several other litters of fearsome creatures

Phorcys
(FOR sihs) The Sea Hog; husband of Ceto and father to all of the above

Echidne
(ee KID neh) Eldest daughter of Ceto and Phorcys; also part woman, part serpent, but worse all around than her mother

Ladon
(LAY duhn) Totally serpent, and entirely lethal

The Gray Ones Three hags, born old and growing steadily older, who must share a single tooth and eye amongst them and do so most unwillingly

Medusa Youngest of the Ceto-Phorcys brood; as beautiful as
(muh DOO suh) the others are ugly, and cursed for her beauty

The Gorgons Hideous elder sisters of Medusa, equipped with
(GOR guhnz) brass wings and brass claws

**Andromeda's
Beast** Sea dragon sent by Poseidon to harass the seaport
city of Joppa

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods
(ZOOS)

Poseidon Brother of Zeus; God of the Sea
(poh SY duhn)

Athena Daughter of Zeus; Goddess of Wisdom
(uh THEE nuh)

Hera Sister and wife of Zeus; Queen of the Gods; her
(HEE ruh) jealous wrath carries its own legend

Humans

Danae Princess of Argos; loved by Zeus and hated by her
(DAN ay ee) father, Acrisius

Perseus Son of Zeus and Danae; young hero who meets
(PUR see uhs) many monsters in his quest for rightful succession
to King Polydectes' throne

Acrisius Cowardly king of Argos; father of Danae
(uh KRIS ee
uhs)

Polydectes King of Seriphus; pursuer of Danae
(pahl ih DEHK
teez)

Cepheus King of Joppa; father of Andromeda
(SEF ee uhs)

Andromeda Princess of Joppa; betrothed to Perseus; later queen
(an DRAHM ee of Argos, Mycenae, Seriphus, and Joppa
duh)

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A Hero Comes Home

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A Fearsome Brood

This story begins in the sea and returns to the sea, but strange and terrible things happen in between.

In those first days there was no land, only water, until the gods grew bored with endless ocean and floated a few islands. A certain deep-dwelling family of monsters were happy to see these dry places heaving out of the sea. They knew that land would mean land animals, and they were tired of eating fish. The reason they had to live underwater is that they were so ugly the gods couldn't bear to look at them.

They hated the gods and vowed vengeance upon them—also upon a new species the gods were breeding for their entertainment, to be called humans.

The mother monster was named Ceto. She was half beast and half woman, with the body of a gigantic snake and the arms and breasts of a woman.

Her husband was Phorcys, the Sea Hog, a gross blob of flesh but much smaller than Ceto, who allowed him little freedom. She kept him wrapped in her coils except when she was laying her eggs.

These eggs hatched in strange ways.

Echidne crawled out of the first one. She lengthened into a woman-serpent like her mother but larger and of a much more ferocious nature.

Out of the second egg wriggled Ladon. He was pure serpent, a hundred feet long and every inch fatal. Half his length was jaw: fifty feet of living gullet lined with teeth. When the islands appeared, he crawled up out of the sea to hunt and could devour a hippo in two bites. An elephant took three.

The next egg cracked to reveal a set of triplets. At the sight of them, no one rejoiced. For they were born old: three crones with decaying hair and withered skin. They were blind and toothless most of the time, for they possessed but one eye and one tooth among them. These they had to share,

passing them about to take turns seeing and chewing and always railing at one another for taking too long. The Gray Ones they were called, and Ceto couldn't wait to get rid of them. She carried them northward, swimming through water that grew colder and colder. Finally, she deposited them on an ice floe and swam away, never looking back.

Ceto laid two more eggs. The larger one was colored the usual leaden green to make it almost invisible underwater and more likely to escape the attention of a hungry neighbor. But the other egg, the smaller one, was a wonderful greenish gold, the color of the sea when the day dawns fair.

Now, Ceto and Phorcys had produced one ghastly offspring after the other and had no high expectations this time. But when the larger egg hatched, Ceto gasped in horror. Out crawled two scaly creatures with the bodies of infant girls. But they had brass wings and claws and were covered with brass scales. And their faces! Squashed noses, jutting fangs, and bulging red eyes. Their hair was seaweed.

"They're uglier than the Gray Ones," muttered their mother. "I'll take them to the ends of the earth and leave them there—and hope they don't fly back."

Finally, the smaller egg cracked. Out crawled the third sister. Again Ceto gasped, but in wonder. For this daughter was beautiful.

Monsters have no childhood. They grow up as soon as they leave the egg. So Ceto sat coiled in her undersea cavern, gazing upon her three tall daughters. "I can't exile these ugly ones," she muttered. The ancient Greek word for ugly one is *Gorgon*. "They must stay here and guard their sister. For anyone who sees her will want to abduct her immediately. Her name shall be *Medusa*, the lovely creature."

"Medusa?" grunted Phorcys, who spoke only once every hundred years; the rest of the time he was busy eating. "Why Medusa? The word means 'wise,' not 'beautiful.'"

"Quiet, Hog," said Ceto. "Or I'll squeeze you to a pulp. What is beauty but the body's intelligence?"

Indeed, the lovely girl who had been sent by fate to live among this monster brood lit up the undersea cavern, startling the shadows. She didn't stay underwater, of course. She craved sunlight and demanded that her sisters fly her as high as they could. They cleaved the air, swinging Medusa between them. Wingless though she was, she wanted very much to fly and

made them drop her from great heights. She would straighten into a dive, hair streaming, and knife the water, then swim so swiftly that her sisters could not outrace her, no matter how fast they flew.

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The Necklace

Arumor arose that Poseidon was about to choose a bride. For some reason gossip spreads just as fast underwater as it does above. Immediately, every Nereid in the Ocean Stream, every river nymph, and every naiad of fountain and lake swam into the Middle Sea. There they hovered in shoals about his great sunken palace of coral and pearl. Wherever Poseidon went he found them swarming, darting in and out of his path, brushing against him, tweaking his beard, and calling to him in the curious bubble language of the submerged.

“I’d better do something drastic,” he muttered. “Or they’ll wear me down by sheer weight of numbers. I have a great deal of endurance, but I can’t handle them all.”

Poseidon thought and thought and finally hit on a plan. He summoned his chief helper, a watery demigod named Proteus, who was gifted with the ability to change his shape. He could become jellyfish, octopus, shark, abalone—whatever the occasion required, and all in the wink of an eye. But his favorite guise was that of a blue-eyed white seal, and it was in this form that he now appeared to Poseidon.

“You called me, oh master, and I am here.”

“Yes, faithful Proteus. I have need of your services.”

“Command, and I perform.”

“As you know, I am about to take a bride,” said Poseidon. “Every nymph and naiad and Nereid from every waterway of the world seems to be competing for the honor. And they are all so bewilderingly beautiful that I simply cannot choose among them.”

“A pleasant dilemma, my lord.”

“What I want you to do is organize a swimming race.”

“They all swim superbly, your majesty.”

“Some have to be better than others, and among those, one has to be the best. It is the nature of things; there is always one who’s best.”

“Shall I announce that you will marry the winner?”

“No, no ... we must still leave ourselves some options. Announce that they will be racing for a prize, a jewel most sumptuous, the exact nature of which we shall not disclose until after the race.”

“Yes, sire. They swim. One of them wins. Then what?”

“I shall have been closely observing the swimmers, judging them on strength, speed, endurance, and so on—qualities any wife of mine will need in full measure. Among the ten or so who come in first will undoubtedly be some magnificent creatures. I shall choose among the finalists.”

“All will be done according to your pleasure, my lord.”

The white seal who was Proteus swam away, changing himself into a shark as he went—for that is the species best suited for organizing contests.

Thereupon, Poseidon sent for Brontes, a Cyclops, who had won the sea god’s admiration by hammering out a set of enormous silver horse troughs for his herd of surf-stallions.

“I have a task worthy of your skill, Brontes. I want you to make me a gem that I will be proud to offer my bride. It must be a necklace, the most magnificent ever seen or imagined in heaven, on earth, or under the sea. You shall have an entire harvest of pearls—black ones and white ones, brimming with watery lights and filtered moon fire. You shall also have a sunken galleon whose hold is loaded with treasure. From its heaviest ingots you shall forge a golden chain to hang the pearls on. And of the diamonds from the galleon, you shall select the largest, the most brilliant and artfully cut, to stud the boundaries between white pearls and black.”

“How splendid!” cried Brontes. “How generous! All the goddesses will go mad with jealousy.”

“Yes,” said Poseidon. “And my bride, lucky creature, noting their envy, will go mad with joy, which is as it should be. Hasten your labors, good Brontes. I give you ten days.”

“On a task like this, sire, I shall work both day and night.”

Before Brontes could finish his assignment, however, he was visited by Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, the warrior maiden whose tactical skills rivaled those of her half brother, Ares, Lord of Battle. She had come to order weapons—a new-moon sword, a dagger, and a set of spearheads.

Brontes was working on the necklace as she entered. Athena moaned with pleasure when she saw what lay on the basalt slab that was his workbench. It seemed as though the forge fire had burst, scattering varicolored coals upon the slab.

“What are you making?” she whispered.

“A necklace, my lady.”

“May I know for whom?”

“For whomever Poseidon chooses.”

Athena was silent. She kept staring at the necklace, naked desire in her gray eyes. She coveted this gorgeous jewel with a craving that scorched her inside, and she was resolved to have it for herself, come what might.

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Family Council

The Middle Sea was boiling with excitement as the day of the great race approached. The most excited of all, perhaps, was Ceto. Beyond anything else in the world she wanted her beautiful daughter to become Poseidon's bride. She called the Gorgon sisters to her and said:

"Which of you is which?"

"Why the sudden interest, mother?" said one. "Considering that you've never even bothered to name us."

"Well, you've named yourselves, haven't you?" Ceto replied. "Don't be impudent, my lass, or I'll mangle you, brass scales and all. Which one are you?"

"I am Strong," muttered one Gorgon.

"And I am Swift," said the other.

"Strong and Swift," said Ceto. "Well, you are, you are. Ugly as the hinges of hell, but strong and swift, no doubt about that. And I want you to use your strength and speed to help your sister."

"Help her do what?" said Swift.

"We're always doing things for her," said Strong. "She's been queening it over us since we were born. I suppose that's all right. We don't have anything better to do than fly her around and guard her against kidnapers and so forth. But I wouldn't say she needed anybody's help, not little sister Medusa. She takes excellent care of herself."

"Shut your spiteful mouth!" shouted Ceto. "I must know this: Is she fast enough to win Poseidon's race?"

"She's fast enough," said Swift. "She can swim circles around anything in the sea."

"She can, but will she?" asked Strong.

"What do you mean?" said Ceto.

“Medusa forgets what she’s doing. She starts dreaming. If she even remembers to enter the race, she’ll take the lead easily—then she’ll see a pretty piece of coral or fall into conversation with an octopus. Everyone will swim past her and she won’t even notice.”

“Suppose I swim with her and keep nagging her back on course?” said Ceto.

“Well,” said Swift. “It might work for a while, but if she gets interested in something else, she’ll simply swim away. You won’t be able to catch her.”

“I can catch up with her while she’s looking at the coral or chatting with the octopus.”

“In the meantime,” said Swift, “the race will be over.”

“All right,” said Ceto. “We have to do two things. I have to swim with her and keep her in the race. And, what you two must do is interfere with the other swimmers.”

“How?” said Strong.

“What happens when a gull swoops down on a school of fish?”

“They scatter. They go deep.”

“Well ... you two will be my gulls. Or sea hawks is more like it. You will fly over the course, and when you see naiads, Nereids, and other nymphs beneath you, you will plunge through the air, claws gleaming, screeching. Like frightened fish, the swimmers will scatter, dive, and hide in the depths. Then you two will circle above, clashing your brass wings, rattling your brass claws, screeching, and shrieking until I can get your sister on the move again.”

“It’ll be a slow race,” said Swift.

“But she’ll win, she’ll win. She’ll be Poseidon’s bride, and Queen of the Sea.”

“Do you really want her to marry that brawling bully? He’ll make a dreadful husband.”

“He’ll also make her a queen,” Ceto said. “Afterward, she can ignore him through eternity.”

“Yes ...,” said Strong. “She might not even notice she’s married. She’ll sit on a rock winding the necklace in her hair, admiring herself in the mirror of the sea, and won’t give Poseidon a thought.”

“He’ll be marrying better than his brothers did,” said Ceto. “Zeus has Hera, the shrew of the universe. Hades abducted Persephone and has been hated by her for a thousand years now. If my beautiful girl grants Poseidon one smile, he’ll be doing better than his hag-ridden brothers. Off with you now! Go practice dropping out of the sky, shrieking as you go. Find a school of dolphins and practice on them. Who knows—you too may profit from your sister’s success. She may be able to find husbands for you.”

“Will she be that powerful?” muttered Swift.

“I suppose anything’s possible,” said Strong. “After all, mother, you found a husband, and you’re no beauty. It was only *him*, of course.” She pointed a claw at Phorcys, who lay snoring within Ceto’s coils. “But we’d settle for anything, wouldn’t we, sister?”

“Even less,” said Swift.

They flew off, shrieking with laughter.

Bride of the Sea

Medusa sat on a rock, plaiting her hair and singing. Her voice harvested the sounds of the sea—gull cry, splash, and sigh; lilt of water and lament of wind; chuckles of the tide among pebbles; and the moon-drunk crooning of naiads catching fishermen. As she sang, she combed the mass of hair. Each strand was a tendril of light, a filament of fire. These rich tresses, trapping the sunshine all day, held it at night and became a false beacon to helmsmen, luring them out of darkness to break their ships upon the rocks. All this she made happen as innocently as a child whipping the heads off flowers. Shipwreck was her pastime; her voice called sailors to drown.

One night, riding in his dolphin chariot, Poseidon heard a voice singing. Although he was as tone-deaf as a mackerel, he knew that this voice could belong only to someone beautiful. Surfacing, he saw Medusa plaiting her hair; it was a net of moonlight, casting a fragrance of wild grasses upon the salty wind.

The night was cool, but the sea around him began to steam with his desire. He knew that he had found his bride, and tried to tell her so, but could not utter a word. His desperate craving had wiped his lips of speech. He roared wordlessly.

Medusa on her rock looked up to see a huge, green-robed, green-bearded figure balancing himself on the swell. Dolphins frisked about him. He held an enormous three-pronged staff and wore a crown of pearls. He bellowed again and brandished his trident. She smiled at him. And he found speech.

“Who are you?” he said.

“Medusa.”

“You shall be my queen.”

“Are you king of something?” she asked.

“I am Poseidon.”

“But Poseidon, I hear, has a wonderful gift for his bride.”

“Here ...”

He spun a hoop of fire toward her. She caught it on her arm. It was the necklace.

“If you take it you are my wife,” he said.

“Yes, your majesty.”

And so it was that Poseidon called off the great race, putting an end to every tender expectation. He had chosen his bride.

News of Medusa’s triumph spread through the Middle Sea, enraging its nymphs. It became unsafe to put out in a small boat for fear that a Nereid would swim under it, capsize it, snatch a sailor, and carry him off to an undersea cave. There, she presented him with a choice: marry her, or be fed to the sharks.

Meanwhile, Medusa sat on her rock playing with her necklace, making its mingled lights flash back at the stars. A small boat scudded by, running before the wind. A fisher-lad had bound the rudder and was standing in the bow, arm raised, ready to cast his spear at one of the big sail-finned fish, which were not the best eating but were the easiest to catch.

He was a slender youth, just ripening into manhood. Standing there in the bow, spear poised, painted by moonlight, he seemed to be carved of marble. Medusa’s heart danced at the sight of him.

The boat stopped suddenly, as if it had hit a rock. She stared in disbelief; she knew there were no rocks around except the one she was sitting on; she thought the boat must have been gripped by an octopus. But it was no octopus. A Nereid surfaced, seized the lad by the hair, and pulled him under. Medusa dived off her rock. She reached the sea nymph in three strokes and took her by the throat. The Nereid writhed and flailed her legs, but Medusa was much larger and stronger. She pulled the nymph to the surface—for you cannot strike hard underwater—and slapped her until she fled, weeping.

Medusa caught the boy, who was feebly struggling in the water. She set him astride her and swam on her back until she reached the rock. There, she lifted him out of the water and climbed onto the rock after him. His teeth were chattering and his lips were blue.

She took him on her lap and hugged him close, feeling the heat of her body enter his, and his shudders subsided. He looked at her and smiled

faintly. A big purple bruise was forming on his brow. He closed his eyes. His head lolled against her shoulder. She held him as though he were a child, rocking him in her arms, crooning. Very gently, she kissed the side of his face. His eyes opened. He smiled.

Suddenly, the stars were blotted. A cold wind blew. The sea churned. Medusa, startled out of her trance, lifted her face, tasting the wind with animal alertness. Had Poseidon spied them together on the rock and grown jealous? Sent a squall? Would it grow to the kind of killer storm that the sea god sent against those who offended him?

Quickly, she slid the boy off her lap. "Wait here," she said, and dived off. She cut through the water toward the drifting boat, caught its line, and towed it back to the rock. She motioned to the boy, who climbed down into the boat.

"Go!" she cried. "You must not stay here—not now!"

He gazed at her sorrowfully. A hot gust of tenderness swept over her. But she knew she must not yield to it; the peril was too great.

"Go now!" she cried. "Go, little love. Sail away."

"Must I?"

"Come tomorrow at sunset. Sail past the rock. If all is safe, I shall be singing. If I am silent, you must sail away."

The youth raised his sail; the boat moved into blackness.

The Curse

The tidings that had so aroused the sea nymphs reached Athena's mountaintop. Burning with envy, Athena whistled up her chariot, which was drawn by eight white arctic owls, as large as eagles. She flew off her mountain and skimmed the surface of the water, searching. Finally, she saw a patch of light fracturing, exploding into color. Making herself invisible, she hovered over Medusa's rock, watching her wind the necklace in her hair. Athena knew that she was gazing upon the most gorgeous creature in the entire world, and that knowledge clawed her entrails, gouged the soft places behind her eyes, and seared every particle of her body with jealousy.

"Very proud of yourself, aren't you," snarled Athena. "Well, take a last look. I'm going to make you even uglier than your sisters."

Medusa raised her comb and felt it snatched from her hand. She looked up, thinking a gull had seized it, but saw nothing. She stared then into the mirror of the sea, and her eyes grew stony with horror. A snake was coiled in her hair; it held her comb in its jaws. Shrieking, she reached up and grasped the snake, trying to pull it out of her hair, but its tail was rooted in her head; to pull it out she would have to rip away her scalp. And now the snake became two snakes, then three! Every lock of her hair was becoming a snake. They stood on their tails, weaving their coils, darting their tongues, hissing.

The sinking sun reddened the water. Medusa, staring at her reflection, saw the snakes writhing out of her head like flames. She could not bear the sight of herself. Red-hot pincers of grief were digging into her heart. But she did not know how to weep, for the tears of creatures that live underwater are lost in the sea. She heard herself howling. She lifted her face to the sky and howled like a wolf.

At that very moment, the fisher-lad she had saved was coming back to her. He yearned to be with her on the rock again and prayed that he would hear her voice, for she had said that if she were singing at sunset it would be safe for him to come. He heard her. He was so enamored of her voice that her wild cries of grief sounded like song.

She didn't see him. Sailing toward her out of the flaming disk of the sun, he was only a silhouette. He dropped sail, wedged his bow in a cleft of rock, and climbed up beside her.

"Medusa!" he cried.

And she, seeing him appear out of nowhere in the midst of her torment, hearing the love in his voice, lost all sense of everything except his return. She sprang up, lifted him to her, and tilted his face to kiss him. He stared at her, sinking into nightmare. Her beautiful, graceful head was crowned with snakes. They were her hair. Each one separately alive, they were the coiled shapes of evil. They were writhing, lunging, hissing. The horror entered him, freezing every response, petrifying every duct and fiber, damming the flow of blood.

Medusa felt him stiffen in her arms. His eyes grew rigid. The thread of vein at the base of his throat stopped pulsing. She was holding a stone boy. He slipped out of her arms, fell stiffly off the rock, and crashed into his moored boat, splintering it. Amid wrecked timbers, he sank out of sight.

Medusa stared into the purple-red water. She stood there watching as if carved of marble herself, motionless except for the snakes swaying on her head.

"I'm the ugliest sister now," she cried to the wind, "the worst Gorgon there is. So horrible that anyone who looks upon me turns to stone. Yes-s-s ... you came sailing back to me, little love. And saw a change so loathsome that your very heart froze. You're a marble boy now, sleeping whitely, heavily, at the bottom of the sea. Your bones will turn to coral, and your eyes into black pearls, more precious than those of this necklace, which is the sea god's accursed gift. As for me, I shall hide my ugliness where no one may ever set eyes upon it again. I shall swim to the end of the Ocean Stream to the region beyond the North Wind, where it is neither land nor water but foul, icy swamp, unvisited by sun or moon, shunned by fish, and avoided by birds. There shall I abide forever and ever, knowing the full torment of immortality—unwilling to live, unable to die."

Medusa threw her necklace away. But it never reached the water. The invisible Athena caught it in midair, whipped up her owls, and flew off toward her mountain, laughing triumphantly.

Swimming toward the lair of the North Wind, Medusa found bitter entertainment in turning sharks to stone. One day, however, a dolphin that had been her playmate spotted her. Before she could turn away he had become a stone dolphin and dropped to the bottom of the sea.

From then on, Medusa tried to avoid every living thing, but once, passing a headland, she entangled herself in a heavy net strung between two fishing boats and was hauled to the surface before she could break free. Shouting with joy at the weight of their catch, the fishermen pulled up the net and looked down on Medusa and the snakes that were her hair. They became statues, smiles carved upon their faces. They had died rejoicing.

After that, Medusa swam very fast and without rest. The exercise heated her blood, and, because she was still very young, she sometimes forgot the dreadful thing that had happened to her, and found herself filling with joy. Then she would feel the snakes tugging at her scalp, and remember what she had become. And grief revived was more agonizing than if it had never ceased.

Guests of the Tyrant

Polydectes, king of Seriphus, was famous for ferocity even among the cruel rulers of the Middle Sea basin. When enraged, he would kill anyone within reach. By the time he was thirty-seven he had run through three wives and had sent several children to join their mothers in Hades.

Now, he was considering a fourth wife. The target of his dangerous attentions was a beautiful young woman named Danae, who had come to Seriphus from a far place. Since her arrival she had wrapped herself in mystery, refusing to disclose her rank, her parentage, or the father of her son. Anyone looking at her, however, knew immediately that she had sprung from a line of conquerors, both male and female. In those days, women fought alongside their men when they didn't have more important things to do.

Danae had to be polite to the king, for she lived on Seriphus as his guest. But she secretly loathed him and was resolved that she would kill herself rather than become his wife. "But I shall not leave this life without a royal escort," she said to herself. "If I decide to travel to the Land Beyond Death, I shall play the role of loving bride and insist that my husband accompany me wherever I go."

Nevertheless, Danae was clever enough to conceal her feelings, and she managed to fend off the king without arousing his fury. But he was growing more ardent, and she knew she wouldn't be able to go on refusing him much longer.

Polydectes was not a stupid man, and although his mind was larded with the kind of vanity that often dulls the wit of tyrants, he realized that Danae was prepared to repulse him. He refused, however, to ascribe her lack of interest to his own lack of charm. He had to find someone else to blame and decided that it was her young son, Perseus, who was poisoning her mind

against him. The king thereupon resolved to get rid of Perseus, but to do it in such a way that he would not be blamed for the boy's death.

Seriphus was an island whose chief industry was piracy. The most successful pirates became its first nobility; its first king had been a glorified pirate chief. Now, five generations later, king and nobility were still pirates, slightly polished. In such a society, the children tended to play roughly, and Perseus and his friends were the roughest of all; any game was likely to end in a brawl.

But Perseus in sport, as in everything, went further than anyone else. For him fighting was a natural extension of other games—the most exciting form of activity. And he fought with great playfulness and a mounting joy. At the height of a conflict he felt a kind of love for the antagonist who provided such sport. This lightheartedness translated itself into light-footedness. Where others grew grave with determination and heavy with rage, he shed gravity. Perseus moved more quickly, leaped higher, and struck so swiftly that his fists seemed to blur in the air. He kicked like a wild stallion, butted like a mountain goat. He used dagger and sword and spear as a tiger uses its claws, or a wild boar its tusks.

Upon a certain day, the king stood half hidden behind a rock watching the children play at the base of the hill. His heart grew bitter within him as he watched his young enemy move among the other boys like a hawk upon barnyard fowl. His hair burned yellow; his bronze body flashed; his eyes shot rays of light. And the king knew suddenly that the woman he loved and the boy he hated lived somewhere beyond ordinary circumstance; they were a different breed—more vibrant than life. To win the mother and vanquish the son, he would have to do things he had never done before.

He went to consult an oracle. It took two days and a night for the old prophet to search for clues to the king's future. On the first day he examined the entrails of a pigeon. On the second, he studied the flight of wild geese. And, on the night between, he stayed awake to read the stars.

By this time, Polydectes was boiling with impatience, and the oracle was afraid to take any more time. "Oh Majesty, forgive me," he said. "But the signs are difficult to read. The pigeon's liver was where its lungs should be, and its heart was riddled with worms. The stars were pulsing in a way I've never seen, spinning like fire wheels, branding the black sky with strange

images—a nest of snakes, and statues, bleeding. As for the flying geese, they scrawled the sky in a language more ancient than our own, but I sensed their message—which is ‘peril ... peril ... peril!’”

“What kind of peril?” asked the king.

“Obscure, sire. Ugly but obscure. What it reduces to is this: Your enemy is the son of a god and cannot be defeated by direct assault.”

“Can he be defeated at all?”

“Only by deceit—by lies artfully told and plots skillfully spun.”

Polydectes looked hard at the old man, who shuddered. He turned and departed; the prophet almost swooned with relief.

“The old dotard only advised me to do what I had already decided to do,” thought the king. “But that’s an oracle’s stock in trade, it seems ... especially when his client is a king. As for Perseus being the son of a god, that means that his mother was once loved by a god. And that means ...” Polydectes smiled to himself, for it tickled his vanity to think of wooing the woman a god had loved; it seemed to make him something of a god himself. “As for weaving a plot to lead the lad to his own death, that suits me very well. I’ll start with his mother.”

Polydectes invited Danae to his palace. They sat drinking wine on a balcony overlooking a great scoop of sea, painted by the sunset. He had subdued his ferocious manner for the occasion, smiling at her benevolently.

“Hear me, my dear,” he said. “Though I am all-powerful here, I am ready to accept the fact that you do not return my love. Nevertheless, that love abides. What I must do is change its nature. I shall love you not like a husband, but like a brother ... or like a father, perhaps.”

“Please!” cried Danae. “Don’t say ‘like a father.’ Don’t say ‘father’ to me.”

“Mystery within mystery!” cried Polydectes. “What do you mean?”

“I welcome your change of heart,” said Danae. “And I shall gladly accept you as my brother.”

“Then I claim a brother’s due and would know the secret that you harbor.”

“Ah, brother, it is a terrible tale I have to tell.” For a moment, Danae hesitated. “My father was Acrisius, king of Argos. I was his only child. Although descended from mighty warriors, he was a coward. And I was causing him much terror. He knew I would soon be ripe for a husband, and

that husband would be a prince or a young king—a warrior, certainly. My father visualized the son-in-law he did not have yet reaching for power in Argos, gathering troops, and plotting to murder him. It became unbearable for me to enter his presence; his eyes were glazed with hatred. Finally, a dreadful rumor reached my ears. My father had consulted an oracle, who had stoked his terror by telling him that if I bore a son, that son would kill him. Knowing my father, I decided to flee the palace, but it was too late. He forbade me to leave the royal enclosure and set guards upon me.”

“How is it he didn’t kill you immediately?” said Polydectes.

“He feared the vengeance of the gods. He had heard they inflict terrible punishment on those who kill their children.”

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no,” muttered Polydectes. “Go on.”

“I had been hearing a daylong clanging of tools against metal, and I didn’t dare think what that sound foretold. My father had ordered a prison built that would need no jailers—for he wanted to deprive me of male society forever. So his slaves were building a brass tower without doors or windows, just a single arrow slit for light and air. I was put into that tower before it was finished and watched the last plate of brass being bolted into place. There my father meant me to dwell until I died—which he expected to happen quickly. For I had always been an active girl who loved to ride and hunt and run on the hillside and swim in the sea.”

“Poor child,” murmured Polydectes. “Poor innocent wild-flower of a child with so cruel a father.”

“So he waited for report of my death, and waited, and waited.... But I was resolved not to die.” Danae broke off suddenly, stifling a sob, then said: “Dear brother, forgive me; I can’t go on. What happened next in that tower is a holy secret to me; I have told no one, not even my son. And I’m still unwilling to talk about it.”

“Don’t fret. You’ll tell me when you’re ready. We shall have many such talks, my sister, and you will find yourself opening your heart to me.”

“Yes ... no doubt.”

“And now,” said Polydectes, “to show you how different I am from your cruel father, I shall designate your son to be my heir. Yes, he shall inherit the kingdom after my death. Nor do I fear that he will do anything to hasten that sad event, although many kings would be fearful, for he bids fair to develop into a powerful and ambitious young warrior.”

Danae was truly surprised. “I don’t know how to thank you,” she murmured.

“I am not looking for gratitude. I am here to serve you in all ways without thought of repayment.”

“Your generosity overwhelms me, sire.”

“I must add that my gift to Perseus, like most gifts, carries with it a certain obligation, not to me, personally, but to the state. According to our law, no one can inherit the throne without performing a deed recognized as heroic. I, myself, the son of a king, had to venture forth alone in a small boat to combat a killer whale that was harassing our coast. Armed only with a spear, I succeeded in killing the monster and thus qualified myself for the kingship. Your son will choose his own task.”

“Let me go now, dear brother,” said Danae, “and inform Perseus of your noble generosity.”

That night, mother and son sat long over a driftwood fire as she told him what had happened that day. Perseus listened hungrily, growing more and more excited with each word.

“Mother, mother!” he cried. “What great warrior shall I challenge? What monster shall I hunt? Or shall I go to places no one has ever gone before? Sail to the very end of the world where the sea tumbles off into nothingness? Shall I lean over and peer into the abyss—or leap off, perhaps to land in some new place? Mother, mother, what shall I do?”

“Perseus, listen ...”

“I am framed for great deeds! I know I am. And now the king knows it too.... But glory, glory, glory, what shall I do?”

“Nothing, yet.”

“What!!”

“You must grow up first. Become a man before you become a hero. You’re only a boy.”

“Oh, mother ...”

“Perseus, the king is not our friend. His one desire is to separate us so that he can force me to marry him. That’s why he wants to send you out before you’re ripe for combat. But I won’t let him.”

“Mother, please.... You have been my defender long enough. It is time for me to be yours.”

“My boy, you have grown beyond me, perhaps. You must ask your father what to do.”

“My father? Are you finally going to tell me who he is?”

“Yes, my son, it is time.”

And Danae told him what had happened to her in the brass tower. Perseus’s eyes grew wider and wider, drinking in the firelight until they became two pools of flame. She had told him before about her imprisonment, but she had never finished the tale.

“... I was penned up in that stifling prison, pining for light and air, struggling to stay alive. I fastened my eyes to the arrow slit and clung to the sight of the one star I could see. Enlarged by my tears, that star grew until it filled the sky. A blade of light slashed through the blackness and stabbed into my cell. Unlike ordinary light, it didn’t spread. The golden blade pulsed, thickened, became a pillar of light, then gathered itself into the form of a man. But taller than any man—with yellow hair and eyes of molten gold, wearing golden armlets and gold sandals, and carrying a jagged shaft of pure light as other men bear spears. I knew he was a god and knelt to him. He raised me gently and spoke in a deep, musical voice: ‘Yes, Danae, I am a god. But for the sake of your beauty I have become a man.’”

“Every night he came into my cell as a shower of gold, and he vanished at dawn—just like the evening star.”

“Was he my father?”

“He was. And is.”

“I am the son of a god,” whispered the boy.

“You are.”

“What am I then—man, god, or something in between?”

“What you may be, my son, what you may become, cannot be defined by titles, only by deeds.... But you are too young to begin, so terribly young! You’re the only thing I have now, and I cannot bear to lose you.”

“Shall I ask my father if the time has come?”

Danae couldn’t speak, she only nodded. Perseus kissed her and rushed out into the windy night.

The Dream Tinker

The wind had blown the clouds away, and Perseus prowled the beach under a great chandelier of stars, waiting for dawn. How could so great a day break properly unless he, god-spawned, were there to salute the flaming banners of his cousin, the sun?

It was a sleepless night for the king as well. His brain was a cauldron. “She swallowed the bait,” he chuckled to himself. “By this time she has told that accursed son of hers that he is to be king after me ... when he has returned from a perilous task. Today, he will come to me, asking to be sent on that mission—and I will oblige him, as a kindly patron should. Then I’ll turn my attention to his stubborn mother. I’ll break her will and possess her beauty. But I have work to do first. I must find a really foul assignment for the lad. What should it be? I need advice from on high. And that means I need a dream tinker.”

He clapped his hands; servants came running. He sent them off to find a meadow nymph named Dimona.

In those days it was believed that some unusually talented sorcerers could perform a kind of magic known as dream tinkering. Through certain spells, using certain secret herbs and essences, the tinker unlocked a chamber in the sleeper’s mind. In the rich gloom of this chamber, pictures floated, pictures of the future, sent by whatever god or devil manipulated the destiny of that particular person. At this time, an apprentice witch named Dimona was the latest to have impressed the court. She was a long-legged, black-maned filly of a girl with huge, glossy eyes, wild-hearted and fearless as one of the moor ponies, which no one could break. Polydectes disliked her, as he disliked anyone who did not fear him, but he needed her now, and greeted her with a fat bag of gold.

“Keep your money, king,” she said. “I can’t use it. I live on mushrooms and blackberries and river cress, and dress in leaves, as you see.... Lie down and close your eyes and don’t open them till I tell you. Take your crown off first. It’ll only dig into your scalp.”

The king’s eyes wanted to fly open, but he pressed them shut. A heavy incense hung on the air, and he knew that Dimona was throwing herbs on a fire. He heard her crooning. The words were muddled so he couldn’t understand them, but the tune was a sleepy one. The sound became a silver river cutting through blackness, and he was afloat upon it, drifting, drifting ...

Bending over the king, the nymph lifted an eyelid, and saw that he was sleeping deeply enough for her to continue her spell. What she did exactly is a secret that has not come down to us. But she opened a chamber in the sleeping king’s mind, revealing a gallery of hideous portraits.

In the dream, Polydectes was himself an invisible presence. A witness. A swift traveler. He swung between sea and land and blue steeps of air ... and saw things, huge fanged things that swam and crawled and flew- He saw the three-headed dog Cerberus, guarding the tall black gates of Hades. It was snarling, slavering, one mouth chewing a bitten-off hand.

The king traveled up from Hades, up, up—floating on golden air above a blue sea. What was this flying near him? It was something that should not fly, that should not be. Something with horns, with claws, half-lion, half-ram. He recognized it from nursery tales; it was the Chimera. He was seeing it as he slept, but he knew that somewhere it dwelt beyond his dream.

Something else loomed between the king and the sun. It had the body of a tiger, the face of a woman, a serpent’s tail, and eagle wings. From one clawed foot dangled a horse, from the other its rider. She screamed at him as she swept past. Or was she laughing? Her laughter was worse. It was the Sphinx.

A down-draft forced him toward the sea. He hovered above a channel. What he saw was the worst navigational hazard in the entire world. Upon one side, a great, gross, bladderlike creature squatted on the sea bottom, swallowing ships and spitting timbers. This was Charybdis, he knew.

On the other side of the channel dwelt Scylla. Her upper body was that of a beautiful sea nymph, but from the waist down she was six ravening

wolves. A ship passed close to her. The wolf heads swept the deck, seized six sailors, and ate them alive.

The sleeping king swung above the desert now. It was parched, sweltering. He saw a crack in the earth, a drying riverbed with a little muddy wetness left at the bottom. Something huge was slouching down to drink. The Nemean Lion, larger than an elephant, yellow as daffodils, stared with eyes of pure green murder. It roared; the desert shook.

Another riverbank, this one cutting through lush meadows. Along the shore was crawling something too dreadful even for a nightmare. It looked like a riverbed full of crocodiles tied at the waist. The king knew he was looking upon that fabled monster known as the hundred-headed Hydra, which had devoured several generations of heroes. One of them was fighting the Hydra now. An arm flashed, a sword cut off one of the heads. But on the nodding stalk of its neck two new heads grew. And many heads were closing their jaws upon the warrior.

The dreamer drifted again, happy that he saw no pictures—hoping that the parade of monsters had ended. But a paleness was blooming in the darkness. A head grew bigger and bigger as it came toward him. The face was beautiful, but the hair was snakes—writhing and hissing, darting their tongues. It was Medusa. He awoke screaming.

The Pledge

Next morning the king greeted Perseus on the steps of the palace. Polydectes was a born actor and knew that he cut an impressive figure, standing a step above the boy against a background of marble pillars, disposing himself so that his purple robe was sculpted by the wind.

He listened gravely as Perseus blurted out his thanks, then laid a fatherly hand on the boy's shoulder. "I know that you want to hear about the task that will qualify you for kingship," he said. "I could assign you one, but I prefer that you name your own. There are many glorious deeds waiting to be done. Among them, killing one of the monsters that plague mankind is perhaps of the highest merit. If you crave such adventure, I might cite several: those dread flying beasts, the Sphinx and the Chimera; Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the portals of the Underworld and does not allow the living to enter or the dead to escape; the hundred-headed Hydra, whose heads no foe can diminish as two grow in the place of every one cut off. There are also those sea monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, who drink the tides and devour sailors; the Sirens; the spear-birds of the marsh; and many, many more. I hesitate to even name the worst one, Medusa, because no warrior, however brave and skillful, should go against her. Her aspect is so dreadful that anyone who looks upon her is turned to stone."

"I choose her!" cried Perseus. "I choose Medusa!"

By this time a crowd of courtiers had gathered before the palace. They laughed loudly when they heard the lad's words,

"By the gods," he cried, "who laughs at me will taste my blade before the Gorgon does."

"What blade?" said one gorgeously dressed young man. "I see no sword, and doubt that you own one. Or do you mean that butcher knife of your mother's stuck in your belt?"

“Who will lend me a sword?” shouted Perseus, wild with anger. “I promise to wipe the blood off before I return it.”

“Softly ... softly,” said the king. “I’ll have no squabbling in my presence. Perseus is my heir now, everyone take note. Carried away by visions of glory, he has made a foolish boast, perhaps, but he is very young. I give him this chance to retract his vow and choose a mission less perilous.”

“Thank you, king,” said Perseus. “But I retract nothing. I shall return with the head of Medusa or not at all. This is a pledge of blood, Polydectes.”

He rushed away from the palace, followed by laughter.

Running across a field toward his mother’s house, he met a tall, black-haired girl clad in leaves. She stood in his path. “Stop!” she said.

“I should like to make your acquaintance,” said Perseus. “But I must bid farewell to my mother. I leave on the morning tide.”

“To seek the head of Medusa, no doubt.”

“How do you know?” cried Perseus. “You weren’t there when I spoke of this.”

“But I know things,” said the girl.

“Are you perhaps the young sorceress so popular at court?”

“I am Dimona, yes. Everyone thinks I’m an apprentice witch, who learns faster than she’s taught. And, in all modesty, I am adept at the dark arts. However, I must confess I’ve had a headstart. I’m not really human, you see. I’m a meadow nymph of the mushroom clan. I serve the goddess Athena and have been sent here on a special mission to help a half brother of hers who has fallen into deadly peril.”

“Half brother? Who might that be?” asked Perseus.

“Athena is a daughter of Zeus. Her half brother would therefore be a son of Zeus. Now the king of the gods has a thousand and three sons at the latest count, but not so many on this small island. In fact, you’re the only one.”

“Oh ... you’re talking about me!”

“I don’t know.... Athena said half brother, not half-witted brother. With such exalted parentage, your perceptions should be a bit quicker. Of course I’m talking about you. You’re the only son of Zeus on this island, and the only one in deadly peril.”

“What peril?”

“Is not the king sending you after the head of Medusa?”

“He didn’t send me. I volunteered.”

“I see.”

“In fact, he tried to discourage me. Urged me to do something a little less dangerous. But I chose this task.”

“Well, whether he’s sending you or you’re sending yourself, you’re still going—which signifies deadly peril. Do you not agree? Or perhaps you think hunting Medusa is a recreational activity?”

Perseus laughed.

“What are you laughing at?”

“I’m not laughing *at* anything. I’m laughing with pleasure. You’re quite beautiful, and you say funny things. Funny, sharp things.”

“Oh Goddess, give me strength,” cried Dimona. “This is a sweet boy, but with no more brains than a sand crab. Look, Perseus. My mistress, Athena, your half sister, takes a special interest in you and has sent me to help you. But you have to help me help you. So listen carefully, and try to understand. I’ll speak slowly.”

He laughed again.

“Stop cackling, and listen. How do you intend to journey to the far place where Medusa dwells?”

“The king has offered me a ship,” said Perseus. “Complete with crew.”

“Set foot aboard that ship and your mission ends right there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the king doesn’t plan to wait for you to be turned to stone by Medusa. He expects to hear news of your death within hours of your departure. Every member of that crew is a trained assassin who has been offered a generous bonus to plunge a knife into your heart. So your first instruction from Athena is: Do not board that ship.”

“What then shall I use for transport?”

“Look here.”

She stooped and lifted a rock. Under it was a pit; in the pit were various objects wrapped in oiled leather. She took up the smallest packet and unwrapped it, disclosing a pair of winged sandals. “These are called *talaria*,” she said. “Ankle-wings. Athena is not only a potent weaver, but she cobbles magically too. These sandals are exactly like those she made for another half brother, the messenger god, Hermes. They allow him to fly

through the air more swiftly than any bird. They will do the same for you. And you will be the first mortal ever to wear them.”

Perseus tried to thank her, but his throat was choked with tears. He had wanted to fly so badly that he had risked his life many times diving off the highest cliffs he could find just to have a brief sensation of flight.

Dimona peeled a larger object of its oiled leather and raised it with a flourish. It was a bronze shield, its center panel so highly polished that Perseus could not look at it, for it held the sun like a mirror.

“This has a double purpose,” said Dimona. “When fighting an ordinary enemy, you can flash the sun in his eyes, impairing his vision. But it is specially contrived for hunting Medusa. Because no one can look upon her without turning to stone, you must look only upon her image as reflected in the mirror of your shield.”

“Thank you,” he muttered.

“Finally—your weapon.”

She drew out a sword. Its blade was curved like the new moon; it glittered like a new moon, and was sharper than any blade made by mortal man. Dimona pulled a hair from her head, tossed it up, and as it floated down, swung the sword, cutting the hair in two.

“Here,” she said, handing him the weapon. “Strike right and you’ll cut through any neck, no matter how monstrous.”

“Speak on, sweet tutor,” said Perseus. “Instruct me. How do I find Medusa?”

“Her dwelling place is a secret known only to the Apple Nymphs.”

“How do I find them?”

“They tend the Garden of the Hesperides, where are buried many secrets, many treasures; among them are two more things you will need to vanquish Medusa.”

“How do I find this garden?”

“Ah, my young friend, that too is a secret, known only to the Gray Ones, three weird hags who are sisters of the Gorgons. They dwell on an ice floe, which you will find by flying due north until you feel your marrow freezing. Farewell now, brave lad. Good hunting to you.”

Swiftly she brushed her lips over his, wrapping him in a fragrance of crushed grass. He reached for her, but she had vanished.

“I’ll come back for you!” he shouted. “And you shan’t escape me again!”

He strapped on the sandals and rose straight in the air, shouting with joy. Turning, he swooped down to pick up his sword and shield. Keeping the afternoon sun on his left, he sped over the central mountains of Seriphus toward its northern shore and out to sea, so drunk with happiness that he quite forgot that he, who had never spent a night away from his mother, was now leaving her, perhaps forever, without saying good-bye.

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The Gray Ones

Now Perseus was flying over gray-black water, littered with ice floes. The air was so cold that it hurt him to breathe. A hailstorm spat ice at him, cutting his face. The cuts bled; the blood froze. He wrapped himself tightly in his cloak, lowered his head, and butted through the freezing wind.

Perseus spotted something below him and flew lower. Three hags sat in a circle on the floe, screaming as they passed things from one to the other. He swooped down and landed silently among them. They stood clad only in their own gray hair, which was so long it dragged on the ice. Their skin was as tough and wrinkled as a crocodile's. Their feet were leather claws. They kept snatching something from one another and screaming softly. Perseus saw that they had a single eye and a single tooth to serve the three of them, and these were what they passed from hand to hand, screeching all the while.

Two of the crones were exchanging tooth and eye while the third yelped angrily, "My turn ... my turn ..." Perseus stepped among them, snatched tooth and eye, and stepped quickly back. Immediately the hags screamed, "Where is it? Where's the eye?" "I gave it to you; you took it. Where's my tooth?" "You took the tooth." "Liar." "Liar." "You're both liars! Selfish, rotten liars! It's my turn for the tooth, my turn for the eye. Give them to me! ... Give them to me!"

Shrieking with rage, they flung themselves upon one another—slapping, kicking, gouging. They tried to bite, but had no teeth. But their jaws were powerful, their gums tough, and these toothless bites left great bruises. They made so ugly a spectacle that Perseus could hardly bear to look at them. But he could not afford to be squeamish until his task was done.

"Silence!" he roared.

They stopped screaming and turned blindly this way and that. Then they pointed their faces straight at him, and he realized they had developed noses keen as hunting dogs.

“A man!” shrieked one. “I smell a man. A young one.”

“A man ... give me the eye; I want to see him.”

“Give me the tooth so that I may smile.”

“Listen to me,” said Perseus. “I have your tooth and eye, right in my hand. And you shall not have them back until you tell me where the Apple Nymphs dwell.”

“The Apple Nymphs!”

“Oh, no, not the Apple Nymphs! Not that secret,” yelled one hag.

“It’s a terrible secret, a Gorgon secret,” cried another.

“They’ll tear us to pieces if we tell,” said the third.

“I’m hungry now,” said Perseus. “I’m about to chop a hole in the ice and go fishing. I’ll use this eye for bait. As for this sharp yellow tooth, I can use it also.”

He began to chip ice with the tooth, and the crones felt the painful cold in their gums. He pressed the jellied eye lightly between thumb and forefinger, and they felt the pain in their empty sockets. They wept. It was too cold for weeping. Their tears froze and fell musically on the floe.

Swiftly then, gasping and tittering and sobbing, they told him what he had come to find out—that the Apple Nymphs guarded the Garden of the Hesperides, where Hera’s golden apples grew and where other treasures and secrets were buried. They also told him of the many brave voyagers who had visited that place, not one of whom had ever come back.

Perseus thanked the Gray Ones, returned tooth and eye, and leaped into the air. The hags’ joyful cackling faded on the wind, which grew more and more bitter the higher he flew.

The Apple Nymphs

Perseus flew westward. The frozen sea melted beneath him, and became blue water. This gave way to rocky shore, then to a great forest belt, stretching to the horizon. Another sea appeared, then islands rich with meadow and orchard. Dominating the outermost island was a mountain, rearing stark against the sunset.

“Well,” he said to himself. “If the hags weren’t lying, and I have flown straight, this should be the Garden of the Hesperides.”

He dipped toward the earth. Three nymphs were dancing among the apple trees. They were enchantingly beautiful. When his shadow fell upon them, they stopped.

“It’s Hermes!” they cried.

“Welcome, sweet Herald!”

“Come down quickly. We’re pining for company.”

Perseus flew lower and hovered above their heads.

“It’s not Hermes!”

“Not a god.”

“Much smaller.”

“But big enough. Clean and sweet and young.”

“Come down!”

“Then what?” asked Perseus.

“You shall dance with us all the sunny day, then dance the night away.”

“How do I find Medusa?”

“That’s a deep and dismal secret. It will cost you a few kisses and much dancing.”

“You’re three to one, my lovelies. And I have journeyed far.”

“Oh, do stop hovering. Come down or fly away; don’t just float there out of reach.”

“I can’t stop now,” he said. “I’m on a mission.”

“You men and your stupid missions. When will you learn what women have always known—that happiness is the only victory and love the only happiness? Stay with us, lad, we’ll teach you love.”

“I’ll come back after I kill Medusa. I promise. And I keep my promises.”

“You may have another mission you don’t know about. It has been foretold that a strange young cousin would come to us on wings and change our lives. Aren’t you he? Who are you?”

“More than I was and less than I will be,” said Perseus. “My father is Zeus, who courted my mother as a sun ray, lancing through her prison wall, illuminating her sorrow, warming her solitude, and leaving her with what turned out to be me.”

“If you are a son of Zeus, you are the cousin destined to aid us. Were you sent to us, sweet one?”

“In a sense.”

“Oh joy! Then you are he who will free us from the awful vigil of our father.”

“Who’s your father?”

“See him there on the horizon?”

“That mountain?”

“That’s no mountain; that’s a Titan—the mightiest of all. What looks like snowy peaks are his hair and beard.”

“Why does he hold his arms so broad and wide?”

“He is the Titan Atlas, who rebelled against the gods, and has been condemned to bear this corner of the sky upon his shoulders. But we, his daughters, are condemned, too, living as we do under his stern gaze. And when we’re lucky enough to have a guest, why then this father of ours simply stamps his great foot, squashing the visitor like a bug. Won’t you please come down?”

“And get squashed?”

“He doesn’t know you’re here. Storm clouds abet us, lovely boy. They veil his eyes so he cannot see.”

“Oh nymphs,” said Perseus. “Even at this distance I am bewildered by your beauty. I grow dizzy on your fragrance. If I come down and touch your petal skin and breathe your cider breath, I’ll go drunk as a bee among apple

blossoms. I'll lose my sting, forget my oath, forfeit my newfound manhood, and be no good for you or anyone else."

"What can we do for you, then?"

"Help me, sweet nymphs, and by the gods I'll love you forever. I'll come back with Medusa's head, and tell you the tale of my battle, and dance with you and do your pleasure."

"Let us tell him what he needs to know," cried one nymph. "The sooner he goes, the sooner he'll be back."

The nymphs leaped up and seized Perseus's ankles, pulling him to earth. They clung to him, kissing him and whispering. He felt his wits spinning, his will melting under their apple fragrance and the touch of their hands and lips. But they were not trying to keep him now—only to be near him, because they could tell nothing to anyone they could not touch. Whispering and murmuring, they told him where Medusa dwelt and how to get there.

Then they pulled him over to a great oak and dug among its roots. Buried there were what looked like a golden bowl and a leather pouch. The bowl, they told him, was a helmet, a most ancient and magical one—the Helmet of Darkness, which lent invisibility to its wearer.

"The pouch is magical too," said one nymph. "It's called the *kibesis*, and it is made from the hide of the Delphic serpent slain by your half brother Apollo at the dawn of time. Only this pouch can contain the head of Medusa, for the envenomed slaver of its snakes will burn through any other. Both helmet and pouch are necessary for your mission. Thank us nicely now."

Perseus put on the Helmet of Darkness and immediately disappeared. They had to grope about to kiss him farewell.

Radiant with happiness, Perseus rose into the air, shouting, "Thank you, beautiful cousins! I shall return!" And he flew swiftly away.

The Gorgons

Hills flattened as Perseus flew the route given him by the Apple Nymphs. Fields and orchards gave way to a wide, dark plain cut by weed-choked rivers. This was the Land Beyond, called Hyperboreas, meaning behind the North Wind. It was neither earth nor sea but something less than both, a foul marshland from which animals departed, and where no travelers came. Here, Perseus had been told, was where the Gorgons dwelt—snake-haired Medusa and the two monstrous, brass-winged sisters who had followed her into exile. These winged Gorgons were meat-eaters and would snatch any living thing, tear it to pieces in midair, and stuff the gobbets of raw flesh into their mouths.

Perseus had hung the Helmet of Darkness from his belt and was flying bare-headed. For when he wore the helmet he became invisible to himself, and it made him uneasy not to see his own body. He knew, though, that he was getting close to his enemy now, and he decided to put on the helmet. But he had waited too long.

There was a clatter of brass, and he saw two huge shapes rising to meet him, wings and claws gleaming in the muddy light. He was about to clap the helmet on his head when he was struck by a bold idea. He held the helmet in his hand, hovering, letting the Gorgons see him. He watched them climbing, rise toward him, then separate to attack from both sides.

Exerting his will like a single muscle, he bade his throbbing heart to slow its beat, willed the hot, choking excitement mounting in his chest to turn to an icy calm. He made himself wait until he could see the Gorgons' faces, their bulging red eyes, squashed noses, and yellow fangs, waited until their carrion breath wrapped him in its fumes. Then he put the helmet on his head.

They were about to seize him in their claws. But he had vanished. They groped the thin air, searching, screaming, getting into each other's way, and entangling their wings. They could not find him. They never guessed he was floating directly above them.

Deliberately, Perseus raised his sword and slashed down with all his strength, shearing off the Gorgon's four wings, one by one, listening to the music of his enemies shrieking. They dropped like rocks out of the sky and smashed to the earth. Hearing the sickening sound when they hit, he knew that they were two bags of broken bones and that he could safely descend.

Alighting, Perseus waded through the stinking pools and slogged through the mud until he came to a kind of stone orchard that resembled a graveyard. He realized that he was in a grove of statues. Peering more closely at them in the fading light, he saw that they were the stone figures of men and beasts, the human faces wearing expressions of horror, the animals frozen in mid-flight or cowering in fear. He knew that he was among those who had looked upon Medusa.

Perseus raised his bright sickle sword and covered himself with his shield, judging his movement only by weight since he was invisible to himself. Very carefully, he wove his way through the statues until he heard a sound. Something was breathing heavily, snoring. He saw a glimmer of paleness, a movement. He tilted his shield so that whatever was there would be reflected in the polished metal.

He saw a head, saw its hair stand up and writhe, and knew that he had found Medusa. He felt his own hair prickle with horror, as if it too were turning into snakes. He stepped closer, raising his sword.

But the angle of the shield had changed, framing out the snakes, so that he saw only the face of the sleeper. And that face was beautiful. So beautiful and sad that he couldn't bear the thought of striking it from its body. The sword trembled in his hand; the shield almost slipped from his grasp.

He steadied himself—now the reflection had shifted again. He saw the snakes writhing, swelling with fury, biting one another so that the blood ran over Medusa's forehead. And the snake blood reeked of death. He felt himself beginning to swoon in the terrible stench and knew that he must act.

Perseus gripped his sword and felt it fuse to his hand, felt the blade become an extension of his arm, growing white-hot with his own intention.

He whipped the blade downward in a savage backhanded blow, slashing down, slashing through snake and tendon, bone and sinew—watching the reflection of her head as it separated from her stalk of neck and rolled off his shield.

Perseus stooped swiftly, lifted the head by its limp snakes, stuffed it into his pouch, and stood gaping in wonder. Where the blood had fallen on the ground, two creatures had sprung forth—a warrior holding his own golden sword and a magnificent white stallion with golden mane and golden hooves and golden wings shaped like those of an eagle. They were Chrysaeor and Pegasus. Their seed had been planted by Poseidon, but Medusa had been unable to bear children while living as a monster, and they had grown inside her womb.

The warrior vanished into the mist. The white horse arched his neck, snorted triumphantly, and pawed the ground with his hoof.

Perseus sprang into the air and flew off as fast as he could. He didn't want to think about the warrior and the horse and where they had come from. He didn't want to think about the head in his pouch. But it was there.

Fruit of Victory

Perseus now had two more promises to keep. One offered pleasure, the other vengeance. When confronted by a choice, he preferred to do the harder thing first. But cutting off Medusa's head had horrified him. For the first time in his young life he felt the kind of grief that becomes fatigue. And he decided to visit the Apple Nymphs first and restore himself through pleasure.

They greeted him with joyous laughter, welcoming him as nymphs have always welcomed heroes. They drew him into a wild dance among the apple trees, passing him from one to the other. The dance grew wilder and wilder until it slowed into a fragrant sleep.

Perseus awoke to new pleasures. The blood sang in his veins. The nymphs were as fresh as apple blossoms; they twined about him, urging him to stay.

"I have still another mission before me," he said. "My mother is pursued by an evil king and has no one to help her except me. After I straighten out her affairs, I'll be my own man again."

"Will you come to us again and dance all the sunny day, then dance the night away? Will you ... will you? Say you will."

"I will!" cried Perseus. "Nothing will keep me away. I'll come back every midsummer and dance with you until the leaves flame. We'll dance the apples off the trees, press the fruit, and drink the juice. Farewell ... farewell...."

He picked up the pouch that bore the head of Medusa, leaped into the air, and flew away.

But he should have started his flight a bit sooner. For now the sky was growling with thunder. The mist that had veiled the eyes of Atlas had blown

away in the morning wind. And the ill-natured Titan was eager to punish daughters and destroy guests.

Atlas stamped his foot. The earth shook. He shrugged his shoulders, and comets fell. They fell into the orchard, setting fire to the apple trees. Perseus felt his blood boiling as he watched the trees burn.

He flew straight toward the Titan. Hanging in the air before the giant scowling face, he opened his pouch and pulled out Medusa's head.

"I return good for evil," he cried. "You who do a mountain's task shall have a mountain's form and a mountain's immunity to pain."

He thrust Medusa's head toward the giant eyes. The Titan turned to stone. He became a mountain holding up the western edge of the sky. And he remains Mount Atlas to this day.

Perseus shouted to the nymphs: "You are free now! You may entertain what guests you like—and tread night into day under your dancing feet. And I'll come back as soon as I can."

He wheeled in the air and headed east and south toward Seriphus.

The Princess of Joppa

Flying home, Perseus was blown off course. The wind carried him to the eastern rim of the Middle Sea, which was the Phoenician shore. He had climbed high; people crowding the shore below looked like an ant swarm. Swooping down, he saw that an enormous mob stood on the beach, staring out to sea. Among them stood a man and a woman wearing crowns.

Perseus looked to where all the people were staring and saw a strange sight. A naked girl was chained to a rock. She was festooned with jewelry, as if about to be married; but her face was a mask of terror. Perseus understood her fear. Plowing toward her was the great blunt head of a sea monster.

Perseus dropped to the beach and spoke to the man wearing the crown: “Who are you? Who is this maiden? Why is she being sacrificed?”

“My name is Cepheus,” replied the man. “I am king of Joppa. This lady is my wife, and that unlucky girl is my daughter, Andromeda. But I am not usually asked questions by anyone in that tone of voice.”

“And I am not usually treated to the spectacle of a father standing by and watching his daughter being devoured by a sea serpent.”

The king swelled with rage. His hand crept toward his dagger. But a thought struck him. This youth had dropped out of the sky, wearing winged sandals. He held a curious antique helmet, a superb shield, and a new-moon sword. Perhaps he was a messenger of the gods and had the right to ask questions. Cepheus fought down his fury and managed a smile.

“I beg your pardon, young sir,” he said. “You can understand that a father so distraught would forget the uses of courtesy.”

“The beast approaches!” cried Perseus. “Speak quickly!”

“It is sent by Poseidon,” said the king. “My wife boasted that she and her daughter were the two most beautiful women in the world, more so by far

than any Nereid. And the sea god, who has appointed himself patron of all Nereids, took strong offense. He sent this monster to harry our coast, destroy our ships, and devour our cattle. I consulted an oracle, who told me I could wipe out the insult only by sacrificing my daughter. Needless to say, this causes me great grief. But I am head of state, and must sacrifice my private feelings to public welfare.”

“Any state that nourishes itself on innocent blood does not deserve to fare well,” declared Perseus. “Poseidon happens to be my uncle; he will forgive me, perhaps, for sporting with one of his pets.”

He saw the blunt head coming closer to the rock now and knew they had spoken too long. Not waiting to put on his Helmet of Darkness, he leaped into the air, ankle-wings whirring. He flashed through the air and fell like a lightning bolt onto the great scaly back of the sea monster. The beast arched and bucked, lashing at him with its spiked tail, swerving its head to spit flame. Perseus rode the monster, hacking at the enormous head with his sword. But its scales were polished leather, tougher than bronze; they turned the blade.

Perseus knew there was only one thing to do. He rose into the air, pulled Medusa’s head from his pouch, and dived, holding the head before him, dived right at the beast, thrusting the head at it until it almost touched the monster’s muzzle.

The beast was caught with jaws agape, spitting fire. And even the flame turned to rosy marble as the heavy statue of a sea serpent sank to the bottom of the sea.

Perseus flew back to the rock, struck off Andromeda’s chains, and bore her through the air to where her parents stood.

“Your daughter lives,” said Perseus. “I claim her as my bride.”

“Your bride!” roared Cepheus. “She is the daughter of a thousand kings, the most richly dowered princess in the East. Do you think I’ll give her to a homeless vagabond who’s learned a few magic tricks?”

“I see your problem,” said Perseus. “If I had let the monster eat her, you could have kept the dowry for yourself. If you weren’t about to become my father-in-law, Cepheus, I would tell you how pitiful a king you are, how despicable a father.... And if you utter one more syllable I don’t like, I shall orphan your richly dowered daughter and make her an even richer heiress. Take care.”

He lifted Andromeda in his arms, jewels and all, and flew away, leaving king and queen gaping after him and the harbor half-blocked by the stone serpent.

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A Hero Comes Home

Perseus flew night and day without stopping, and on the third evening he and Andromeda landed on Seriphus, only to find his mother's house dark and the streets of the town empty.

He hurried to the palace and stood amazed in the courtyard. The marble building was blazing with light and rang with laughter and the clatter of voices. Magnificently clad courtiers thronged the steps and the great hallway. He pushed his way to the throne room.

There he saw his mother. She was dressed in white, hung with jewels, but she was deathly pale and staring glassily. The man clutching her arm and smiling like a crocodile was Polydectes. Perseus realized he had returned just in time, for the king was forcing Danae to marry him, and the ceremony was about to begin.

Perseus heard his own voice thundering through the chamber. "Stop!"

Silence fell. Perseus saw the king staring at him, saw him bare his teeth in a wolfish snarl and nod to his Royal Guard. They raised their axes and advanced in formation.

"I have redeemed my pledge, oh king," said Perseus. "And I have flown across the world to bring you a gift. But I didn't know it would be a wedding gift."

He put his hand in his pouch. "Mother!" he shouted. "Close your eyes!"

He raised high the head of Medusa, and stood immediately in a gallery full of statues. Stone guards stood with stone axes poised. A snarling statue of Polydectes stood on the steps to the throne. There were statues of courtiers caught in mid-bow, smiling toward the king, or staring toward Perseus. And among the grove of statues stood the white, trembling, beloved figure of his mother.

Perseus went to her and took her in his arms. “I’m home now,” he said. “Your past is a nightmare. Your future will be a happy dream. Our enemy, the king, has become his own monument.”

“Two kings,” whispered Danae. “Praise the gods, Perseus. Their whim is our fate. Look ...”

She pointed to one of the stone figures. It was a bearded man wearing a crown.

“Who is it?”

“Your grandfather, Acrisius ... attending the nuptials of a fellow king, not knowing the bride was his own daughter.”

“Your father—who shut you in the tower?”

“Yes, to thwart a prophecy that a son of mine would kill him.”

“Delighted to oblige,” said Perseus. “My grandfather’s stony heart deserves a body to match. I met another loathsome father in my travels. Not quite so bestial as yours, perhaps, but bad enough. That reminds me: I’ve married his daughter. Come meet her.”

The next day, Perseus was polishing his shield, admiring the way the head of Medusa had burned its reflection into the metal. To his amazement, the head spoke out of the shield:

“Throw me into the sea.”

He gaped at it silently. It spoke again. “Into the sea, which is my home.”

“No! I need you,” cried Perseus. “You are the ultimate weapon. With your help, I’ll go from victory to victory.”

“Beware, Perseus. You cannot be constantly turning your enemies into stone without a deadly hardness entering your own heart. Stop using me as a weapon. Fight in the normal way. Take your chance of being killed. Don’t let success petrify you.”

“How can winning harm anyone? Only losers lose.”

“Not so. We monsters know that monstrous destruction leaves no winners.”

“Must I really give you up then?”

“Yes, my lovely boy. For your own sake, be rid of me. Go on to other warm-blooded conquests.”

Perseus took Medusa’s head to the shore. He looked directly into her face, unafraid, knowing he would not be turned to stone. For he had learned

to love her face. And love drives out fear.

He kissed her lips and dropped the head into the sea. It sank to the bottom. And there it is to this day, rolling with the tides, making coral where it goes.

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THE MINOTAUR

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For my son, Tom
who tracks numbers down labyrinthine ways,
and now has a young Daedalus on his hands,
even as his father did ...
So, of course, this is also for his son,
Jarah Evslin

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Characters

Monster

The Minotaur Half man, half bull, wholly fatal
(MIHN oh tor)

Cretans

Minos King of Crete; Emperor of the Lands of the Middle
(MEE nohss) Sea

Ariadne His daughter, a maiden acquainted with magic
(air ih AD nee)

Phaedra His younger daughter; her sister's rival
(FEE druh)

Europa His mother, a Phoenician princess abducted by Zeus
(yoo ROH puh)

Pasiphae His wife; mother of Ariadne, Phaedra, and the
(PAS ih fy) Minotaur

Athenians

Theseus Prince of Athens; a hard-riding, easy-spoken young
(THEE see uhs) hero

Aegeus King of Athens; supposed father of Theseus
(EE jee uhs)

Aethra Queen of Athens; seduced by Poseidon; mother of
(ETH ruh) Theseus

Daedalus Born in Athens but dwelling in Crete; most brilliant
(DEHD uh luhs) inventor of ancient times, or any time

Icarus His son, also talented
(IHK uh ruhs)

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods, Lord of the Sky, wielder of
(ZOOS) thunder and lightning; appearing here first as a bull
and then in his own radiant form

Poseidon God of the Sea, who sired Theseus during one high
(poh SY duhn) tide

Aphrodite Goddess of Love and Beauty, particularly to be
(af ruh DY tee) feared when answering prayers

Others

The Barley-hag A prophetic crone

Thera A sea nymph who sings to Theseus of battles to
(THEE ruh) come

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The Singing Bones

The meadow around the maze was a huge velvety sward tended by gardeners who knew they would be thrown to the Minotaur if they allowed one blade of grass to grow too long.

Two girls were chasing each other over the green, but swerved suddenly and ran toward the outer hedge of the Labyrinth—a deadly puzzle-garden on the island of Crete. The bellowing had stopped, which meant that the killing had started. There was a pulsing hush, then the screaming began. It rose to a shriek, a horrid, anguished din scarcely muffled by the hedges—then fell to moaning and the gurgling coughs from gut wounds.

“It’s mean not to let us watch,” said Phaedra.

“Nothing to see,” said the taller girl, whose name was Ariadne. “They aren’t Athenians or anything. Just people Papa’s tired of.”

“I’d still like to.”

“It never lasts long, you know. Those prisoner types are too scared to fight back.”

“It’s all right for you to talk,” said Phaedra. “You’ve seen it all, selfish cat.”

“Shut up or I’ll slap you. I might anyway.”

Phaedra started to run away. “Wait,” said Ariadne.

“Why? So you can slap me?” said the younger sister.

“I won’t if you’re not pesky. Wait till the Hag comes. We’ll get our fortunes told.”

“Stupid old hag,” said Phaedra. “She gets everything all wrong.”

“There’s a new one, the Barley-hag. A real witch.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Well, she’s something weird. They beat her with staves in the usual way and broke every bone in her body. And when they were through, she got up

and walked away. It's never happened before. Now people are mad for her to tell their fortunes because she goes around singing, 'If you won't die, you don't lie....' But she hasn't told anybody's yet."

"How do you know she'll do yours?" asked Phaedra.

"She wants something. She was hanging around the castle this morning when I came out. 'Wait for me in the meadow,' she said. 'I'll come to you when the killing's done.' So I'm waiting, but you don't have to."

"Maybe she'll do me too."

"Don't ask her until she's through with me," said Ariadne.

"All right, all right ..."

A squad of the King's Guard trotted past. Picked for their size, the biggest youths in the kingdom, they wore brass breastplates, brass shingreaves, and heavy brass helmets. They were basting in their own sweat under the hot sun. The guards despised such summer duty, but no one dared grumble. Minos had ordered full armor, and they preferred being broiled in brass to being served raw to the Minotaur.

The girls spotted the Hag sidling through the hedge that formed the outer wall of the Labyrinth. She limped toward them, a small, hunched figure in the vast meadow. She carried a sack over her shoulder. The girls waited, watching her slow, crippled walk. When she reached them, she dropped the sack on the ground with a crash. She blinked up at them. She was incredibly ugly, almost bald, and the clumps of hair that clung to her head looked like mildew. Her nose and chin almost met over the toothless hole that was her mouth. But her eyes were bright bubbles, like a squirrel's eyes. She curtsied and her rag skirt billowed in the breeze.

"Ah, my pretties, my dearies, are you waiting for the Hag, then?" She began to cackle, but it turned into coughing.

"You told me to wait," said Ariadne. "So here I am."

"And here *she* is," cried the crone, pointing to Phaedra. "Here we are, all three—the royal girls and me! Hee, hee, hee! Someone carry my sack, please, and we'll go up the hill. If I carry it, I'll cough myself away."

"Phew, it stinks!" said Phaedra. "What's in it?"

"Bones, old bones ... gathered from the killing ground. I need my tattlebones, don't I?"

Ariadne snatched the sack from her sister and raced away over the meadow. "See you on the hilltop," she called. Phaedra stayed with the old

woman and they followed the girl as she bounded up the slope.

From the crown of the hill they looked down on a burning stretch of sea. “Hang the bones,” said the Hag. “Do it properly—skull on top, ribs just so, armbones hanging, legs below ... and the skeleton will dance to a skeletune by the yellow light of a hangman’s moon ...”

The girls emptied the sack and hung the bones from the branch of a wild olive tree. The skeleton hung in the red light of the falling sun. Phaedra started to say something, but the Hag put her fingers to her lips, and the girl fell silent. Ariadne had not uttered a word since climbing the hill. The Hag raised her arm and called out:

West wind, west wind,
howl and moan.
West wind, west wind,
sing through bone.
West wind, west wind,
when you blow,
tell us what
we need to know.

Light ruffled the water as a wind arose. The bones swayed, rattled, and did a dry jig. Ariadne closed her eyes. She couldn’t bear to look at the dancing bones. She felt herself seized by a nameless fury and wanted to kill them both, sister and hag. She began to stalk over the grass toward them, then froze. For the wind was blowing through the skull, making it sing:

Tigers are wild,
dogs are tame.
Listen, dear child,
to your husband’s name.
Theseus, Theseus.
A prince for a princess,
Theseus is his name.
Roses are red,
wounds are too.
Him you shall wed,

I tell you true.

Ariadne stared out to sea. She felt her face stiffen as if it were carved of bone, as hard and salty as the skull dangling from the tree. Phaedra sat mesmerized on the grass. She reached up and tugged at the Hag's skirt.

"Do me," she whispered.

The Hag bent to her, put her withered lips to the girl's shell-pink ear, and whispered, "Shall I tell you your husband's name?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Hush.... She mustn't hear ... or she'll kill you," said the Hag.

"Why?"

"Because the name you shall hear is the name you have heard."

"What do you mean?" said Phaedra.

"The lad you shall marry is named Theseus."

"Two with the same name?"

"*One* with the same name ... who shall marry a pair of sisters, the eldest first. Farewell now."

The Hag vanished.

Son of the Sea God

Young Theseus had two fathers—an official one named Aegeus who was King of Athens—and a real father, whom he had never met and whom his mother had met only once. He was Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, a huge, brawling, piratical god, whose favorite sport was riding a tidal wave in to some seaside village where a wedding was being held. Green-bearded and roaring with laughter, he would rise from the swirling waters to snatch the bride from the arms of her half-drowned groom. But he would always return her the next morning; he liked wet brides, but didn't want them to dry into wives. As for his children, he was very content to let someone else care for them.

Poseidon had raided the wedding party of the Fisher King, Aegeus, and borrowed his bride. She gave birth to a child named Theseus. For the son of a god, he was unusually small, but he was very quick and graceful, and he swam like an otter before he could walk. His eyes, too, told of the sea. They were not quite green, not quite blue, and only sometimes gray, changing with his mood as the water changes when the wind blows.

Theseus had no way of knowing that he had been sired by a god, but he did know that he was different from other boys. Others fought because they wanted something someone else had, or wanted to keep what someone else wanted. But Theseus fought because he enjoyed it and always challenged those larger than himself, who were not very hard to find. He fought without rancor but with a wild élan and disregard for pain. And, despite his size, he usually won.

As a son of Poseidon, he had another inborn talent—horsemanship. All of the sea god's horde of children were magnificent riders. For, as it happened, in the first days of his reign, Poseidon had been especially fond of Demeter, the tall, abundant goddess, Queen of Harvests, whose fall of hair was like

wheat ripening in the sun, whose voice was the throbbing of birds at dawn, and in whose footsteps flowers sprang. The sea god doted on her and pursued her whenever he was not occupied with something else.

One day, as Demeter was scattering seeds on a small, fertile island some miles off the mainland, Poseidon leaped out of the sea and raced toward her. She fled across a meadow. But he caught her, twined a rope of enormous freshwater pearls about her neck, and demanded that she love him.

Demeter didn't know what to do; he was so huge, so lavish, so laughingly insistent.

"Prove your love," she said. "Give me another gift."

"Another?"

"Not something oysters made, but something you have labored over yourself, thinking of me all the while."

"What do you want?"

"You have made many creatures for the sea. Now make me a land animal. But a beautiful one. More beautiful than any other animal on land, or sea, or air."

Demeter thought she was safe, believing Poseidon could make only monsters. Much to her amazement and delight, he presented her with a horse. Poseidon so admired his own handiwork that he immediately made a herd of horses that galloped about the meadow, tossing their manes, prancing and neighing their pleasure. Poseidon was so fascinated by the horses that he forgot all about Demeter for the moment, leaped on one, and rode off. Later, he made another herd of green surf horses for his own stables. But Demeter kept her own gift, and from that herd all the horses in the world have descended.

One story says that it took Poseidon an entire month to make one horse. His first attempts weren't to his liking and he simply cast them away. These creatures made their way into the world. They were the camel, the hippopotamus, the giraffe, the donkey, and the zebra.

Afterward, through some twist of inheritance, all the sea god's children could ride before they could walk; all became ardent horsemen and horsewomen, especially Theseus.

But now, in this year of change that was crowning his boyhood, Theseus had begun to ride other creatures, more difficult than horses. He climbed on

bulls and learned to ride them, though he suffered many a painful fall. Finally, he could sit on any bull, even the wild ones. He sneaked up on deer as they grazed, leaped on the backs of stags, and rode them—they ran swiftly and leaped to dizzy heights. But deer were far easier to ride than bulls.

Theseus tried something even more difficult. In the early morning, he would race across the meadow, dive into the sea, and slide aboard slippery dolphins. They could always get rid of him by going underwater. But they were playful, gallant creatures and soon accepted this as a game. Leaping straight up out of the water, the dolphins tried to shake him off. Soon, he was able to cling to them, no matter what they did, and became confident that he could ride any creature in the world.

One morning after a gale, Theseus was prowling the beach, for storm brings many treasures for a boy to find. He spotted something flashing on top of a rock. He came closer and saw that it was a silver comb held by a hand at the end of a bronzed arm. A sea nymph sat on the rock, combing her long, green hair.

He approached slowly, then climbed the rock. The nymph arose and towered above him on long, bronzed legs. He laughed with pleasure. “Good morning,” he said.

She sat again, dangling her legs over the edge. “Good morning, Theseus.”

“You know my name....”

“I do.”

“May I know yours?”

“Thera.”

“Are you a Nereid?”

“I am.”

“Are they all as beautiful as you?”

She smiled at him. “You’re sweet.”

“May I kiss you?”

He put his arm on her warm shoulder. He felt that it was stuck there, that he could never pull it away. She shrugged him off.

“You’re pretty sassy for a sprout. I might smack you.”

“Well, do something to me, for goodness sake. We’re wasting our youth. Nymph, sweet nymph, why don’t you teach me to swim?” said Theseus.

“You don’t know how? Wasn’t it you I saw riding a dolphin the other day? Don’t lie.”

“Well ... maybe I can swim a little. But you could improve my stroke.”

“You’re a true son of your father, aren’t you?”

“My father?”

“Poseidon. No Nereid is safe when he’s around.”

“I don’t know what you’re raving about,” said Theseus. “My father is King Aegeus, a nice, safe old man.”

“All right, if you say so. Would you like me to sing to you?”

“May I sit on your lap?”

“Sit where you are! Well, you can lie back and put your head on my lap.”

Theseus leaned back and nestled his head on her lap—the most delicious cushion a head could have. Tears of joy filled his eyes as a wild caramel musk of sun and sea rose about him. She began to sing, and her voice was like the wind at dusk crooning over the waves as it comes bearing cool airs to the parched land:

Sisters two for you to woo if you do what you’re fated to. Beware, beware the bull-man’s horn, or your blood will feed the Cretan corn. Like a spider, but immensely wider, the Minoan Bull has blood to shed. And you must ply the antic thread, lest the monster leave you dead. You shall meet on evil Crete, where sisters two wait for you. Shall you dare that fatal pair, of butcher-king and mad queen born? Beware, beware the monster’s horn, or your blood will feed the Cretan corn.

Theseus felt her voice pulling him down into fathoms of sleep. The song was the skeleton of his dream, and the dream was full of terror. Demon girls were after him, and a bull-man was goring him. Everywhere there was blood. There was pain. There was fear. But his head was in the nymph’s lap and her musk was about him, her voice weaving the dream. He knew then that she had been sent to tell him of something dreadful that was to happen to him later. Her song was a warning. But she had brought him a new kind of joy, one that made him see everything differently. The boy, who was to become a hero, suddenly knew then what most heroes learn later—and some too late—that joy blots suffering and that the road to nymphs is beset by monsters.

The tide had come in and was swirling about the foot of the rock. The nymph arose, clasping his wrists in one hand and his ankles in the other, then lifted him above her head with amazing strength. She tilted his face to hers, kissed him on the lips, and tossed him into the sea.

Falling, he straightened into a dive and split the water cleanly. When he surfaced, the rock was bare. Far out he saw bronzed shoulders gleaming on the sea. He swam a few strokes after her, then turned back to shore. She was, like a dolphin, not to be caught until she wanted to be.

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The Tyrant

To understand what is happening, and why, we must go back two generations, to the birth of Minos. He had a first-class pedigree. His father was Zeus, King of the Gods, who abducted a young Phoenician princess named Europa. Zeus often fancied mortal maidens, but had learned to be careful. If he appeared to them first in his true form, so bright and terrible, they were liable to get burned to ashes. This finally taught Zeus how inflammable girls could be. Now, he was determined that nothing should happen to the beautiful Europa before he could embrace her. So he appeared to her not in his own form, but as a huge white bull.

He came onto the Phoenician beach where Europa was playing ball with her handmaidens. She caroled with joy when she saw the splendid animal, and was amazed to see him kneel on the sand as if inviting her to climb on his back. "Be careful!" cried the maidens, but Europa was a high-spirited, reckless girl. Without hesitation, she leaped onto the bull. The giant beast arose and galloped away into the sea. The maidens screamed in horror to see him swim toward the setting sun with Europa clinging to his back.

After a while the girl stopped sobbing and began to enjoy her adventure. No girl in the world, she thought, would be able to match the tale she would have to tell when she returned to her father's court.

But Europa never returned. Zeus changed back to his own form and took her to a cave gouged into the side of Crete's Mount Ida. His daughters, the Hours, had hung rich tapestries and carpeted the cave with flowers, making it a fragrant bridal chamber.

Zeus stayed with Europa for a week, planted a son in her, and left, promising to return.

Now, Zeus was Zeus, and Europa was a fine, big, healthy girl, but their first son, for some reason, began life as a miserable bluish scrap of flesh,

too feeble even to cry. Europa fought hard to keep him alive. She was happy that Zeus did not visit her. She did not want him to see their son, whom she had named Minos. Europa did not know whether the baby would live—she did not even know whether she wanted him to, but she kept fighting for his life.

Minos pulled at his mother's breast, drank the strong milk, and survived. He lived, but he did not flourish. When he was a year old, Europa could still hold him in the palm of her hand, and did not dare to wean him. She was still nursing him when he was two years old. He could walk and talk but was still tiny, and would take nothing but her milk. Zeus came to the cave in Crete upon occasion. He never inquired about the child and she never mentioned him. She hid Minos away when she knew Zeus was coming.

Europa found herself pregnant again, and knew she would have to stop nursing her firstborn. She tried to wean him. But he climbed her leg and stood on her knee, saying in his silvery little voice:

“Mother, I require suckle.”

He tugged at her tunic, encircling her breast with both arms, and began nursing happily.

Europa bore her second child, again a boy, but how different he was. This was a superb, big one, looking every bit the son of a god. His eyes streamed light, and there seemed to be laughter in his first cry. Europa immediately fell in love with him, which made it easy for her to reach a decision about Minos. She denied him her milk. When Minos began to howl, she carried him to the cow byre, where dwelt a big young heifer, her udders bursting with milk. Europa sat him on the straw under the cow and went back to the cave to nurse her beautiful new son.

Minos howled with fury, but nobody came. For the first time, his mother did not rush to comfort him. He was bewildered, and his untried heart grew ripe with hatred. But most of all he was hungry.

“Mother, Mother!” he shrieked.

No one came. The cow swerved her head and nuzzled the little boy. Her big tongue was warm upon his naked body. He shivered at the new sensation. It was warm and fragrant in the byre. There was a reek of hay and fresh milk. He pressed against the cow's muzzle, wanting her to lick him again. She yawned. Her breath was heavy and beautiful, as if she had been eating flowers. He was small enough to walk beneath her. He went to

her udder and patted the warm bag of milk. The cow mooed; the whole byre hummed with her sound. She was ready to be milked.

Minos drank from her udder. It was not like his mother's milk; it was sweet and creamy and strange. He almost gagged, but he was hungry. He swallowed the first mouthful and pulled at the teat. The cow lowed. Her tail swished.... And there in the warm darkness, in the smell of hay and the rich strangeness of change, Minos sank into sleep.

Now Crete was a privileged island. Remote, reef-girded, and lovely, it was a favorite trysting place for Zeus. Its animals had not been deprived of speech. So it was that a wolf that had been prowling about the cow byre pounced upon Minos as he came out wiping his milky lips, and snarled: "Well met! You shall be my breakfast."

"You treat yourself shabbily, my friend," said Minos, thinking quickly. "See how small I am—just a little scrap of nothing, as my mother calls me."

"Better than nothing," growled the wolf.

"Scarcely," said Minos. "But I can guide you to a fine meal. Inside that cave is a remarkably tasty child—plump, tender, and delicious—brother of mine, as a matter of fact."

"You're trying to trick me," said the wolf. "Surely such a child does not lie untended."

"My mother is also in there," said Minos, "but soon she will go to the stream to fetch water."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"No need to trust me. You can keep me here under your paw until you see my mother come out of the cave."

The wolf slunk back into the shadow of a rock, dragging Minos with him. He kept the child pinned to the ground as he watched the mouth of the cave. A tall girl came out, lightly bearing a heavy yoke across her shoulders. Minos, peering out from under the wolf's paw, saw that his mother looked happier than he had ever seen her.

"Wait until she goes down that path, out of sight," he whispered to the wolf. "Then, into the cave!"

When Europa came back to her rock chamber, she found the wooden cradle empty. It was still swaying slightly on its rockers. She rushed out, screaming, and looked everywhere. All day she searched, under every rock,

every bush. She couldn't find any tracks; the ground was too stony. It grew dark. Then she remembered her other child and rushed to the byre.

On the way she heard a little snuffling sound, and saw Minos lying on the ground, sobbing.

"Oh, Mother, Mother," he cried when she knelt to him. "I saw a terrible thing. A wolf running by, holding my dear brother in his jaws. 'Stop!' I yelled. 'Take me instead; my mother loves him better.' But the wolf growled, 'It's him I want; he's fatter,' and ran off. Mother, Mother, where were you? Where were you?"

Europa gathered him into her arms and they wept together. That night when he crawled into her lap, mewling piteously, she gave him her breast, which was aching with undrunk milk. She kept him there all night, nestled against her.

The next morning, Europa climbed to the top of the highest mountain in Crete and uttered the eagle scream that Zeus had bade her use as a signal in times of dire trouble. A huge white eagle swooped down to the crag where she stood and took the form of Zeus. She threw herself into his arms, crying: "Oh, my master, plant another child in me, I pray. For the beautiful son you have given me is dead."

"You seem a bit careless with your children, my dear. I have never seen the first one at all. And now, it seems, I am not to know the second one. Are you sure you want to try again?"

"Please, my lord ..."

Zeus still wore the enormous white wings of the eagle. It was midsummer, high noon. Zeus and Europa seemed to be inside a great golden bell humming with light. He spread his white wings, shielding her from the sun's glare and from his wife's vigil. He leaned forward and pressed her to the earth.

The shadows grew long and blue. A breeze stroked them. Zeus spoke: "You have kept the first boy from my sight. I know your intention was good, but the time has come for father and son to meet. Fetch him."

"Yes, my lord."

Europa went down the mountain and came up again, bearing Minos on her shoulder. She faced Zeus in the curdling red light of the sunset and held the naked boy out to him.

"Behold, your son."

Zeus studied the child. He saw a tiny face cocked toward him, alert as a bird's, wary but unafraid.

"Runty, to be sure," muttered Zeus, "but vicious, greedy, and clever—qualities often enlarged by smallness."

"Bless me, Father," said the boy.

"The blessing rests with you, my son. You shall be a king and master of kings, if first you master yourself."

"Thank you, sire."

"I do not wish to hear of another accident happening to any brother or sister of yours."

"Now that we have become acquainted, mighty father, I feel that our family fortunes must improve."

"Take care, Minos. I am not to be jested with, or disobeyed."

"Full gravely shall I follow your commandments, Father."

"Your mother will bear again—more than once. I commend those children to your care."

"They will find me a tender and watchful brother, my lord."

"Farewell."

Zeus spread his wings and flew away.

Minos did obey his father, and in time was rewarded by becoming a man whom others obeyed. One by one he exterminated every aspirant to the Cretan throne, and made himself king. He then began to attack the other lands of the Middle Sea. He married the princess Pasiphae, and she bore him two daughters, Ariadne and Phaedra.

Minos knew that he was hated, and he was content in that knowledge. A beloved king was a weak king to be loudly mourned, as he was insufficiently obeyed. Minos did not wish to be loved; he wanted to be feared. And he was. But if he was heartless toward humans, he was kind to beast and bird, especially cherishing cattle, for which he bore an abiding love. Indeed, he made them the pivotal symbols of his state religion.

Minos invoked his parents, the White Bull and the Phoenician princess, decreeing a reenactment of Europa's abduction as the central rite of the Minoan creed. He ordered that a special corps of vestals be trained to serve the Horned Moon—the Cow Goddess, whose milk was rain—and appointed his daughter, Ariadne, to the sisterhood of priestesses. Whatever he did flourished. He not only wielded temporal power but dominated the

priesthood of a successful religion, rich in murder and orgy, appealing to the mob and useful to the throne.

He encouraged public executions. The dungeon cells were thronged with those who had offended Minos or one of his current favorites, and the leather-aproned headsman wielded his double axes overtime to make space for new prisoners.

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Aphrodite's Vengeance

In the seventh year of his reign, when he had established absolute rule in Crete, Minos made a move that was to turn him from king to emperor. He invited the great Athenian inventor Daedalus to come to Crete, offering him great wealth for his labors.

Daedalus accepted and was royally welcomed when he came to the island. Minos presented him with the most lavishly equipped workshop in the entire world and gave him strong slaves and clever apprentices. The king also made his wishes clear.

“You have been creating tools of peace,” he told Daedalus. “You have given mankind the ox-yoke, the plough, and the loom, all of which are very useful. But I want you to concentrate on the tools of war. Weapons, man, I need weapons that will make me invincible on land and sea.”

By this time Daedalus had formed a good idea of the person he had sold his talent to, and did not dare disobey. Besides, he was extremely comfortable in the brilliant capital of Knossos, and he had never much cared how his inventions were used, as long as they worked.

So he did as Minos asked, and weapon after fearsome weapon issued from his workshop. He began by providing a unique sentry to patrol the wild sections of the coast. He devised a living statue and cast it in bronze. Talos, he called it, and there was never a sentinel like this one: a giant humanoid figure, tall as a tree, invulnerable to sword, spear, or arrow, and completely obedient to whomever Daedalus designated. Talos circled the island three times a day. Whenever a galley approached, Talos hurled huge boulders at it, sinking it or driving it off.

Then followed a stream of weapons. Giant catapults. Chariots whose hubs were whirling scythes that could winnow a rank of armored men like a reaper moving through a stand of wheat.

Minos was very pleased. He couldn't stop praising his inventor, who became recognized as the most important person at court next to the king.

But not all of Daedalus's creations were so grim. In the intervals of his labor, he found time to make a sisterhood of dancing dolls for the king's daughters, who visited his workroom with their mother, Pasiphae. He made other marvelous toys—a perfume flask that played music when uncorked, and a parasol, lighter than a butterfly's wing, that opened like a flower when it felt the sun. He enjoyed these visits mightily. Pasiphae was beautiful, and her two little girls were exquisite. All three were very affectionate to the one who made them such wonderful gifts.

But one day Daedalus and Pasiphae held a conversation that was to have dreadful consequences.

“Tell me, Athenian,” said Pasiphae, stretching her long, bare arms and yawning. “Do you think I'm good-looking?”

“My queen, I'm supposed to have a reasonable command of the language, but am quite unable to describe how beautiful I think you are.”

“Try.”

“You are simply the most gorgeous woman I have ever met or could hope to meet.”

“How about Aphrodite? Am I as beautiful as she is?”

“I've never had the privilege of meeting the goddess.”

“Well, you've seen statues of her. If the sculptors are getting it right, she's a big cow—the kind my husband's always chasing. Well, he has an excuse, I suppose; his foster mother was a cow, as he's told me a million tedious times. Don't you think she's a bit bovine, that Aphrodite? I'm of pretty good size myself, but those hips of hers. *Massive*, my dear!”

“Try to be discreet, sweet lady, I beg you. The gods are quick to take offense.”

“Do you really think there are such things as gods—an intelligent, sophisticated man like you? I think they're all nursery tales and nonsense.”

“Your husband ...”

“Oh, I know, I know; his father was Zeus, who changed into a white bull and came up on the beach after Europa, who didn't have the sense not to ride strange bulls....”

“You don't believe that?” asked Daedalus.

“Oh my, don’t you know anything about politics? Don’t you know that any little village chieftain who wants to enlarge his domain begins by blowing up his pedigree?”

“My queen, you are witty as you are beautiful, and as reckless. I don’t consider myself superstitious, but I have had personal experience with the vengeful gods, and I beg you not to mock them.”

“I’m bored, Daedalus—bored, bored, bored! Quickly—make me something marvelous!”

He made her a silver pitcher that could fly from guest to guest, pouring wine into their cups and never allowing itself to get empty. Pasiphae was pleased. Now she knew her banquets could progress even if the serving maids were being flogged.

At this time, Minos had begun to plan a series of campaigns against other island states of the Middle Sea. He asked Daedalus to do what he could to improve the quality of his war fleet. Within a year Daedalus had replaced the great clumsy sternsman’s oar with a pivoting steering board called a rudder, and had also devised a sliding bench for the rowers. These improvements made the ships of Crete swifter and more maneuverable by far than any that had ever sailed the waters of the world.

Minos was more than pleased. He couldn’t praise Daedalus enough and heaped so many gifts on him that the old man was bewildered; he already had more than he could use. Nevertheless, Daedalus was fully aware of how important it was to have earned the esteem of an all-powerful ruler like Minos.

It was at this point, at the very flower of the old craftsman’s career, that he fell into deadly peril. The image of Pasiphae had begun to scorch his sleep, and he realized that he would have to do something about it.

He took a lump of pure crystal and wrought a special mirror, which he laid on the altar in the temple of Aphrodite. He hoped the goddess might be pleased because, viewing herself in this wondrous glass while combing her long yellow hair, she would be able to see the back of her head.

That night Aphrodite appeared to him. “Thank you for your gift,” she said.

“Beautiful goddess, you are more than welcome.”

“Now, what is it you wish of me?”

“Are you sure I want something?”

“In my experience, mortals do not make gifts to gods without expecting much in return. What is it you wish?”

“I’m desperately in love with Queen Pasiphae and need your help,” said Daedalus.

“Tell me, how long do you think you’d last if Minos knew you were trying to take his wife?”

“Oh, Goddess, if she returned my love I’d be so filled with creative energy, with such brilliant inventiveness that I’d be able to surmount all difficulties.”

“It’s hard to be brilliant without a head. And your venerable pate, my friend, would be whisked off your shoulders by the king’s executioners before you could kiss Pasiphae twice. Besides, it’s ridiculous. You’re much too old for her.”

“I thought you could arrange anything in the love line, no matter how ridiculous.”

“I can. I can. As a matter of fact, I’m planning something truly grotesque for that Pasiphae of yours. She’s a boastful, sacrilegious slut and I’ve always disliked her.”

“Aphrodite, please.... I have asked you to help me, and you offer a disservice.”

“I haven’t forgotten the mirror you made me. Find yourself another girl and I’ll send her your way no matter how young and beautiful she is. But take my advice and keep away from Pasiphae. Dreadful things are in store for her and bad luck is contagious.”

With this, she vanished.

The next morning Pasiphae was strolling in the paddock when a bull ambled her way, the largest and most splendid animal she had ever seen. This was no bull of the Minos herd, but a prize stud belonging to Helios, the Sun’s Charioteer, whose golden suncattle were the envy of all the gods.

Aphrodite had borrowed the animal for her own purposes, coaxing the miserly Helios to lend him out. The bull’s hide was a hot, dazzling gold, and his eyes were pools of amber light. His hooves and long, sharp horns were of polished ivory, and he snorted joyously through coral-pink nostrils.

As soon as Pasiphae saw him, she felt herself strangling with passion. She fell violently, monstrously, permanently in love with the bull.

She went to Daedalus and told him. He listened quietly as she told her tale; by the end of it, she was sobbing. He stroked her arm timidly and trembled at the touch.

“Do not fret, beautiful queen,” he said. “No living creature can possibly resist you—god, man, or beast.”

“Please don’t flatter me. This is tearing me to pieces. I know that bull has a loving heart. One look into those golden eyes and I understood him to the depths of his sweet, straightforward soul. But how can he possibly return my feelings? I’m sure he must prefer his own kind. I’m going to kill myself.”

“No, Pasiphae. Don’t despair. I’ll help you.”

“How?”

“I’ve thought of a way.”

“If you can do anything, old friend, I’ll be eternally grateful.”

Daedalus went to work. He fashioned an exquisite wooden cow, hollowing it out so that Pasiphae could comfortably position herself inside. It had amber eyes, ivory horns, and ivory hooves with wheels in the hooves and springs in the wheels. As a last touch, he tenderly upholstered his wooden heifer in pliant calfskin and painted the entire piece so artfully that it seemed to have a hide of dappled moonlight.

After finishing the cow, he began to peg another frame together. His son, Icarus, who was also his apprentice and a formidably bright lad, was watching him all this while. He knew why his father had made the wooden cow, but he didn’t understand what he was doing now. However, when the youth saw the frame taking shape under his father’s incredibly swift carpentry, he began to understand.

“Don’t tell me you’re making a wooden bull,” he said.

“You see that I am.”

“Yes. I see that it will be a wooden bull to match the wooden cow. What I can’t believe is that you’re actually doing it.”

“Please, Icarus ...”

“I can’t believe that a man so intelligent would do something so stupid, so fatally stupid.”

“Please, son ... don’t sit in judgment of me. Not today. I’m under a terrible strain.”

“You’ll feel worse when you’re under the ax.”

“You don’t understand,” said Daedalus. “You’ve never been in love.”

“Well, if love can turn a brain into porridge, I want no part of it. Are you actually going to cram yourself into that thing and court Pasiphae?”

“That’s the idea. I’ll take her on any terms, son. Any at all.”

Icarus stormed out of the workshop. He was furious. And terrified for his father. He hurried to the temple of Aphrodite and knelt at the altar to pray.

“Oh, Goddess, you who preside over that bewildering state called love and who, therefore, I presume, must have a loving heart yourself—hear me, I pray. This passion you wield has addled the most brilliant mind on earth. Retrieve him, I beseech, from this matchless folly. For the sake of all of us who will find our lives enriched by inventions still unhatched in that fertile brain, please save my father from his desperate ploy. Dissuade him from secreting himself inside a wooden bull to court the contents of a wooden cow, and to court death under the double ax.”

Aphrodite looked down from Mount Olympus and saw the young man at her altar. She was struck by his appearance. He was altogether elegant, a cleanly made youth, his eyes aflame with intelligence. When prayed to, the goddess seldom paid heed to what was being said, but based her decision on whether or not she liked the looks of whoever was doing the praying. And she liked this young man very much. Aphrodite came down from the mountain of the gods and hovered invisibly over the workshop where Daedalus was finishing his wooden bull. The old man suddenly found himself unable to breathe; he was choking on sawdust. He rushed outside, panting, and hurried down to the meadow. It was midafternoon. The sun was pressing close, making heat waves dance, turning the meadow into a rippling green lake.

Crossing the lake was a golden galleon. Daedalus blinked and rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. In the blur of brightness, a ship drifted and burned. It became a bit of the sun itself, melting and congealing on the grass. Then his vision cleared. A golden bull came ambling toward him. At the sight of this magnificent animal, his heart shriveled within him. He realized how shabby, how futile his wooden bull would seem to Pasiphae, who had looked upon this throbbing mountain of hot blood, this golden beast.

How could he have hoped that she would be deceived? Icarus was right. He was no lover ... no longer an artisan even, for if his judgment were

failing then his hands must surely follow. Splendor had gone. And hope. He was a poor, enfeebled, crazed old man whose plain duty was to go back to his workshop, take his sharpest knife, and cut his own throat, claiming a place in Hades while his deeds were still being hailed on earth. The mad queen could have her wooden cow and her unspeakable rendezvous.

That night, as the moon was rising, the great golden bull saw the form of a graceful cow gliding toward him over the meadow, mooing musically. He bugled softly in return, swished his ropy tail, and pawed the earth. By the end of the evening, Pasiphae was very happy. And the next night she thought she would burst with joy as she rolled into the meadow, peering through the eyeholes of the wooden cow. For the same molten moon hung low in the sky, and very soon, she knew, her bull would come to her.

The moon climbed and paled, and no bull came. She tried calling him, mooing musically as she had the night before, but heard only her own thin, scratchy voice. Suddenly, she hated her voice, hated everything about herself, loathed her entire human condition.

The bull did not come to her that night. Nor the night after. Nor the night after that. Every night she fitted herself into the wooden cow, and rolled into the meadow and waited. Every dawn she departed.

Then, one night, she found she could no longer fit into the wooden frame and knew why. Some months later, she gave birth to a child, half boy, half bull-calf. Pasiphae refused to name her son, but as rumors spread, the populace dubbed him Minotaur, or Minos's Bull.

The New Monster

Minos was very much disturbed by these rumors and the gossip of the populace. He summoned Daedalus and said, “I have a different kind of project for you—one that will serve me against domestic enemies as your weapons have served me against the foreign foe. I want you to design and build a kind of puzzle-garden, a maze so cunningly wrought that no prisoner will be able to find a way out. Make it big; it will house many guests of the state as they await their turn with my busy executioners. Start immediately. You may have a thousand slaves.”

Daedalus designed a maze and supervised its construction. It was a marvel. Its walls were tall, impenetrable, thorny hedges. It was full of blind lanes, lanes that angled, circled, doubled back on themselves, and trailed off into nowhere. When the work was done, Daedalus reported to the king, whom he had not seen for six months. Minos toured the maze, which he named the Labyrinth or Ax-Garden.

“You have done your usual fine job,” said Minos, “and I mean to reward you.”

“Pleasing you is reward enough,” said Daedalus, who detected something in the king’s manner that filled him with terror.

“Permit me to differ,” said Minos. “I know your modest, undemanding nature, but I can’t allow myself to take advantage of it. Now hear me. You shall immediately move your workshop into this Labyrinth and attach such dwelling quarters as you require. You shall take your son and your servants too. In other words, loyal friend, this beautiful puzzle-garden shall be your home from now on.”

“You mean I am to be the first prisoner in your maze?”

“You, a prisoner?” cried Minos. “How absurd! I’m only trying to please you. I know you like to be surrounded by your own artifacts. And here I am

putting you in the middle of your greatest construction—and giving it to you on a lifelong lease. And mind you, in the exclusive residential area, not the prisoners' quarters.”

“Oh, how touching,” continued Minos. “You’re weeping tears of pure gratitude, aren’t you, old fellow? And yet, so foul is human nature that there are those who actually tell me that you’re the most ungrateful of mortals. Can you credit such wickedness?”

Daedalus started to say something, but Minos stopped him.

“No ... no, not a word of thanks, please! I haven’t finished describing the benefits to be heaped upon you. For you shall have interesting neighbors: the ex-queen Pasiphae and her son—a most unusual youngster, I’m told. Well, I’m off now, Daedalus. We’re sailing against Athens. It may be a lengthy campaign, but I can leave with my mind at rest, knowing that I have fully repaid my old artisan for his matchless service to me and my family.”

Living in the maze, Daedalus saw Pasiphae every day but never spoke to her. Nor did she speak to him, or even seem to know that he was there. She was aware of nothing but her horned child, whom she cared for tenderly. She was never heard speaking to him, only singing a crooning, wordless song.

When the child was barely six months old, he was the size of a twelve-year-old boy, but much more muscular. His rippling torso was covered with dense golden fur and his horns were ivory knives growing into ivory spears. The boy’s face was rather squashed, with upturned coral nostrils and huge brimming eyes like pools of molten gold. He trotted after his mother wherever she went.

At this time, Daedalus never sought to leave the Labyrinth. Through sheer inventiveness he had refined its grid work of paths, shifting them into new patterns every day. But he had also made a spool that rolled through the twisting lanes, heading inexorably toward the exit, unreeling its thread as it went, so that whoever held the other end could leave the Labyrinth by the quickest route.

His only visitor from outside was the princess Ariadne, and he suspected that she came only to claim the dolls he kept making for her and that she never outgrew.

“But,” he thought, “greed can imitate love too, as long as I can satisfy it. And I do care for the selfish child as much as I can care for anyone now.”

One day, when Ariadne came to him with a sullen face because she had lost her way and wandered for hours, he gave her the pathfinding spool and taught her how to use it. He didn't need it for himself any more. The shifting grid of the maze was stamped on his brain now.

Pasiphae, like many women misled by the Love Goddess, turned to eating. She kept trying to stuff food into her aching emptiness, but the more she ate, the emptier she felt. She was a tall woman, so her face went first, blurring and then ballooning. Then her body bloated. She grew a gut, then a paunch. Her legs became quivering blobs, her arms two gelatinous bolsters.

One day she simply burst. She had devoured an entire shoulder of ox and washed it down with a half barrel of wine. She burst with the dipper still at her lips, exploding into gobs of flesh. The ground where she had stood looked like the floor of a slaughterhouse.

Her son watched all this. He was the size of a half-grown bull-calf now and was growing fast. But his brimming golden eyes still seemed too large for his head. Bewildered, he ran in circles, bawling, searching for his mother. When he realized that she was gone, that the bloody offal littering the grass was all that was left of her warmth, her fragrance, her singing voice, a puzzled rage began to work on him. His anger swelled into unfocused hatred and became pure murder seeking occasion.

He grew now with monstrous speed, and in three days had reached his full size. The Minotaur stood ten feet tall, had long, needle-pointed ivory horns and a set of razor-sharp hooves, and was as powerful as a wild bull. But he had the wits of a man, the brooding, vengeful nature of man, and a pair of huge hands that closed into fists of bone.

He began to prowl the lanes of the Labyrinth, looking for something to kill. He entered a holding area where prisoners were kept, awaiting the return of Minos, who would pass final sentence upon them. They were to wait no longer. As soon as the Minotaur saw them—they were the first living creatures he had seen since the death of his mother—he charged. Before they understood what the hurtling figure was, it was goring them with its sharp horns, lifting them into the air, and hurling them into the thorn hedge, where they hung dying. Others were knocked to the ground as the monster charged. He turned then and trampled them into bloody rags.

Those who were still alive after the first charge scattered and fled. But the Minotaur's rage was a separate organism, nourished by blood, growing with every murder. He snorted and bellowed down the lanes, pursuing the survivors, hunting them down systematically and cornering them in blind lanes. He gored them, trampled them, and battered them to death with his fists. By the end of the long afternoon, when the last bloody light was fading from the hedge tops, he had killed every one.

Among the corpses were a few of Daedalus's smithy slaves, for the old man had sent a party out to see what the screaming meant. Only two of them returned, both badly gored, and they gasped out their tale. Daedalus immediately closed the hedge gaps, encircling his area with a single wall so thick and thorny that not even the Minotaur could break through. He also sealed all the gaps in the outer wall of the Labyrinth, penning the monster in.

The Tribute

The ships of Minos went off to battle and they swept the Athenian fleet off the sea, forcing Athens to surrender. The young Theseus watched the battle from a hilltop. His heart grew sick within him as he saw what was happening. The long, brass-prowed Cretan ships fell upon the slower Athenian vessels like hawks among pigeons. Theseus watched his father's ships being grappled and boarded, saw double-bladed axes flash in the sun and the sea redden with Athenian blood. The Cretans did not even bother to board some of the enemy ships but simply rammed them, driving brass prows into wooden hulls. Their archers stood on deck and calmly sent arrows into the Athenian seamen who had leapt overboard. Those who tried to swim were gaffed like fish.

Aegeus was forced to surrender and accept the terms imposed by Minos. Every year, on the first day of the Spring Sowing, twenty of the strongest and most handsome young men of Athens and twenty of the healthiest, most beautiful maidens were to be sent to Crete to enter the slave pens of Minos. But not as ordinary slaves. They were to be trained as bull dancers for a year and the next year sent into the arena against the wild bulls of the Minos herd.

Their deaths would be useful and not without honor, Minos proclaimed. After all, when the bulls had finished with them, they would be buried in the wheat fields, where their bodies would fatten the crops.

Theseus had sneaked into the council room, where the terms of surrender were being dictated. No one saw him; he had blended in with the shadows and stood very still, listening. He studied the cold, pinched face of Minos, who was black-cloaked and wore no ornament except a spiked iron crown, as if to emphasize his role as pirate king. And the lad saw how that runty figure breathed power, and how crushed and humiliated Aegeus looked as

he accepted the terms of his defeat. Bitterly the boy learned how fortune alters physique, how victors grow and losers shrink.

Then and there Theseus vowed to himself that he would be among those sent to Crete and that he would fight the wild bulls and the ax men on their own territory. He told himself that one day he would stand in the throne room at Knossos, dictating terms of surrender to this same Minos ... or be buried in the wheat field, as losers deserve.

Two springs passed. Forty of the best young Athenians were taken to Crete, where they died dancing in the arena and were planted in the ploughed fields. Then the rite was changed. One day Minos was informed that Pasiphae's crossbreed child had grown into a fearsome monster and had slaughtered the prisoners in the Labyrinth. All Crete was abuzz with tales of the beast. This pleased Minos tremendously. The monster, once a source of shame to him, now offered a rich opportunity to spread the name of Minos into every corner of every island in the Middle Sea and to charge that name with horror.

This was exactly what he wanted—for the mere sound of his name to strike terror into the hearts of everyone, to have the mere sight of a Cretan ship or a Cretan chariot freeze an enemy with fear, making him flutter helplessly as a dove before a diving hawk.

The Minotaur, who had just enjoyed its first orgy of murder in the maze, would now serve the king. It would not lack for victims. There were still those suspected of treason. Or, if not of treason exactly, of dissent. Or, if not quite of dissent, then of insufficiently enthusiastic approval of everything Minos did, had done, and would do. In other words, there were still those whom Minos disliked, and this was enough to qualify them for residence in the Labyrinth and the attentions of the Minotaur.

Still, domestic victims were not the big issue. They were only something for the Minotaur to practice on. It would be upon the occasion of the next Spring Sowing, when again the flower of Athenian youth would be brought as sacrificial tributes to Knossos, that the monster could be most profitably employed. The Minotaur would replace the ordinary wild bulls and go into the arena against the beautiful young people. Their blood would dung the roots of royal prestige and make the name of Minoan Crete shine darkly forever.

The king's daughters drank in the rumors. The word *Athens* held a special resonance for them. It was Theseus, a young prince of that land, whose name had been sung by the bones. By twisting ways, then, the Hag's prophecy was coming true. Theseus would come to Crete. Once there, he could be persuaded to change his destiny from victim to husband.

Ariadne, of course, did not know that her sister had been promised a share in this fiancé, and Phaedra was careful to keep her secret. Being very much Minos's daughter, she had begun spinning plans of her own.

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Theseus Embarks

When the third spring rolled around, Theseus was ready to go to Crete, but not as a sacrifice. During the past year he had prepared himself for mortal combat by roaming the dangerous parts of the Hellenic Peninsula posing as a harmless traveler with a heavy purse. He had invited the notice of the most savage bandits who infested the mountain roads, had been bush-wacked many times and sliced and battered, but was young enough to heal rapidly, especially while enjoying himself so.

Theseus had learned much from his journey through the mountains. “This I now know,” he said to himself. “To learn about your enemy before the fight, not during it; never to accept his terms of combat, but to impose your own; and, above all, to avoid doing what he expects. The key to victory is surprise, surprise, surprise ... especially when your foe is bigger, which he always is.”

So it was that when the next spring tribute came, Theseus did not sail to Crete with the other young Athenians. He went to the port at Piraeus in the garb of an apprentice seaman, and he shipped aboard a merchant vessel bound for the southern islands of the Middle Sea. He did not mean to stay with the ship. His intention was to sail with it until it reached Cretan waters, then dive overboard and swim ashore. Once there, he would pose as a shipwrecked sailor from a land other than Athens and scout around Knossos, learning as much as possible about Minos and the Minotaur.

That same night, Minos, who after a string of victories was sleeping more or less dreamlessly, had his rest broken—not by the livid pictures of a dream, but by a voice speaking out of the darkness. It was a soft, melodic voice, but full of authority:

It creeps ashore, the danger.

Your land to be cursed,
maddened by thirst.
Beware the stranger.
When you have passed away,
Crete will be ruled
by a castaway.
Burning sky,
fountains dry.
Take care,
Beware
the castaway.

Minos took the voice very seriously. He issued orders to his coastal troops to keep close watch and seize any shipwrecked sailors who came ashore.

“Be vigilant,” he told his captain. “I have learned that spies, very dangerous ones, are attempting to sneak ashore and probe our defenses. If a single one gets past the beaches, the company patrolling the area can report to the Minotaur.”

One dawn, Theseus leaped overboard and swam toward a land dimly hulking on the horizon. Threading his way among rocks with the fluid skill of someone spawned by the sea, he made his way to the beach and waded ashore. He lifted his face to the kindling sky and said: “Thank you, whoever you are, wherever you are, for bringing me this far.”

Then he turned to the sea and spoke: “Oh, Lord, who is supposed to be my father, if you really did steal my mother from her husband, you can repay us both by helping me now. I cannot tell you exactly what I want, but with such vast oceanic powers as yours, you should be able to do something.”

Now Poseidon was good-natured when not offended and had always been entertained by this smallest and most combative of his sons. However, he was used to doing things in a big, gusty way and had no mind for detail. Those he wished to reward, he heaped with gifts of pearl and galleons full of sunken gold. When he wished to punish, he sent drought or tidal wave. Hearing his son’s prayer, then, he decided to withhold his waters from the thirsty spring sky over Crete. And no rain fell.

Theseus turned from the sea and began his journey inland. But he didn't get far. Almost immediately, he was intercepted by a squad of armored men who wordlessly knocked him over the head with their spear shafts, bound his unconscious body to a mule, and took him to Knossos.

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The Castaway

Theseus was shackled to an iron ring set in rock, and left in the stinking darkness of the smallest cell in the dungeon system forming the cellars of the Ax-House. The cell was so loathsome that he rejoiced when the guards came for him, thinking that he would now be led out to execution, and hoping only that he would not be tortured first. Instead, he was led up a marble stairway to an enormous sunny chamber, where a little man sat on a throne of ivory and gold. The captain of the guard prostrated himself, wriggled forward, and kissed the king's sandal. A soldier rammed the haft of his ax between Theseus's shoulders, pressing him to the tiled floor. He lay prone, hoping he was not expected to kiss the royal foot himself. With his face against the floor, he heard the rattle of arms and the shuffle of boots as the guards departed.

"Arise," said a voice.

He arose and faced the throne. It was a warm day, but the king wore a robe of Egyptian weave called byssus, dyed purple and embroidered with the double-ax in heavy gold thread. Trying to forget his stinking rags, Theseus stood tall as he could and waited for the king to speak.

"You are a spy, of course."

Theseus shuddered when he heard the little man's thunderous voice.

"No, Your Majesty."

There was a silence. Theseus stood with his head bowed, but he knew the king was studying him. He raised his head and looked into the king's eyes, then looked away again. Minos's eyes were flat black disks. They rotated slowly on their axes. Theseus could not bear their gaze.

"Prisoners are not ordinarily questioned by the king, you know."

"I am grateful for the honor, Your Majesty."

"Do you know what happens to spies in Crete?"

“I repeat, my lord, I am no spy, but a shipwrecked seaman.”

“A castaway?”

“Yes, sire. A castaway.”

“However you describe yourself, I think you came to spy. The penalties for that are severe.”

“For the third time, I am no spy.”

“Why did you come to Crete?”

“Not by intention, sire. I was shipwrecked.”

“No vessel has foundered recently in these waters. I am kept informed of such matters.”

“It was a Mycenaean trading vessel. It broke up on a reef about ten miles offshore. I caught a spar and drifted in.”

“You’re not a very skillful liar.”

“I lack practice. I’m accustomed to telling the truth.”

“Be careful, now. Every additional lie will cost you several hours of agony. Have you never served as an officer aboard a foreign galley docked at Knossos?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you served as a member of the crew, concealing your station, as a spy would.”

“I swear by all the gods that I have never before set foot on Crete. I am a voyager, true. I have traveled much, but never to Crete.”

“Well, you have made your last landfall, voyager.”

“So it seems ... and I wish it had been in any other place than this miserable slaughterhouse of an island.”

“Are you trying to act demented to escape the penalties of the law? It won’t help you, you know. Maniacs who commit crimes here are simply considered crazy criminals. They receive no privilege denied to sanity.”

“Hear me, Minos,” said Theseus. “You have the power to order my death. Then do so. I had rather perish under the double-ax than be bored to death by your dreary, malevolent tirade. Young though I am, I have met *real* killers—evil men, to be sure, but brave—who did their own killing. And I am not to be intimidated by a poisonous little toad who happens to wear a crown.”

Theseus broke off. The king had toppled from his throne. He writhed on the floor uttering broken shouts. Foam flecked his mouth. Guards rushed in.

The king arched and spat and beat the back of his head on the floor. The captain of the guard knelt to take the king in his arms. His men had surrounded Theseus with drawn swords, hiding Minos from view. But Theseus heard his strangled shout break into words: “Don’t kill him ... don’t kill him.”

They returned Theseus to his cell and shackled him. He lay on the straw listening to the rats. “I’m sorry he spared me,” he said to himself. “I’d rather be dead than rot in this filthy hole.”

He prayed to Poseidon then, very fervently, but received no answer. A rat came while he slept and bit off half his ear. He hoped to bleed to death then, and tried to encourage the bleeding by digging at his wound, but the pain was too intense. “No use torturing myself,” he thought. “I’ll leave it to the experts.” He fell asleep again, and by morning the bleeding had stopped. The wound festered. He tossed and burned.

When the girl appeared, he thought she was fledged by his fever and waited for her to disappear. But she did not. Was she another joke of the capricious gods? He shook his head trying to rid himself of the vision, but he couldn’t shake her away. Her eyes were burning holes in the murk. She had ivory-brown legs, cascading black hair, a curly mouth. He dragged himself to his hands and knees and faced her with his head raised. She did not disappear. She stood there silently, her dainty white feet spurning the dirty straw. She was dressed in court fashion—in a long, full skirt, and naked above the waist save for the drape of her shining hair. The girl was small and slender, not yet nubile.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“I am Ariadne.”

“I greet you, lovely maiden, whoever you are.”

“I just told you who I was,” said Ariadne. “What did you do to my father?”

“Have I the honor of knowing your father?”

“He’s the king. You threw him into a fit. He’ll never forgive you.”

“I had nothing to do with his fit.”

“He says you’re some kind of wicked sorcerer, employed by his enemies. He’s going to do dreadful things to you, unless you vanish or something. Can you do that?”

“Not without help.”

“In your opinion, am I marriageable?”

“Well ... perhaps not quite yet,” said Theseus.

“Almost?”

“You’ll be very lovely when you do grow up.”

“How can you tell about what you can’t see?”

“Because what I can see is beautiful, and the rest of you will surely match.”

“Good-bye now.”

“Don’t go,” said Theseus.

“I’ll be back.”

Darkness swarmed. Red pain flared.

She was back. Taller, long-legged, coltish—an ivory wand of a maiden, the coolest, cleanest thing he had ever seen. She smelled like the snow-freighted wind blowing off the mountains of Greece. She stood erect, smiling.

“Well, am I grown up?”

“By the gods, I don’t believe it! How long have I been here?”

“Little girls grow up fast.”

He lay back on the straw. A wave of sickness broke over him.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing much. I’m probably dying.”

“So soon? We have prisoners who’ve been here for twenty years—some of them without hands or feet because the rats ate them off.”

“Why don’t you run along, Princess? It can’t be pleasant for you here.”

“It stinks, if that’s what you mean. But a lot of interesting things do.”

She knelt swiftly and touched his ear. He jerked his head away.

“What happened to it?” asked Ariadne.

“One of those rats you were talking about.”

“It looks dreadful. Say a spell and make it grow again.”

“I’m no sorcerer, I told you. Please now, be on your way.”

She knelt on the straw. Her ivory knee almost touched his face. He felt himself reviving in the piny fragrance of her young body. She seemed to cleanse the foul vapors. He pulled himself up to a sitting position.

“I know who you are,” she said. “You’re Theseus, Prince of Athens.”

“Nonsense! Princes aren’t found in prisons.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Most prisoners here are of very good family. So tell me the truth.”

“Why is it important to you who I am?”

“Because I’m destined to marry Theseus, Prince of Athens.”

“Has he asked you?”

“Wouldn’t you remember if you had? I’m destined to marry you, and you’re destined to marry me.”

“How did you learn of this destiny?”

“From a reliable witch. A very magical one. She gathered bones from the killing ground in the maze and hung them on the western slope of a hill where the wind blows. The bones danced and sang. They sang:

Tigers are wild,
dogs are tame.
Listen, dear child,
to your husband’s name.
Theseus, Theseus
A prince for a princess,
Theseus is his name.
Roses are red,
wounds are too.
Him you shall wed,
I tell you true.

“Anyone would be happy to marry you,” whispered Theseus. “You’re exquisitely pretty. And smell marvelous. And sing like a lark.”

“You sound like a man who wants to kiss me.”

“You’re so lovely and clean. And I’m in so foul a state. How can I touch you?”

“I’ll take a bath when I leave. I’ll have to anyway.”

“Look, they’re ready to kill me just for being cast away on this island. What would they do to me for fondling the king’s daughter?”

“Oh, they’d whisk you to the chopping block and lop your head off.”

“Exactly.”

“Unless sorcerers can grow their heads back—as lizards do their tails.”

“You have some useful ideas about magic,” said Theseus.

“That witch taught me a few things.”

“Show me.”

“Not here. I need some stuff. Frog ... cat ... fire of thorns. An alder stick and a bag of corn ...”

“Sing that again,” he was surprised to hear himself whispering.

“I wasn’t singing.”

Pain flowed from his mangled earlobe and coursed like lava through his head. He groaned and fell back on the straw.

He heard her singing:

Thorn and thistle,
gristle grue.
When I whistle,
it means *you!*

He tried to speak but could not. She whistled. He saw the straw heave beside his face. He couldn’t move away. Out slithered a rat, an enormous gray one with faint black markings. It held something pale in its mouth and danced toward the girl like a poodle. She held out her hand and the rat leaped up. Balancing itself on her palm, it offered the ear. She took it and kissed the rat on the head. It disappeared.

Ariadne turned the ear, studying it. She spat on the raw edge and smoothed it out with her little finger, then knelt to Theseus and pressed it in place. It was like a piece of ice; it froze the fire in his head. Pain drained deliciously out. He felt the ear; it was whole. He looked at her. She smiled. And, very gently, he kissed her curly mouth.

“You’re getting politer,” she whispered. “Anything else I can fix?”

He drew away. “Just talk to me.”

“Talk?”

“Yes, it’s a way of touching too.”

“Maybe you *are* old under that beard.”

“Nobody’s that old, Princess. If you were to walk past an Egyptian tomb, the mummies would jump out and run after you.”

“Oh, gruesome! ... Someone told me about those tombs once. They’re very tall and full of cats. An Egyptian told me.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“He put into port one day in a big boat made of paper or cloth or something. Big, clumsy things, hardly like a boat at all.... Egyptians are weird. They look like long, rusty knives. Reddish brown, you know, with stilt legs and bird faces. But he was nice. He told me all about cats and tombs and the moon eating the sun. Egyptians are very religious—worse than us.”

Her hand lay on the straw beside him. He studied it as he drank in the clear, beautifully articulated stream of words. It was a childish hand still, the fingers very long. He put his hand over it. It moved in his grasp like a little bird. Tears scalded his eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Tell me more things. Tell me about your mother.”

“What about her?”

“There’s a curious tale—that she eloped with a bull and had a child, half man, half bull ...”

“I can’t talk about that,” said Ariadne.

“Why not?”

“It’s a family secret. And in our family that’s a state secret. You know what happens to anyone who tells? They get their tongues torn out with hot pincers.”

“You can tell me. I won’t tell your father.”

“Why should I tell you anything? You won’t even admit who you are. But I know. You’re Theseus, Theseus, Theseus...”

She brought her face to his. Her eyes were black disks like her father’s, but larger and more brilliant. Slowly, they began to spin. “Aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

“Yes,...” he murmured.

Ariadne laughed. Her eyes spun faster. Blackness spun inside his head, flowed out, and engulfed him.

The Sacrifice

The king was closeted with his daughter.

“Well,” he said. “I have indulged your whim and allowed you to visit his cell.”

“It wasn’t a whim,” said Ariadne. “I was trying to help you.”

“Did you learn any more than I did?”

“He confuses me.”

“Is he a wizard?”

“Too young. Much too young. I think he’s what he says he is—a castaway. Why should you doubt it? Many shipwrecked sailors are washed up on our shores. They’ve never bothered you. You just pop them into the slave-pen.”

“Not this one,” said Minos.

“Why?”

“Something spoke to me in the night, warning me against a castaway and against drought. This fellow appears, and it stops raining. It hasn’t rained for weeks, not a drop. The streams are dry. Crops are withering in the fields.”

“What are you going to do, kill him?”

“Not yet. I want to know his secret. He shall be tortured until he talks.”

“Father, he won’t survive a minute of torture. He’s too weak.”

“Are you sure he’s not pretending?”

“If you want to torture him long enough to learn anything, you’d better shift him out of that cell. The rats almost ate his ear off. At this rate, he won’t last three days.”

“You’re suggesting that I turn him loose?”

“Not at all. Simply put him in the Labyrinth until he gets his health back and is able to bear a touch or two of the hot iron without dying.”

“I’ll think about it. Return now to the temple. Dance with your priestesses and pray for rain.”

Since Phaedra had learned that her sister was visiting the castaway, she followed Ariadne everywhere. There is no instinct surer than jealousy—especially when your rival is your sister—and Phaedra had immediately sensed that this stranger was Theseus. She felt helpless. Ariadne had already begun to blossom, especially since the stranger had come, but she, Phaedra, was still a little girl. She examined herself very carefully in a mirror and saw nothing to interest anyone. But if she wasn’t ready for Theseus herself, no one else would have him either, especially not Ariadne.

And now things were worse. The prisoner had been transferred to the Labyrinth, which was a dreadful development. For Ariadne, armed with that damned spool Daedalus had given her, could slither in and out of the maze like a hedge-snake.

On this night, Phaedra had followed her sister to the temple of the Horned Moon and perched herself on the outer stone wall. The vestals came out and began to dance. Phaedra hummed wordlessly along with the flutes. The moon was hot and white, and shadows danced among the vestals. One shadow thickened and flowed toward Phaedra. A hand clutched her with enormous strength.

She felt herself being lifted high over a shoulder and borne away with great speed. A heavy arm pressed against the back of her thighs, holding her close. Her head swung against a downy back, rolling with muscle. She was in a swoon of speed, a daze of helplessness, and wanting the ride to go on and on.

Suddenly it was over. She was swung down and set on her feet. Phaedra stood before her abductor. She examined him from the bottom of his hooves to the tip of his horns. He was huge. A dense pelt of golden hair covered his shoulders, chest, belly, and thighs. He looked all golden in the moonlight. His horns glittered, and his eyes were pools of light.

“Hello, Minotaur,” she said.

He grunted.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“No.”

“Why did you carry me off, then?”

“I heard you singing. Your voice ...” he reached out and touched her lips with the tip of a hard finger.

“What about my voice?”

“My mother used to sing to me. Then, one day, she was in pieces on the ground. Your voice is like hers.”

“Well, she was my mother too.”

“Yours?”

“I’m your sister—half anyway. The one called Phaedra.”

He didn’t answer. She was frightened by the silence. His eyes were burning. Finally he spoke.

“You’ll stay with me now.”

“Will I?”

“I want you to.”

“Suppose I don’t want to?” she said.

“Once you try it, you will.”

“Try what, exactly?”

“Living with me. Doing what I do.”

“But you’re a monster. I’m not.”

“You can be anything you like. Look at our mother. She got herself up as a cow to catch my father. And that old wizard who helped her can help you. He’ll make you some sharp horns and a pair of razor-hooves, and you’ll be able to run the maze with me and have fun with prisoners.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Wild, screechy fun, the kind girls like. Goring with your horns, trampling with your hooves. You’ll love it.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Of course you will. You’re my sister, you say.”

“Only half.”

“That’s plenty. We have the same crazy mother. And your demon father makes mine look like a bleating calf.”

“I can’t stay with you, but I’ll come visiting,” she said.

“Every day?”

“Well ...”

“If you don’t, I’ll come get you.”

“Almost every day.... Tell me, do you eat all these people you kill?”

“I don’t eat people. That’s a myth. I just kill them; the vultures pick their bones. What I eat is grass and things.”

“Grass? I can’t eat that.”

“Sing something.”

“Then will you let me go?”

“If you want me to. But I can always come and get you again. And I will—again and again, until you decide you might as well stay.”

“Hush if you want me to sing.”

Ariadne was told that the king wished to see her. She hastened to him. He told her that the stranger was to be given to ritual slaughter.

“I suppose it’s necessary, if you say so.”

“The oracles say so. They state that the drought has been caused by a stranger in our midst. And the populace, always ready to relieve its fears with simple answers, has accepted the idea that the castaway is accursed. He comes here, and crops wither in the field. Cattle die; men and women are dying. They believe that only his ritual dismemberment will appease the gods and bring rain.”

“But is that what you believe, Father?”

“I believe the lad is unlucky, for he is to die young. I believe in the drought and the suffering of our people, and their rage and fear. They believe in gods, curses, and oracles, and I welcome such faith. Absolute belief feeds absolute authority. I shall decree the performance of the people’s will. You priestesses shall howl your prayers, the bull dancers will perform, and the boy will be given to the Minotaur.”

“And then—suppose it doesn’t rain?”

“It will rain, or it will not. If not, I shall detect a flaw in the ritual. The oracles will find another victim. I shall certify his guilt; you will dance again; he will be given to the Minotaur, then dismembered. And so on. It has to rain sometime.”

Ariadne knelt before her father. “As usual, sire, your wisdom leaves me speechless with admiration.”

“One more thing,” said Minos. “I mean you to play a key role in this ceremony. When the bull dancers have finished, you will appear as your ancestress, Europa, being abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull. And that bull shall be the best in all our herds, of tremendous size, unblemished

whiteness, and fiery spirit. Following that, the stranger will be brought into the ring and given to the Minotaur. And the drama of what will happen then will divert our poor drought victims, even if it doesn't bring rain."

Ariadne visited Theseus in the maze and told him what her father had decreed. He laughed.

"What's so funny about the Minotaur? I only hope you find him that amusing when he comes at you in the ring."

"No use weeping beforehand."

"You have guts, I'll say that for you. Anyone else would be scared witless."

"You haven't met many heroes. It's well known we have more guts than wits. Actually, I'm not entirely like that. I have sharp wits and not quite enough courage."

Ariadne stared at him, then reached into her tunic and pulled out a spool. "Watch," she said. She tossed the spool onto the ground. It darted through the hedge, out of sight, unreeling itself as it went and leaving one end of its thread in the girl's hand. She whistled. The thread grew taut as the spool wound itself back through the hedge and leaped into her hand.

"Remarkable!" said Theseus.

"Daedalus gave it to me so I could find my way in and out of the maze. I want you to have it. Leave the Labyrinth tonight and try to make your way to the coast."

"You want me to leave?"

"I don't want you killed. I'll try to follow you."

"Keep your spool, pretty one. I came here to fight the Minotaur."

"Do you have any plans for survival?" said Ariadne.

"My only chance is to do what I do best."

"What's that?"

"Riding," said Theseus.

"They won't give you a horse. Just a weapon."

"Yes, but you can help me."

"How?"

"You'll be aboard a bull, you say."

"Yes."

"Listen carefully ..."

She listened, then departed, leaving the spool with him.

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Hero Meets Monster

The bullring at Knossos was a huge grass oval enclosed by stone steps shelving up tier by tier to the height of a hundred feet. The royal box was a pediment of rose marble on which stood a throne of onyx and gold. A white silken canopy supported by four ivory posts shaded the throne.

Here sat Minos, holding a golden scepter topped by an enormous ruby. He had chosen this stone, it was rumored, because he occasionally expressed displeasure by braining a courtier, and rubies do not show blood. In truth, save for his occasional fits, Minos rarely lost control. But neither did he discourage rumors that fed fear.

Stationed around the royal seat was the King's Guard. Each man wore breastplate and greaves and bore the double-ax, but had been given leave to omit the helmet. No man, however strong, could stand for so many hours under the Cretan sun with his head stewing in a brass pot.

Some hundred thousand people jammed the arena. The lower steps were reserved for nobility; the lower your station, the higher you had to climb. The crowd had been filing into the stadium since dawn. Squabbles flared up from time to time, and more than one early comer was hurled a hundred feet to the chariot road outside the arena. When this happened, the bullpen slaves would untether a pair of vultures kept for such occasions and the great birds would rummage the corpse, leaving only bones, which were flung to the mastiffs. All this was done with dispatch; the king disliked mess.

Nor was the purpose of the day forgotten by the multitude. People kept looking up at the sky. Surely, with such splendid appeasements under way, the angry god, whoever it was, would feel his wrath cooling and send a few clouds. But the sky was clear, so hot a blue it was almost white, and the sun was a wheel of fire.

Minos raised his scepter, then lowered it. The rites began.

A double file of oxen ambled into the arena—huge, clean beasts with luminous eyes and gilded horns. Perched on them were lithe youths and maidens, the bull dancers of Crete. Chosen for their beauty and grace, they were taken from their parents when very young and trained for years. The girls began performing at fourteen, the boys at seventeen; after that, it was thought, their skills declined.

A last pair of oxen walked the circuit; then beasts and dancers stood motionless as the priestesses took up their complaint. Drums began. The wailing turned into shrieks, mounting higher and higher. Suddenly, all sound ceased. A hush fell upon the vast crowd.

A white bull walked into the ring. Riding him was Ariadne, clad only in her long black hair. She rode slowly through the pulsing silence, looking very young and slender on that mountain of throbbing muscle. Suddenly the silence broke. The crowd was yelling, sobbing. Many people sobbing together make a sound rarely heard, an unbearable sound, which grew and grew as the people called to the sky for mercy. For the crowd was caught up in a delirium of belief. The mime of bull and maiden was more real to them than their own parched knowledge. It was life itself. The maiden was Europa returned, which meant that the bull contained something of Zeus—enough, perhaps, to bring rain.

The maiden did not seem to be guiding the bull. Swaying there, slender as a wand, she was vibrantly passive. Every eye was on her; every heart thudded with her own. Each woman felt her spirit yield to the burning god. Every man yearned for Ariadne—thirsted for her, as for rain.

Unseen, the priestesses began to wail again.

Theseus entered the arena. A great hush fell upon the crowd. He walked in, unescorted, wearing a white tunic and a chaplet of roses picked by Ariadne. His single weapon was a hawthorn branch sharpened to a needle point. He walked slowly toward the white bull. Ariadne stood upright on the animal's back and stretched her arms to the sky.

The Minotaur appeared. People gasped in fear. Children shrieked. Light danced on the points of his horns. His sharp hooves glinted on the grass. When he clenched his hands, they were fists of bone. He walked slowly, stalking. He belonged to the sun; every hair of his fleece glittered like a red-

hot filament. He was burning and terrible, a sun demon as deadly as drought.

Theseus reached the bull. Suddenly, Ariadne leaped off. She flashed away and vanished into the shadow at the base of the wall. And Theseus was standing on the bull. It was done so swiftly and with such certainty that the crowd thought it part of a new ritual.

For the first moment, Minos was nailed to his throne by amazement. Then such a gust of wrath took him that his senses fused and he fell into a foaming fit. He slumped off the throne and writhed on the pediment. But no one came to him, for this was a sacred occasion and everyone believed that their sacred king, like many a prophet, was responding to divine inspiration with gibbering frenzy.

Besides, everyone was far too occupied watching Theseus ride the bull. It is very difficult to ride a bull that does not want to be ridden, and this one was the largest and most powerful in all Crete.

It bucked. It reared. It stood on its forehooves and tilted itself up, almost somersaulting, then leaped into the air and came down on all four hooves in a spine-cracking jolt. But Theseus clung to its back. He had begun riding before he could walk. What he rode were the enormous colts sired by the surf stallions of Poseidon, and these colts had been as big as wild stags and much meaner.

Now, in the ring at Knossos, he was riding for his life against the Minotaur. He balanced himself on the bull's back like a gull on the deck of a pitching vessel, sliding down and bracing his feet against the horns when the bull stood on its forehooves. Theseus leaped when the bull leaped, landing on his back with his knees bent when he came down. He kept to the middle of its broad back, for the bull sometimes rushed at the walls trying to scrape him off, and wrenched its head about, trying to catch him with its horns. But he managed to balance himself lightly, never looking at the bull but guiding himself by its movements, for he didn't dare take his eyes off the Minotaur.

The monster simply waited. He crouched in the center of the ring and waited, pivoting slowly as the bull circled. The bull stopped, stood there with head lowered, rolling its red eyes. Uttering a howl, the Minotaur charged. Theseus stood on the bull. As the monster came close, he leaped

off backward, landing behind the bull's stringy tail, which he seized and wrung with a cruel, expert twist.

The bull went mad and charged. Envenomed blood rose in the Minotaur like a gorge. He lowered his head and locked horns with the bull. The huge crowd churned with excitement as bull wrestled half bull—all except Minos, who was sprawled unconscious in the royal box.

Fettered head to head, bull and Minotaur strove with their horns. Theseus leaped back onto the bull and stood behind the hump of muscle. He jabbed his sharpened branch into the bull's flank, drawing blood, but not enough to weaken the animal. The bull flung its head up, lifting the Minotaur, and hurled him off with a shake of its horns. The Minotaur landed on his feet, darted back, leaped above the bull's head and with a vicious sideways kick drove a hoof into Theseus.

Things slowed for the lad. The Minotaur seemed to float up to him, moving his leg slowly and gracefully, as if underwater. But Theseus could not dodge this slowness. He felt the hoof slicing into his side. He knew he was badly hurt. The pain had not yet started, but he knew how it would be. He was slipping now in his own blood.

Clutching to consciousness with all his will, clutching the hawthorn stick with the waning strength of his hand, he slid off the bull.

The animal loomed above him. Its underside was strangely pathetic. Through its legs Theseus saw the Minotaur coming, slowly, stalking. He wondered dully whether the monster meant to kill him with horns, hooves, or fists—or simply by wringing his neck like a chicken. He knew his only chance was to goad the bull intolerably, making it attack again.

He struck upward with his stake, jabbing the bull in its most sensitive spot. In the split second that followed, he knew he had done the worst possible thing. The bull rose in the air with an agonized bellow and came down on him with all its weight. He felt his ribs go. He was crushed under the animal's bulk; he could hardly breathe. Every breath was fire; he knew that a splinter of rib must have pierced his lung.

Then he felt the weight lifting. He breathed deeply and almost fainted from the pain. The Minotaur was standing above him. It would be over quickly now.

But the monster was in no hurry. His golden eyes burned down at Theseus. Ariadne's half brother, this Horned Man. So strange.... He

wondered at the strength of the monster who could lock horns with the bull. Where was the bull? It had trotted off and seemed to have lost interest. Theseus started to swoon. The Minotaur lifted his hoof.

“So he’s choosing the most humiliating way,” thought Theseus. “Trampling me to bloody rags on the grass. Why should it be worse to suffer a kick than a blow? Is death by hoof more shameful than death by hand? But death, that’s what swallows everything—options, questions, regrets, and all the pain.”

The hoof was poised above his throat. When the monster stamped, Theseus knew, the razor-sharp hoof would shear through his neck, slicing off his head like an executioner’s ax. “Poseidon, help me,” he whispered.

With the last flicker of his strength, he reached into his pouch and pulled out the spool Ariadne had given him. How slowly it came out of the bag; it was heavy as a chariot wheel. He dropped it at the feet of the Minotaur. It lay there. The Minotaur spurned it, then raised his hoof again above the crouching Theseus, who feebly tried to whistle the hedge lark melody that he had heard Ariadne whistle to the spool.

Suddenly, the spool leaped into motion. It rolled, unwinding its thread, circling the Minotaur, slowly rising and spinning a cocoon around the monster’s body. The bull-man stood as if entranced while the almost invisible thread was binding his strength. He bellowed, thrashed, and tried to tear himself loose. But the thread cut like wire as it wrapped him close, tethering him to himself. In an amazing burst of power, the Minotaur flexed his bound legs and leaped, rising straight into the air and trying to come down on Theseus with his hooves.

He landed near the boy’s face. Theseus realized that the Minotaur was still very dangerous, shackled though he was. He pulled himself to his feet, feeling his broken ribs stab him with every panting breath. He grasped his stick and thrust it between the Minotaur’s legs, tumbling him to the ground. Then, as his foe lay there, struggling to arise, he lifted the sharpened stick.

A wave of nausea took him; he was swept by dizziness and he knew he was about to swoon. With a last effort, he tilted his stick, managing to aim its point at the Minotaur’s throat. He fell, driving the stake into the monster’s throat, pinning him to the earth and holding him there as the Minotaur’s lifeblood drained away.

Theseus lay across the body of his foe.

It was then that Poseidon allowed his tides to release their pent vapors to the thirsty sky, which immediately darkened. Thunder growled, becoming sweet music to the people below. Everyone in the arena gaped in joyous wonder at the sky, which was turning now into one huge purple-black bruise edged with lightning.

Rain fell in clumps. The clumps became rods, lances of rain that merged into a solid wall of water. It was as if the entire sea had been lifted from its bed and hurled down on the island. The plains flooded; the valleys filled. Whole villages were submerged. People fled to the hills.

The bullring was a great stone bowl; the water was rising with deadly speed. People scrambled up the steps as the water pursued them. Those on the high steps fought to keep their places. And again the weaker ones were hurled off the top tiers; they fell into swirling water and drowned before they had finished thanking the gods for sending rain.

Ariadne had pulled Theseus onto the bull's back. The great beast swam easily out of the arena, across the flooded plain, and into the sea.

Theseus lay in a swoon, bleeding. Ariadne tied him to the bull's horns and began to stitch his wounds with Daedalus's thread. And tried to make the bull go faster; she had spotted her little sister swimming after them.

These three young people, swimming away from an evil kingdom toward their future, were observed by another who read that future clearly. It was the Barley-hag, who had escaped drowning by muttering a quick spell that changed her hut into a skiff. She was squatting now in the tiny boat, cackling happily.

"He will marry them both, one after the other. They will share his glory but die their own deaths. For today he elopes with the king's daughters; tomorrow, he'll sail back and help himself to the rest of Crete. Yes-s-s ... young Theseus will return to Athens, inherit his father's kingdom, and assemble a mighty war fleet. He will defeat Minos in a great battle and snatch the crown off his head and put it on his own. Heh, heh, heh ... I see what I see and I know what I know. And what I say is always so...."

Now, as the wounded young prince and the two princesses sailed away toward that magic line where the sea meets the sky, the muttering of the prophetic hag became clear: Theseus was the kind of young hero who would risk everything and endure anything to make his dreams come true.

Years before, observing the agony of his father's defeat by Minos, he had vowed that one day he would stand in the throne room of the palace at Knossos, dictating terms of surrender to Minos. And it would happen just that way.

Defeating the monstrous bull-man called the Minotaur was only the first test in his long quest for glory, and one that he almost failed.

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THE NEMEAN LION

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For my grandson NOAH
Who needs a monster to counterbalance the angels
that swarm about him

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The Nemean Lion

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Characters

Monsters

The Nemean lion Gigantic beast made to order for Zeus by Grandmother Earth
(neh MEE an)

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods
(ZOOS)

Atropos Eldest Fate, Lady of the Shears
(AT roh pohs)

Hades Lord of the Dead
(HAY deez)

Hecate Queen of the Harpies
(HECK uh tee)

Thalia Muse of Comedy
(thuh LY uh)

Gaia First earth goddess, grandmother of Zeus
(GAY uh)

Mortals

Palaemona Later known as Heraclea, daughter of Zeus, born of
(pal ah MON ah) an oak nymph

Melampus Master physician
(meh LAM pus)

Rhoecus Brave young man who dwells in the forest
(REE kus)

Woodsman Foster father of the young Palaemona

Eurystheus King of Mycenae, taskmaster to Heraclea
(Yoo RISS thee
us)

Copreus Eurystheus's herald
(COH pree us)

Bullman A professional killer

Animals

Bear, stag, bees, squirrel, birds, bulls

Others

Serpent Oracular python who serves Melampus

Oak nymph Palaemona's mother

Dryad Another oak nymph, but of the Bee Clan
(DRY ad)

Oreades Mountain nymphs who serve Melampus
(oh REE ah
deez)

Empusae Miniature Harpies with leather wings and spiteful
(EM pyoo sy) habits

Zeus Is Uneasy

Clouds raced across a great blowing lilac sky. Lightning split an oak; the voice of a wood nymph sounded above the thunder. But no one could tell whether she was screaming with fear or joy. For Zeus fancied dryads, and was known to brandish his thunderbolt when he came a-courting. And when the dryad who dwelt in the blasted tree was ready to give birth, the covey of oak nymphs wondered whether they were about to welcome a child of Zeus.

But when the babe made her appearance, it was decided that she must have been sired by something less than a god. For the infant was undersized and looked sickly—a tiny blue scrap of tissue fighting for every breath. And nobody was surprised when she vanished. For the forest was full of hunting beasts, and the young of every species had to be hardy to survive.

Once every thousand years a strange wind blows from all directions at once, shaking the chandelier of stars and branding the night sky with a scrawl of fire. And only the eldest Fate, Atropos, Lady of the Shears, could read that scroll which held the mighty secrets of What Was To Be.

This traffic with the future lent Atropos special authority—so that she was feared by the gods themselves. Even their king, Zeus, who feared nothing, was made uneasy by her.

And the next morning, when he saw the Scissors Hag winding her way among the flower beds in the Garden of Olympus, he knew by the smile on her face that she was bringing bad news for someone and hoped it was for someone else.

“Greetings, your majesty,” she grated.

“A fair day to you, my lady. I trust the windstorm last night did not disturb your slumbers.”

“I do not sleep much, my lord. Most old folk die at night, you know, and I must be ready with my shears when the thread of life has to be snipped.”

“Yes, of course,” muttered Zeus.

“Besides,” she said, “if I were inclined to nap, it would certainly not be when the thousand-year wind comes to jostle the stars. It is part of my task, you realize, to read the fiery splinters. Indeed, this time their message is especially interesting.”

Zeus shuddered as he heard these words and saw the smirk twisting her withered lips. For she smiled, he knew, only when she had something unpleasant to announce. He said nothing; just waited.

“It concerns you, O Zeus,” she said.

“I am all attention.”

“A certain child dwells in a deep wood. A sickly, undersized babe, but she is fated to shake your kingdom.”

“Impossible,” growled Zeus.

“Nay, my lord, possible. Even, perhaps, probable.”

“How can such a thing be?”

“This girl child is destined to be the embodiment of female strength and wisdom, and will dedicate herself to avenging the Great Goddess. Yea, she will seek to restore the glory of the Mother, even by dislodging you from your throne.”

“Ridiculous!”

“Quarrel with the thousand-year wind and the splintered stars, my lord, not with me who only reads their message.”

“Whose child is she? Who has spawned her?”

“Mystery within mystery. But she will claim to be Hera’s daughter, although not yours. Indeed, she will call herself Heraclea.”

“I thank you for your warning, my lady. Where do I find the presumptuous brat?”

“In the depths of the forest girdling Thebes. She is called Palaemona now; the name Heraclea will come later.”

“Too late ...” said Zeus. “I shall hunt her down and snuff her out before she can pronounce that absurd name.”

“Good hunting,” said Atropos, grinning. And humped off. After she left, Zeus thought very hard.

“How shall I proceed?” he asked himself. “Hasten to Thebes and gaff her with a thunderbolt? Effective, but unwise. It would proclaim to the world that she is as important as she claims to be—dangerous enough to attract my personal attention and merit the use of my ultimate weapon. No! I shall do her no such honor. She must die, but her death must resemble other deaths. In other words, I shall employ a monster. But which?”

He thought and thought. “There are monsters aplenty,” he told himself. “But they all seem to work for other gods. Hades employs Cerberus. Poseidon commands a hideous flotilla of sea serpents. The snake-haired Medusa serves Athena’s vengeance. The Calydonian boar is the handiwork of my daughter, Artemis. The Cyclopes work for the smith god inside smoky Aetna. And that dreadful three-bodied Geryon acts for my wife, Hera. The Chimaera tends to free-lance, and is stupid besides ...

“I could borrow one of these repulsive creatures, no doubt. But to do so would be to reveal my intentions toward that forest brat. What I must do is find one that will be mine alone. I’ll go to an expert. My grandmother, Gaia, most ancient of earth goddesses, has spawned an enormous brood of monsters—as well as giants, Titans, and gods. She will help me if I ask her.

“But what shall I ask her for? I am hampered by my keen sense of beauty. I detest ugliness. And the appearance of these monsters tends to be revolting. Surely, though, there must be some creature who possesses a bestial beauty. A lion, for example. All other animals tremble when his scent is borne to them on the wind. When he roars, their marrow freezes; they are too frightened to run, and he kills them with one stroke of his barbed paw and devours them at leisure.

“Yes, he is a killer, and magnificent! A very king of the beasts as I am King of the Gods. A lion ... the idea grows on me. But an animal such as no one has ever seen, or even dreamed—one that will make an ordinary lion look like a house cat. Superb notion! I must summon Gaia now.”

He sent a message to Gaia and received her in the Garden of Olympus, bowing low to her. “O Queen of Earth, wise and powerful, I ask your help.”

“To be asked when it is yours to command, to be given an opportunity to assist omnipotence—this, kingly grandson, is to do me high honor. How can I serve you?”

“I am displeased with certain mortals—a nationful, in fact. The Nemeans.”

“How have they offended you?”

“They favor other gods. Shun my temples. Pray to me seldom, and make me few gifts.”

“They deserve to be punished, of course.”

“Yes, but I do not wish to visit them with swift destruction, blast them with my lightning, incinerate their forests and their cities. For they would die ignorant and serve no example to others. Their punishment must be spaced over time. I want to teach them a slow lesson in the meaning of true faith. I need a monster.”

“No problem.”

“Not a fire-spitting dragon, mind. Nor a gaping serpent, nor something with a lot of heads. That’s not my style, Grandmother. I crave an imperial beast. A lion. But a very special one.”

“Special how?”

“Huge, Earth, huge. Surpassing ordinary lions as we gods surpass mortals. And let his teeth be like ivory daggers, his talons made of brass and as big as baling hooks. His hide should be a supple armor that no spear point or arrowhead can pierce, or blade can slash.”

“A task worthy of my best efforts,” murmured Gaia.

“Take your time,” said Zeus. “I want him perfect ...”

“When next I see you, Grandson, I shall be accompanied by your lion.”

And she left. Zeus laughed gustily, shaking the trees. “She’ll take her time all right. She’s slow, Mother Earth, slow but sure.... However, there is no hurry. A century is a summer’s afternoon to me; I can afford to be patient. I’ll let the lion roam Nemea for a while, feast upon the inhabitants thereof, and their cattle, and teach them the cost of impiety. He’ll grow into his work, gain a reputation, and when I do send Heraclea against him, her death will seem entirely natural.”

The Waif

No woodsman ever entered the grove where the dryads dwelt, for it was a sacred copse. And a woodcutter was circling the grove one day when he saw a pile of dead leaves tremble and heard a faint, mewling cry. He dug into the leaves and felt something squirm. He pulled it out. It was an infant; a girl. He yelled with joy. For his wife had just had a miscarriage with their first child, and he thought that the gods had answered their grief with the gift of another child. He bore the baby home, and the young couple raised her as their own, naming her Palaemona.

Other children came; they soon outgrew her. She was a curious child altogether, so weirdly small in that tall family. Huge yellow eyes flared in her famished face. "Eyes of a panther in a mouse's face," her father said. But she was tough as a bowstring, was never ill, and would play tirelessly from dawn till night.

And so she lived quite happily until her twelfth year. Then one night a robber band came to the hut. They killed the woodsman, abducted his wife, and rounded up the children to sell at the slave mart in Thebes.

Palaemona fled. A robber chased her. He was a tall, gawky fellow, but she was a very fast runner despite her size and was drawing away from her pursuer. But another robber jumped out from behind a tree and stood in her path. She tried to duck around him, but he grabbed her. She went limp; his grip slackened. Her hand flashed up. She struck like a cat, raking his face with her nails, gouging with all her strength, feeling the flesh pull away. He screamed and lunged for her. His face dripped blood. He did not stop to wipe it but kept after her. She dodged under his arm and darted toward the river.

She flung herself off the bank, flattening her body in a shallow dive. Had she wished to escape she could have swum underwater, for she slid through

the water like an eel. But she did not want to escape; she wanted him to follow her into the river. She surfaced immediately and saw him standing knee deep, looking for her. She dived again and came up in a thick clump of weeds. She splashed to attract his attention, then pretended to struggle in the water as if she had been caught in the reeds. His head swiveled. He saw her. She saw his teeth flash in the bloody mask of his face and knew that he was grinning. He was a squat man, very hairy.

As he came near, she moved very slowly out through the clinging reeds. He waded toward her. Now he was waist deep. She waited until he was almost within arm's length, then dived. She groped in the mud until she found a heavy little rock. She arched in a tight turn underwater, slid behind him, and swept his legs from under him. She surfaced as he sank and waited for him to come up.

As he arose, spluttering, she lifted her arm high and slammed the rock down on his head. He grunted and collapsed. She stood shoulder deep, watching the bubbles rise. She saw the water changing color and couldn't bear the idea of his blood fouling her river. She went under, seized him by the hair, and dragged him up. His eyes were closed; his face was greenish white. He did not seem to be breathing.

She shifted her grip and held him beneath the armpits. Blood seeped through his soaked hair. She dragged him to the shore and let him drop. She took off her tunic and washed it in the river, beating it against a flat rock. Then she dived again and swam underwater, keeping away from the clump of reeds, turning and corkscrewing until she felt clean. She came out, put on her wet tunic, and went to look at him.

The robber lay there motionless. His hair was a mat of blood. Fat blue flies buzzed slowly about his head. She felt her stomach churning and fought back nausea, trying to cling to triumph. Flies clotted about his head. She waved them away, blaming him. Even dead he kept attacking her, smearing her with filth.

But was he dead? Was that not a thread of pulse in his fat throat? He was one of those who had killed her foster father, and she needed him dead, but she did not want to touch him. She stood up and looked at the river. Its waters had turned red in the setting sun. It was fouled then forever. She would never swim in it again. She would never do anything again that she had done before.

She turned and raced across the meadow, away from the river, into the forest. She did not head for the hut that had been her home. She turned left and struck deeper into the wood.

Night came and she still moved through the trees. Wind rattled the leaves. She was chilled now in her damp tunic. She welcomed the chill and drew it into her in great gasping breaths. She sat at the foot of a tree trying to let the wind blow into her mouth, sucking its coldness, feeling it shrink the hot lump of blood and flies.

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Vengeance of the Hive

She lay under the tree and tried to sleep. She became aware of how many sounds the wood held: rustlings, scuttlings, a howl, a hoot, a tiny shriek. She was not afraid. She meant to stay in the forest forever and never see anybody again. Even if she knew something was going to eat her, she would not go back to the clearing where the hut had stood and where she had seen her father fall in midstride with an arrow through his throat ...

Moonlight sifted through the trees. There was a silver pepper of stars. The moonlight grew stronger, became silvery green, almost hot. Something blotted the light. Hanging above her was a blunt head. She sprang to her feet. It was a snake's head on a tall, thick stalk of neck rising from the coils of its own body. She saw the head coming down and was choked by the beating of her heart. She felt her legs being touched. She tried to run; her legs would not move. A swoon came upon her. She felt the body of the snake wrapping itself about her, strand upon living strand looping around her. Her arms were bound to her sides; she was encased in serpent.

She had seen one crush a deer once, and she knew that this was how they did it—looping about the victim, tightening the coils; making it soft enough to swallow. She did not scream. Nothing would make her scream. The snake's body was strange upon her—smooth, hard, and cool. She was growing warm in its leather hug. But she was not being crushed, not yet. Did a snake play with its victim like a cat? She could breathe without constriction but could not move. Now the wedge-shaped head was so close she could see its small eyes glittering in the moonlight. Softly it began to sing:

Another mother

*bore you ...
Has she something
for you?
Hush ... hiss ...
I leave a kiss
within your ear.
Listen, listen,
you shall hear,
what few have heard.
Listen, listen,
to beast and bird ...*

She felt the hard leather of its head on her cheek and a tickling in one ear, then the other. A piercing sweetness entered her through her ears; colored flame dancing down her body, all pressure gone as the loops melted away.

She whirled, calling, "Don't go!"

She chased the snake. It entered shadow. She sped after it, calling, "Come back! Come back! Oh, please."

It was gone.

She danced in the sifting moonlight. She heard an angry buzzing. It turned into words.

"Beware ... comes thief ... comes bear ..."

"Where? Where?"

"A white night, sisters. Rhoecus will seek us."

"Guard the hive, guard it well."

"Take wing. Take wing. Dive and sting."

"A white night. Prepare to fight. Rhoecus will seek us."

Palaemona looked for the voices. The moon rode in full blaze now, turning the trees to bone. One white tree had a black hole in its trunk. Three bees crisscrossed, diving into shadow and out.

"I know what they're saying," she thought. "I can understand the language of bees. How wonderful! But who *is* this Rhoecus who robs their hive?"

She saw a dark shape lumbering across the glade. Saw it rise terribly onto two legs, stand tall and thick, then drop again to all fours and pad toward

the tree with its rolling gait, and she knew it was a bear. Then she saw another shape running. It wore a dark tunic. She saw the blurred whiteness of legs, arms, a face. It sliced past the bear, which rose again and roared, teeth glinting. The runner did not pause but flung himself upon the hollow tree and began to climb with amazing speed. The black hole in the trunk broke into bits and became a swarm of bees, buzzing furiously, clotting about the climber's head and shoulders.

"They'll sting him to pieces," she thought.

One arm flailed, brushing away the bees; the other came out of the hole; a hand stuffed something into a pouch. He reached high, clutched a branch, and swung, swung. And Palaemona, gazing in wonder, saw a face catch the moonlight, the face of a youth, rapt with excitement. The bear stood under the tree, clawing the trunk, roaring. The young man swung out on the branch, let go, and flew in a long, arching leap past the bear, hit the ground running, and disappeared among the trees.

Palaemona darted after him. He was a very fast runner. Far behind she heard the bear roaring. She ran and ran, following the faint sounds far ahead. She broke out of the trees into another clearing where stood a little hut with lighted windows. She saw the boy go into the hut. She crept up to the window and looked in.

An old woman sat on a stool, taking a honeycomb from the boy's hand. She crammed it into her mouth and chomped furiously, honey dripping over her chin. She wiped her hands on her long gray hair and cackled.

"Thank you, Rhoecus. Did they sting you, my boy?"

"They broke their stingers on me, Mother."

"Are you hungry, Son?"

"We're both hungry, Mother."

"Milk in the jug, loaf on the hob—and honey, honey aplenty, hee hee hee!"

Palaemona wanted to keep watching them but suddenly found herself starving. She had not eaten since the middle of the day before. She left the hut and went back into the wood.

She saw a squirrel and heard herself say, "Fetch me some nuts, Brother," in a chattering little voice that she did not recognize as her own. "Little brother, I'm lost and hungry. Bring me some nuts."

“All gone—none left. Slim pickings, slim pickings,” said the squirrel. “There is a berry bush in that thicket yonder. You can eat your fill.”

“Thank you,” said Palaemona, who went off thinking,

“You’re lying, you furry little rat. You have nuts aplenty in your hoard.”

She found a bush loaded with berries and gorged herself, ate until she could eat no more. Now she was drowning in sleepiness. She stumbled toward the hut. Its windows were dark. She chose a tree at the edge of the clearing, lay down behind it, and fell into a deep sleep.

She arose early the next morning and waited until Rhoecus came out. He went among the trees and she followed him. She followed him all day long as he rambled the wood. He did not meet anyone. He fished and picked berries and poked into every hollow tree, looking for hives. She went where he went, stopped when he stopped, keeping herself hidden.

He went home for lunch, bearing a fish wrapped in wet leaves, berries, and a pouchful of honeycombs. Again Palaemona stationed herself at the window hole and saw the old woman stuffing herself. She left when she saw the lad stretch out on a pallet of rushes and go to sleep.

She wandered the woods alone. She found a stream and pulled reeds and plaited them into a little basket. She marked the location of various berry bushes. Acorns were easy to find but too hard to crack open with her teeth. She pounded them with a rock and ate their bitter kernels. For she did not wish to eat meat, or fish, or anything that had once been alive. Although she had banished it from her waking hours, a meaty face still hung upon her sleep, dripping blood.

Everywhere she went she spoke to animals. To birds, to squirrels, to rabbits, to larger animals also. She hailed a deer as it fled past. Curiosity broke its flowing stride. It turned in midair, bounded back to her, and said, “Did I hear right?”

“Do you mean did I call to you? I did. I want so much to make your acquaintance.”

“Where did you learn our language, little Sister?”

“A serpent licked my ear.”

“Oh, yes.”

She loved the bugling speech of deer. It was a young stag, glossy coated, horn proud.

“May I ride you?”

“Jump on.”

She laughed with joy and leaped onto his back. She slid up to his neck and grasped his antlers, holding tight, shouting. He went into a long flowing stride. She moved onto his head and perched between his horns as he swam a river. She could have ridden him forever but was afraid of wearying him with the violence of her joy.

She slid off on the farther bank of the river and said, “Thank you, Brother. That was a wonderful ride.”

“You are welcome, little one. You are so light I didn’t even feel you sitting up there.”

“Will I see you again?” she asked shyly.

“You will, you will,” he bugled, and leaped away.

Joy gave her courage then. She did what she had been afraid to do: She filled her basket with berries and followed the bear’s tracks until she saw him sidling along. She heard her voice turn to a rumbling growl. “Greetings, O lord of the forest. I bring you a gift of berries.”

The bear swerved his head and looked at her, rose to his full height, then squatted on his haunches, staring at her. “Who are you? *What* are you? Are you a person?”

“I’m a girl.”

“Where did you learn bear talk, O daughter of man?”

“A serpent licked my ear.”

“I see. I see. Bring me the berries then.”

She approached, moving slowly, and handed him the basket. He took it in one huge paw, and she thought he was going to swallow it whole. But he tipped the little basket, and the berries rolled into his maw.

“Thank you, girl.”

“Can we be friends, my lord? May I come and speak with you sometimes?”

“You may. You may. I like all kinds of berries. Also grubs, fish, honeycomb ...”

“I can’t promise you grubs or fish. I don’t like to kill things.”

“Why not?”

“They crawl back into your sleep.”

“Not my sleep. I sleep all winter long and nothing wakes me. But bring what you will. You are very polite. Farewell.”

The sun was low now. Palaemona raced back to the hut to be ready when Rhoecus came out. She didn't know why she had to follow him. It was a weary business. Sometimes it made her lonelier than ever just seeing him, never speaking to him. But she could not make herself known. She dared not trust anyone who was not an animal. Nevertheless, it eased her heart to look at him.

One day, he tramped a longer distance than usual and led her to a part of the wood she had not seen before. She heard a regular thudding and a voice weeping. Rhoecus lengthened his stride; she ran swiftly to keep him in view. She saw a man swinging an ax, chopping at an oak tree. And out of the tree came a musical voice, weeping and pleading:

"Don't. Don't chop it down. Please stop. It is my home. If you chop it down I will die."

"Come out and let me take a look at you then," said the axman.

"Will you stop chopping if I do?"

"I can tell you this: If you don't, I won't."

A green-clad figure, tall and pliant, came gliding out of the tree. The man leaned on his ax, grinning at her. Palaemona felt a spasm of hatred shake her. The way he was looking at the green-clad one reminded her of the robber she had killed.

Rhoecus had stepped into the shadow of another tree and was watching them.

"Well, you're a pretty one, aren't you?" said the man with the ax.

"I'm a dryad, good sir. My life is attached to the tree in which I dwell. If it falls, I die."

"Nonsense," said the man, laughing a phlegmy laugh. "I know how to keep you happy. But I've got to cut down this tree. Because I'm a woodsman, you see, and that's what I do; I cut down trees."

He swung his ax again. Chips flew. The dryad moaned.

"Drop that ax," called Rhoecus, stepping into view.

The woodsman—a hulking brute—stared at the lad, who was slender as a sapling and did not look at all dangerous.

"Are you speaking to me?" he said in amazement.

"To you, you greasy tree butcher."

"Why, you little meddler, I'll chop you into a thousand pieces and feed you to the crows."

Ax whirling, he rushed across the clearing to Rhoecus—who vanished. Palaemona saw that he had simply leaped up, caught a low branch and swung out of reach. The axman crouched, moving in a slow circle, seeking his enemy. “Where are you, you little wood louse? I thought you wanted to fight.”

The lad flung himself off the limb, landing square on the man’s shoulders, knocking the ax from his hand, bearing him to the ground. And before he could arise, the youth leaped away, snatched up the ax, and smote off the woodsman’s head.

The dryad laughed a high, keening, shriek of a laugh and kicked the head back toward its spouting neck. “He makes an ugly corpse,” she said. “But he’ll be picked clean by tomorrow.”

She glided toward Rhoecus, caught him by the hand, and smiled at him. “Thank you,” she said.

Palaemona saw how beautiful she was. She saw the dryad, who was taller than the boy, take his face between her long hands and slowly begin to kiss him—little nibbling kisses, and then a long kiss upon the lips. Her body seemed to twine like a vine about the boy. And Palaemona shuddered, confused by what she was feeling, unable to look away.

“Ah, my sweetling, my brave one,” she heard the dryad say. “I must leave you now, unfortunately. The day grows old, and I must join the train of Artemis tonight and go hunting with her. It is my night to run with the Goddess of the Silver Bow—I dare not be absent. But I long to be with you, my handsome little stranger, my brave one, my killer of brutes, who has saved my dwelling and my life. Meet me tomorrow, and you shall have a hero’s reward.”

“Where shall I meet you?” said Rhoecus. Palaemona could hear the hunger in his voice.

“I’ll send you a messenger who will tell you when and where. You will know by noon. But do not fail me.”

“Send your messenger. I’ll be there.”

The dryad kissed him again, glided back to her tree, and vanished.

The next morning, instead of going to the hut, Palaemona went to the oak tree, for she was eaten up by curiosity about the dryad. She wanted to suspect her of treachery, wanted to think she had been lying to Rhoecus and

would send no messenger. But, if she did send a messenger, then Palaemona very much wanted to know whom she would send.

Where the woodsman had fallen was a heap of scoured bones. He had been picked clean as the dryad had promised. Humming a wordless tune, the tree nymph wandered over to the bones and kicked them into a neat pile, then kicked leaves over them. Her humming became a buzzing, as Palaemona heard her call, “Come ... come ... come ...”

A fat bee flew to her, poising at face level, wings whirring—so black it looked purple. “I am here,” it buzzed. “What is your bidding?”

“I need a messenger to fly to my love, so I have called you, O honey maker. For who flies as swiftly as you? Fly then to Rhoecus—to the lad, Rhoecus, the sweet one, the brave one, and tell him to meet me at Cleft Rock three hours past noon.”

“Rhoecus. Cleft Rock. Three hours past noon.”

“Find him! Tell him! Fly ... fly!”

The bee circled her head twice, then streaked off. As it shot past Palaemona’s head, the girl heard it buzzing to itself, “Hive robber, beware.”

“She shouldn’t have sent a bee,” thought Palaemona. “They hate Rhoecus.”

And she flashed away, not to the hut, but to where she knew Rhoecus would be at this hour—swimming at the bend of the river where it ran deep. He was there, splashing, caroling to himself, diving, scrubbing himself with sand. Hidden behind a tree, she kept listening for the hum of the bee but heard nothing. Rhoecus had clad himself again and was sitting on the bank throwing pebbles into the water, watching the circles widen. He did not wear his keen hunter’s look; his lips were parted and his eyes dreaming. He arose and looked about, picked up a twig and snapped it, threw the pieces away. He patted together a wall of mud, then stamped it into the ground.

Suddenly, he began running. She followed him. He ran through the wood to his hut and burst in. “Mother! Mother!” he cried. “Has a messenger come?”

“Messenger?” she mumbled. “Have you brought me any honey? I haven’t eaten since breakfast. I crave something sweet.”

“Did anyone come for me, Mother? Did anyone come to tell me anything?”

“Who comes here, my son? No one. Why should they? We don’t want anyone. Go fetch me a honeycomb.”

He whirled and dashed out.

Palaemona was buffeted by different feelings. She was glad he was not meeting the dryad, but was sad because he was sad. And as she watched him waiting for the message that did not come, she pitied him more and more. “Shall I tell him myself?” she thought. “Appear before him and tell him where to meet her? He’ll be so happy to hear from her he won’t even notice me. Yes, I’ll tell him.”

But she could not bring herself to do it. A magic circle had been drawn about the lovers, and she was forever outside. She must be forever invisible to him. She could not break that circle. She glanced at the sun. “Almost three hours past noon,” she said to herself. “I can’t tell him, but I’ll go to Cleft Rock and tell her that the bad bee never delivered her message. Then she can find him herself. They shall be happy together, and I’ll go to another part of the forest.”

She left Rhoecus then and ran as fast as she could to Cleft Rock. When she got there, she found the dryad standing very still, her face pale and hard as she listened to the bee who was circling her head.

“I found Rhoecus,” said the bee. “I found him as you bade me and told him to meet you here at three hours past noon. But he brushed me away, crying, ‘Let her wait then, the fool, for I will never come. I love none but my mother, and never shall.’”

“You lie,” whispered the dryad. “He loves me. He killed my enemy and saved my life. He kissed me sweet as apples. Evil little wretch, why do you lie?”

“Lady of the Oak, I do not lie. I tell only the truth, I swear it. If you do not believe he spurns your love, then wait here and see if he comes.”

The bee flew away. “I’ll tell her now,” thought Palaemona, and was about to go to the rock when the dryad suddenly shrieked. She stamped and moaned and moaned, and tore her hair. Her face had turned green, almost the color of her dress.

“It did not lie,” she cried. “If he loved me he would be here. Lovers hasten to their first tryst. No—he brushed off my messenger and laughed at my love. Well, the next bee that comes to him he shall not ignore.”

As Palaemona watched in horror, the dryad raised her arms toward the sky, whirled faster and faster until she was a blur of green. The green darkened. Her long form rose, pulling in on itself, rolling itself into a different shape. And there hung a bee, an enormous one, greenish black, big as a hawk. Glistening from its tail was a great naked sting, the size of a spur, needle sharp.

“Death ... death ... death,” hummed the enormous bee, and flew away so fast it seemed to vanish.

Palaemona started to race toward the hut, then stopped. “No, he won’t be there. He’ll be searching for her, poor lad. He’ll be at the oak tree waiting for her. She’s going to the hut for him. I’ll get to the oak first and warn him.”

She raced toward the oak tree. Though she had run far that day, now she ran faster than she had ever run before. But it was a long way, and the sun was sinking as she reached the oak. Sure enough, there was the lad waiting.

“Rhoecus!” she called. “Rhoecus!”

She saw his face grow radiant, and thought, “He thinks it’s her calling. That’s why he’s smiling.”

Then she saw his smile disappear, saw him spring to his feet. Heard a loud vicious humming. The huge bee flew straight at him. He tried to cover his face with his hands, but the bee plunged its terrible shining sting into the boy’s chest. When his arms fell to cover his chest, the bee tilted, stabbing his neck again and again, as the humming grew louder and louder and mingled with the boy’s screams.

Before she knew what she was doing, Palaemona found herself there, beating at the bee with a stick. She saw the ghastly, many-faced glitter of the bee’s magnified eyes—and felt something stab her forearm. Icy coldness spread through her. Darkness swarmed.

She fell beside the boy. With her last strength she pulled her arm to her mouth and tried to suck out the poison. She sucked and spat, sucked and spat, feeling herself go under. She saw a bloated hairy blackness clinging to a branch above the boy’s head. Dreamily Palaemona heard it sob with the dryad’s voice. And in the last glimmer of her sense, saw it curl up and plunge the sting into its own body again and again and again.

The green body of the dryad fell on the other side of Rhoecus. Palaemona saw it fall as she sank into total darkness.

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The Haunted Healer

Only where the moon trembled in the river was the black skiff briefly visible. It was going too fast to be drifting in that slow current, yet it bore no sail, no oars dipped. Was someone in it? It passed too quickly to tell. And when it rounded the bend past the drowned moon, it was engulfed in darkness.

But someone did ride that skiff, one who did not wish to be seen. He sat in the stern wrapped in a black cloak, face pulled into its hood, hands tucked under its skirt, so that no glimmer of him could be seen. The occasional hissing word he spoke could scarcely be distinguished from the wind among the reeds. It was serpent talk he spoke, a serpent he was speaking to. The great snake's tail was hooked into a ring bolted into the bow, the entire thirty-foot length of it lay awash as it pulled the skiff down the river. Frogs hopped frantically onto shore, fish dived, birds grew still as the serpent rippled by. The only sound the man heard was a buzzing of two bees sipping willow blossoms.

A tiny sound, but it made the man hiss something to the snake, who stopped swimming and moved its tail so that the skiff floated under the overhanging willow. The man listened intently to what the bees were saying, then hissed again. The serpent glided to shore, beaching the boat. The man climbed out and began to hurry through the trees, the serpent slithering alongside. But the man could not go fast; he limped. He spoke again to the snake, who immediately flowed up a tree, then swung down from a branch, and the man climbed him like a rope. He rode the serpent then as the strand of living muscle thrust itself from tree to tree in a smooth rush, going so swiftly that the man had to put his arms over his face to ward off the whipping branches.

They came to a clearing in the forest. There stood a huge oak. Under it lay three bodies. The man hissed. The snake wrapped itself about a limb and let itself hang to the ground, and the man slid down.

Palaemona felt herself being pulled up through fathoms of darkness. It was as if someone had noosed her while she was swimming underwater and was pulling her up before she was ready. She arched her body, trying to curve downward into a dive again, trying to plunge back into that icy nullity.

“Convulsion,” she heard someone mutter.

She felt hands upon her, firm hands swimming over her body, spreading an oily warmth. Mercilessly, light and heat invaded her, piercing her to the marrow, dragging her up into the agony of consciousness. She opened her eyes. A face floated above her. White hair, white beard, burning black eyes. A serpent’s head dipped in next to the man’s head and poised there looking down at her. She tried to greet him but couldn’t make her voice work.

The man’s wrinkles kindled; he smiled, snag-toothed. She saw him lift a vial and pour a little oil into the cup of his hand. His hands came down on her again. They were very gentle, hard behind the softness, moving with great authority upon her belly, her legs, her shoulders, her chest. She felt the soles of her feet being massaged, and each arm slowly along its whole length, wrist and knuckle and palm. Fingers forked her nose, moving down over cheekbones, over lips and chin. And where the hands moved they dragged sleep behind them. She slid into a different darkness.

When she awoke again, the light had changed. It had been torchlight before, flickering and ruddy; now there was a pale seepage from one side, and against it, the man’s head, black as a cutout. She was in a cave, she saw. She lay on a pile of rushes; he was sitting at the mouth of the cave, chin on chest, asleep. The serpent was gone.

She lay there, breathing easily, smelling the damp mustiness of the cave and the sweet odor of freshly cut rushes. There was a heaviness on her arm. She turned her head to look at it. The arm was bandaged. She lifted it, flexed it; there was a soreness. She sat up, trying to make no noise. She stared at the sleeping man, impatient of the faulty light because all she could see was his hair and beard.

Something flickered behind his head. The flicker became a swarm. A foul stench filled the cave. They were *bats*. They had leathery wings. Not bats.

They had brass claws and tiny hag faces. She screamed. They screamed. The man was on his feet. He scooped up two rocks and clapped them together, catching one of the things between; it fell to the ground but was not crushed. It scuttled out, trailing one wing. They circled his head, diving at him, trying to gouge his face with their brass claws. He clapped his rocks furiously. They screamed in chorus and flew away. He hurled the rocks after them.

He turned to her. "Come," he said. "It stinks in here."

He left the cave and she followed. She could not believe that so deep a voice had come out of this small, emaciated, limping man. He sat cross-legged twirling a fire stick into a log. A spark winked; he blew on it gently, fed it twigs. It fattened into flame. He dipped into his pouch and pinched out some dust, which he dropped onto the fire. A fragrance arose. He waved his hand, sending the smoke into the mouth of the cave.

"That will drive out the stench," he said.

"What were they?" she said. "What were those things?"

"Empusae."

"What's that?"

"They are the small demons who attend Hecate, Queen of the Harpies, as she goes her rounds in Tartarus tormenting the shades. These scurvy creatures have one donkey's hoof each, and one brass hoof. Their hands are claws; they have leather wings. Sometimes they are sent up here on special errands."

"What kind of errands?"

"The kind you saw. They are sent to torment me, in the first place; also to report what I am doing."

"Why? Why should anyone want to torment you?"

"They serve Hecate. Hecate serves Hades, King of the Dead. And Hades hates me."

The serpent thrust swiftly between them. He cast a single loop about Palaemona's shoulders, put his hard head against her cheek, then whisked away and coiled between them, rising out of his coils until his head was level with the man's. "Did they come again?" the snake asked.

"They did," said the man.

"So much for black cloaks and night marches. It's no good; they find you wherever they go. You simply must not go anywhere."

“Do I have a choice?” said the man.

“Choice? You? Are you not the great spokesman for choice, even among the helpless? Are you not he who preaches that illness itself is a matter of choice?”

“Sometimes I regret having taught you logic,” said the man.

“I wish I could teach you the essence of serpent lore, which is self-preservation.”

“Why does Hades hate you?” said Palaemona.

“My eloquent friend will tell you,” said the man. “Stand up, please.”

The man knelt as she stood and put his ear to her chest, listened, then moved it to another place. She stared at the white head under her eyes; she could see the pink skull underneath and smell its piney smell. She clung to the snake’s hissing voice.

“This man is Melampus, the healer. So miraculous are his skills that he pulls people back from the brink of death. In fact, he has been known to retrieve those who have gone over the brink. Thus, he robs Hades of subjects and is loathed by that dread lord. Empusae were sent against him today. The next time it may be Furies, and they are a different matter, a thousand times worse. They’ll scourge the flesh from his bones. His only hope is to let the dying die and not meddle with the dead at all.”

“True, true,” muttered the man. He ruffled Palaemona’s hair and arose. “You’re all right, my girl. You’ll be able to take that bandage off in a day or so.”

“Let us go, Master,” said the serpent. “The sooner we’re back in Thessaly, the better. You’ll have to stay there no matter how many fishermen get their stupid heads bashed in.” The serpent turned to Palaemona. “He promised me he’d keep out of sight until Hades cooled off. But this message came—that the river clans here had begun to fight over fishing grounds, and battered bodies were strewn about the banks. So he forgot all his promises.”

“I took precautions,” said Melampus. “I came in deepest secrecy. No welcome, no torches, no display. Slipped in, worked fast, and slipped out.”

“Deepest secrecy,” said the serpent. “That’s why the Empusae knew exactly where to find you.”

“They wouldn’t have known if we hadn’t stopped to do what had to be done.”

“Yes,” said the serpent. “We would have been in Thessaly by now except he heard some bees bragging about people stung to death and the honor of the hive upheld. So the good doctor left his skiff and came inland, restored the others and worked on you all night. Delighted to see that you’re yourself again, little one, but now I must get him into hiding before Hades learns that he has been deprived of three perfectly good corpses in one night.”

Melampus had put on his black cloak. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Take me with you,” said the girl.

“What?”

“I want to go with you.”

“Oh, no!”

“Please, sir, I’m so lonesome. The people I lived with, the woodsman’s family, were all killed or kidnapped—all except me. And I have no friends here except a few animals ... and this young man who doesn’t even know he’s my friend. So please take me.”

“Impossible.”

“Please. I need to go with you.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking. I live alone except for this fellow now and then, and some other attendant beasts. Because of Hades’ anger I don’t even treat humans anymore, if I can avoid it. Just animals. I live the simplest, roughest kind of life.”

“Sounds wonderful. Please take me.”

She moved close but did not dare touch him. She turned her face up so that he could see all she meant.

“As I see it, doctor,” said the serpent, “she might be useful. I licked her ears, you know. She understands the language of beast and bird. You could use an unsalaried assistant in that unpaid practice of yours.”

“Why did you come to her with the gift of tongues?”

“I was sent.”

“I see.”

He had not looked down into her face. Now he did. The black fire of his eyes stabbed down into hers. “By all the fiends of hell, have I not troubles enough that I have to take on this weird little runaway?”

She shivered in the rough music of his voice.

“Oh, thank you,” she whispered.

Again that night the black skiff slid down the river, towed by the serpent. There was no moon, and Melampus sat in the stern with his head unhooded. Palaemona crouched in the bow, listening to the frogs and the birds who fell silent as the snake passed. This smooth rush through the darkness, the faint chorus of strange, intelligible voices resembled the voyages of sleep, and she was terrified lest she awake in the woodsman's hut, having dreamed the bloody head and swift Rhoecus and the giant bee—having dreamed the hands of Melampus. Must she awake to find herself as she had been before dread and joy? But she was awake; it was all happening. She was on her way to Thessaly with him. And the joy swelled until she could not sit still. She wanted to laugh, shout, sing. She wanted to jump in the river and swim. But she had been told that she must not even whisper until they came out of the river into the sea.

Her thoughts began to float. She bit her hand to keep herself awake. She resolved not to sleep until they reached Thessaly. Until then there was still some chance she might awaken into the old mode—dwarfed, frozen, calling after playmates who ran away.

The trees paled; birds clamored. Palaemona slept. They passed through the mouth of the river and into the sea. The serpent pulled the boat around a headland and held it still as Melampus raised sail and fixed a rudder oar. The serpent swam to the stern and raised his head.

“I must go now,” he said.

“Thank you, friend,” said Melampus.

“I'll come to you as soon as I can.”

“I know.”

“Please go into hiding.”

“I mean to keep out of sight.”

“Farewell,” said the snake, and slid away.

Palaemona awoke to a tilting sail and a new movement—a surge and a lilt. She rubbed her eyes. They had come out of the darkness into a great wash of light. Melampus sat in the stern, steering with a big, hinged oar. The wind tugged at his hair and beard.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Where did the serpent go?”

“To his master.”

“Doesn't he belong to you?”

“No one owns him, not even Apollo, whom he serves. He is an oracular serpent, one of the seven sacred pythons of Delphi. But he is the wiliest of all, and other gods borrow him for special tasks. Befriending me was his own idea. He comes to me whenever he can, but it cannot be often, for I am no favorite of the gods.”

“I thought only Hades hated you.”

“He is the worst.”

“Has he always pursued you?”

“Well, ever since I took up the family trade, which I started training for when I was a lad. Actually, the feud goes back much farther. It began with my ancestor, Asclepius, who was a healer such as the world has never seen. He answered every call, took no fee, and descended upon battlefields more swiftly than the vultures to work among the wounded. He saved so many people that he kindled the wrath of Hades, that black curdling rage that will pursue the Asclepiads unto the last generation ...”

He fell silent, and gazed across the water.

“Tell! Tell!” cried Palaemona.

“Well,” said the man, “Hades came like a whirlwind out of Tartarus, roaring up the slope of Olympus. He appeared before Zeus and lodged his complaint. The King of the Gods listened attentively to his eldest brother, who accused Asclepius of trespass, robbery, and sacrilege, of offending the dignity of all the gods by challenging the authority of any god.

“Zeus nodded. He hurled a thunderbolt. Asclepius was in a hut in Thessaly, tending a shepherd lad who had been crushed by a falling rock. Thunder spoke from a clear sky. A tongue of flame hooked down, touching the straw roof of the hut. It flared like a torch. Asclepius was burned to death. The shepherd also, and his parents, and his dog.”

“I hate Zeus!” cried the girl.

“Hush! Never say that.”

“I don’t care! I do! I hate Hades and I hate Zeus.”

He clapped his hand over her mouth. “Hush, I said.” She began to weep. He drew her down to his lap and held her. A dolphin leaped clear over the boat. The sea was a million points of light. He stroked her hair. She tried to stop crying but could not. She thought of Asclepius—whom she pictured as looking exactly like Melampus—saw the flames, heard the screams of the shepherd lad. Tears poured down her face and into her mouth.

He pushed her off his lap and stood up, holding her by the arms. "You know," he said, "I think you've grown taller." She stopped crying. "Look," he said, "we met only three days ago. You came just to here on me. Remember? Now you come up to here. You've grown that much in three days."

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "You're just trying to ..."

"I'll tell you why. It's because you did the other kind of crying."

"What do you mean?"

"There are two kinds. Mostly we weep because we are sorry for ourselves. And these tears of self-pity diminish us. But there is another kind of grief, one that pierces an unsullied heart when others suffer. Such tears enlarge us. You weep for Asclepius dead. And you grow, my child."

She stared at him silently.

"And you know what?"

"What?"

"I shall tell you many sad stories, and we shall catch your tears in a jug and pour them into a barrel. When you have a barreland you may drink it, and—"

She whipped away from him, huddling in the boat's stern, looking back at the wake. "A barrel isn't enough," she said. "I'm so hatefully small I'd have to drink a lakeful."

"Careful," he said. "You're beginning to grieve for yourself. You'll shrink again."

"I don't care."

"Yes, you do. So do I."

Her yellow eyes flared. He smiled. "Now Palaemona, if you're very good and believe all my sad stories and weep barrelsful, you shall drink of them. And instead of being the smallest girl in the world, you will be the tallest."

He saw that her face was wet. He drew her to him and kissed her eyes. "Too salty to drink," he said.

She shuddered. His lips were gentle and cold, like those of a nurse kissing a child.

The Garden

Palaemona had not eaten meat since seeing the flies clot on the head she had broken with a rock. At first she thought her distaste would vanish with time. But then she had learned the language of animals, and it became unthinkable to eat anything she could talk to. Melampus, who had conversed with bird and beast since childhood, also refrained from meat, and had come to consider a spare diet essential to health. He did not forbid meat to his patients, but encouraged substitutes such as cheese, nuts, and unfertilized eggs.

It was important then to grow a garden near the cave in which they dwelt, an abandoned bear's den in a foothill of Mount Pelion. Melampus dug the garden in a flat, sunny spot near the base of the hill and, after some weeks, left it wholly in Palaemona's care. During her lonely childhood she had helped the woodsman's wife care for a kitchen garden, and knew about mulching, manuring, weeding—but Melampus taught her much more. He taught her to listen to the plants. *Listen* isn't quite the right word, however, for much of what they uttered could not be heard; most of it was gesture, which he taught her to read. It is a difficult language, but less so when you have learned to converse with a creature like a turtle, who has almost nothing to say and says it badly.

She learned the language of plants and was able to understand when they told her of their changing needs in all weathers and all seasons. She grew beans, onions, tomatoes, pepper, garlic. She had a garden of herbs and a small stand of barley. She did not have a separate flower garden because Melampus had taught her that certain flowers sowed among the rows of the vegetable patch served to drive away harmful insects.

Melampus also kept goats: three milk goats and a billy goat. They also fell into her keeping. Being able to speak to them, she controlled them by

voice and did not need the services of the big shaggy dog whom she kept for companionship, and who insisted nevertheless in officiously herding the goats here and there.

So her days were very full, although Melampus was rarely there. Despite the danger, he had not stopped treating humans. His only bow to prudence was in trying to limit his practice to the poor and obscure, people whom Hades would be less likely to notice had been pulled out of his clutch. The shepherds' byres and farmers' huts he visited were miles apart, and his rounds consumed the daylight hours. But he returned to the cave each night and, no matter how weary he was, always had a meal with Palaemona and spent some hours talking to her.

He played the lyre superbly, and taught her to play. And, as he touched the strings in the firelit cave, his deep voice wove itself in and out of the simple melody, singing her the old, old story-songs of Thessaly.

Sometimes, he played without speaking. At such time, she knew, he liked her to ask him questions so that he might build a story upon the answer. It was his way of teaching; he preferred to do so without seeming to. This night she said, "Tell me about the centaurs. Are they really half person, half horse?"

"Not really."

"Is it all a lie?"

"Not exactly. It's a rumor based on a mistake. Actually, I'm the reason that story started. In the mountains up there live some very quarrelsome tribes, always invading each other's hunting grounds. So between border skirmishes and tribal feuds, not to mention private quarrels, I get a lot of bone setting and wound stitching to do."

"Where do the centaurs come in?"

"I'm getting to them. It's rough country up there, and I've been lame since birth, so I depend for transportation on the kindly oreads, who are mountain nymphs, you know—huge powerful lasses, very kind and generous if they like you. And when I'm faced with a long journey one of them always carries me on her back. So rumors spread about creatures that were half woman, half mare. And the story grew as stories do, and became the legend of the centaurs."

"Will you take me to see them sometime?"

"Of course, if you want to go."

“Yes, I want to.”

“My next trip then. But I don’t quite know when that will be. Black fever has flared in the lowlands, and I’ll be busy there.”

“Will you take me to the lowlands?”

“Too much fever.”

“If I catch it you’ll make me better.”

“If you don’t I won’t have to. It’s a thing to avoid. Besides, who will take care of the garden?”

“Will you be gone long?”

“I’ll try to come back every fourth night unless things get worse. If that happens, I’ll send word to you.”

Living with Melampus in this way, tending the garden, roaming hill and field and wood, Palaemona grew happier and happier. And happiness began to make her beautiful. She had always been quick; now she was honed to a marvelous grace. She ran over the meadow without bending the grass. Her hair glimmered like cobwebs in the moonlight, her eyes were two pools of molten gold. Best of all was her laughter. It burbled everywhere, full of joyous rills and trills, nourishing itself upon its own glee. For when she heard herself laughing, this child who had so rarely smiled thrilled to a pleasure of self-awareness, and laughed more joyously than ever.

But nothing attracts trouble like happiness. And now, in the midst of Palaemona’s blossoming joy, something happened that was to bear the most terrible consequences.

Transformation

The earth split near the foot of Mount Pelion. Six black horses charged out of the chasm, drawing a black chariot behind them. In the chariot towered a black-caped figure. It was Hades traveling from Tartarus to Olympus for a council of the gods. As the horses galloped up a slope of sky, he chanced to notice Palaemona frolicking in the field, riding a goat, the dog chasing her. She was laughing and the dog was barking.

Now it must be understood that Hades, somber King of the Land Beyond Death, preferred tiny unripe maidens. It was thus, upon a legendary springtide, that he saw Persephone, only daughter of the harvest queen, playing with her wild paint pots among the flowers, and was smitten by a reckless passion, and abducted her, starting a feud that was to rock Olympus. But that had been centuries before. The April child was now Matron of the Dark Kingdom, each year becoming more and more like her mother, Demeter, whom Hades loathed more than any creature on earth, above it, or beneath it. So he was ripe for another unripe maiden.

His melancholy heart was pierced by Palaemona's laughter. Her tininess intoxicated him. When he returned to Tartarus he sent for his chief adviser, the Harpy queen, Hecate. He described Palaemona to her, and how he felt.

"Well, my lord, if you want her, take her. It's simple enough."

"Not so simple," said Hades. "I could abduct her, of course. But I don't want to do it that way. I've taken a real fancy to her. I don't want her so stupefied by fear that she can't learn to love me. I want her fully alive, fully responsive. I want to hear that joyous laughter and know that I'm the cause of it."

"You are right; not so simple," said Hecate.

"How can I make her love me?"

“I’ll send someone up there to observe her ways, and report to you as soon as I have learned anything.”

Some days later Hecate came to him and said: “I regret to tell you, Majesty, it will be very difficult to persuade that child to love you. She worships someone else.”

“Who?” roared Hades.

“Melampus.”

“Melampus! Melampus the healer?”

“The same.”

“Is there to be no end to his trespass? Did I not give orders that he be taken? I haven’t heard any complaints about him lately, so I thought he must be down here somewhere.”

“He’s alive. He dwells in Thessaly, in a cave near where you saw the girl.”

“Then go get him.”

“The Great Charter permits us to take only the dead,” said Hecate.

“Well, kill him and he’ll be dead. Bring him down and spit him over our slowest fire to roast through eternity.”

“Forgive me for contradicting you, O my master, but for your purposes that would be the worst possible course. Palaemona is not a woman grown. She has not learned to compromise with life and death. She is a pure-hearted child, may the breed be cursed. This is her first love, uncarnal still. She worships his personality, the idea of him. If he is suddenly taken from her, it will cripple her for love, and you will have no pleasure from her.”

“What can I do then? Does my dread authority confer on me no real power?”

“There is much you can do, O Lord of Reprisals. If she herself stops loving Melampus, then she will be ready for another to take his place.”

“How can I make her stop loving him?”

“By changing him beyond her recognition.”

“How do I do that?”

“There I cannot advise you,” said Hecate. “If he were one of those who could be changed by pain, I would know exactly how to proceed. But he is much too strong for that. His spare frame absorbs incredible punishment. I know. I have sent my fiends against him for years at your behest. But he is a kind of hero. He draws inspiration from ordeal. ‘No’ makes him go.”

“Very well,” said Hades. “I shall take the matter under advisement. Thank you.”

Hades pondered the words of Hecate. “Change him, eh, so that she no longer loves him. Yes, but how? I shall have to consult an expert.”

Thereupon he sent a messenger to summon Thalia, Muse of Comedy, Lady of Masks, Mistress of Transformations. Now, one would have thought that this lovely laughing goddess would have loathed the sullen Hades. In fact, she owed him a favor. Some time before, she had amused herself with one of her own performers, a young tumbler—who was so excited by the smiles of the Muse that he tried to do what had never been done before, turn five somersaults in the air—but did only four and a half, and broke his neck. Thalia rushed to Hades and pleaded with him to restore the lad to her. Now, it was notorious that Hades never gave up anyone he had claimed, but he was touched to indulgence by her winsome grace. He yielded his claim on the young man and had Hermes conduct him back over the river Styx, up through the cleft of Avernus, to the grove of the Muses atop Parnassus. Later, the reprieved tumbler tried to rekindle Thalia’s waning affections by trying the five-somersault trick again. This time, grown rusty, he achieved only four and broke his back—was taken to Tartarus and languished there, unredeemed. For Thalia now favored a juggler.

Still, when she received the summons, Thalia was very much aware that she owed Hades a debt, and he was not the kind of creditor she wanted dunning her. So she went swiftly to the place of rendezvous, a grove near the shores of the bottomless lake, Avernus. She found the towering, black-caped figure waiting for her, his face harrowed as if he were basting in one of his own ovens. She knelt and kissed his huge knotted hand, and kept it between her own, fondling it, listening very intently to what he had to say.

When he had finished, she said: “That hell hag of yours gave you good counsel. Transformation is clearly indicated.”

“Then, can I leave the matter in your hands, O my Lady of the Masks?”

“I’ll do my best, of course. But it’s a difficult task. Not at all a matter of simple physical transformation.”

“I should think not,” said Hades. “He’s a miserable specimen—old, starved-looking, lame. I should think any change in appearance would improve him.”

“But she wouldn’t think so,” said Thalia. “She loves him the way he is.”

“Granted! Granted! Then change the way he is. I don’t care how it’s done, but do it.”

“I met him once, you know. My elder sister, Terpsichore, dismayed by the approach of a certain birthday and trying to prove herself as young as ever, danced so wildly with Silenus that she fractured both legs. Melampus was sent for. He came to Mount Helicon and set her legs so skillfully that in a day she was dancing on her splints. A remarkable man.”

“Yes,” said Hades. “And remarkable shall be his torments when I can claim his shade. Tell me plainly: Despite the difficulties, can you change him so that she no longer loves him?”

“What we shall have to do is coarsen him beyond her recognition. Work a total change in him inwardly—which means of course that he will change outwardly as well. Such a transformation lies beyond my own powers. But so great is my regard for you, my dear lord, that I shall implore my mother, Mnemosyne, to help me. I shall ask her to wipe out his memories and replace them with a new set. Then we shall be able to fabricate a new personality for him. Deprive him of his genius and his occupation. Dedicate him to trivia. Diminish him until she knows him no longer.”

“I shall be very grateful to you,” said Hades. “And, as you know, my gratitude can take useful forms.”

“My reward lies in serving you, O Sovereign of the Dread Realm.”

She kissed his hand again and whirled away, singing.

When Palaemona came home from the woods that summer evening she found her garden paved over and a sentry walking his post. Behind him, half visible in the twilight, glimmered a tall brass gate. Up the slope where the cave had been stood a stone castle.

“What happened?” she cried to the sentry. “Where’s Melampus?”

“Are you the princess?”

“I am Palaemona.”

“His lordship awaits you.”

Behind the gates lay a courtyard. A flagged path wound uphill to the castle. Other sentries, holding huge, spike-collared wolfhounds, guarded the portals. She spoke her name, and they gave way before her.

She felt her garment changing upon her. Her old, torn, berry-stained shift became a silken gown, dusk blue, shot with lilac. Bracelets clasped her

wrists. She felt a delicate chain about her neck and the cold touch of a jewel upon her breastbone.

She found him sprawled in a chair in a rude banquet hall. Dogs gnawed bones. Three unhelmeted men at arms cast dice in a corner. The place reeked of meat and wine. Melampus was swigging from a golden cup. He beckoned her. She walked slowly toward him. He kissed her and sat half-embracing her as she stood at his chair. He looked younger. His face was bloated and red, his breath heavy with wine. Through all the changes, though, she still saw Melampus. She stood there in the circle of his arm, basking in the heat of his body. She did not question him. He had always told her what she had to know, and his information had always been utterly new. She expected the unexpected. Love had so altered her that she took lesser transformations without surprise. So she accepted the change in his appearance, the change from cave to castle. She wondered about her garden.

“Melampus,” she murmured.

“Call me Father.”

“Why?”

“You’re my daughter, are you not?”

So that had changed too. She didn’t care. She wanted to be whatever he wanted.

“Go fill my cup like a good girl.”

“Yes, Father.”

Palaemona dwelt in the castle. She was bewildered but acceptant. She planted another garden in a sunny corner of the courtyard beyond the flagstones. Her goats had been given into the care of a goatherd who grazed them in the field where she was no longer allowed to go. But her sheepdog was with her unchanged. She saw more of Melampus than she had before. He was no longer a healer. What he did she did not know; he seemed to be some sort of petty chieftain. He was usually half drunk. He told her no more stories, but was more affectionate—holding her on his lap, stroking her face, and kissing her hair. He was her father and she was his daughter. And she was happy. The stream of her laughter ran its music through the castle, and if she harbored a doubt or a grief, no one knew it.

Now, Melampus had forbidden her to go beyond the walls without an escort of armed men, for the countryside had grown dangerous. Bandits

roamed. And there was a tale of one, more terrible, who did not roam. He was known as the Bullman. He was huge, bristle haired, red eyed—an ugly brute who plowed his field with two enormous bulls. He seized passersby and stripped them of their purses. Then he would unhitch his bulls and bind the victim's arms to the back of one beast and his legs to the back of the other—and then whip the bulls so that they ran in opposite directions. Bones cracked, flesh tore; each bull dragged half a body behind it. And blood watered the furrows. Sometimes, when the wind was right, Palaemona heard a thin screaming.

A restlessness grew in her. She longed to wander the wood as she once had done, accompanied by no one but her dog. But she did not wish to disobey Melampus, and curbed her longing.

Then one day he left the castle with a troop of horsemen and rode up into the hills. He was gone for three days. On the fourth day, Palaemona, watching from the wall, saw a veil of dust and horsemen riding. One of them led Melampus's horse. Her breath caught in her throat. A riderless horse meant a fallen rider. Then she saw him astride the shoulders of a towering young woman. He leaned back, laughing and shouting, clutching the braids of her long hair as if they were reins. Behind them trotted two other huge girls, tossing a wine barrel from one to the other, drinking as they ran.

So the mountain nymphs came to the castle. They lived in the stable, and Melampus rode them every day in turn. Palaemona saw less of him, and her restlessness grew.

One day when no one was looking she slipped through the gate and sped downhill into the woods. All day she wandered, picking wildflowers. In the heat of the day she went to the river. She cast off her clothes and dived deep, holding her breath and circling, feeling her fevers cool in the greenish dusk of the waters. It was late afternoon when she left the river. She was not ready to return to the castle and wandered back by a roundabout way. She was at the edge of the forest, near a field. She heard someone scream. She crept slowly from tree to tree and peered into the clearing.

It was a man screaming. He lay on the ground. A much larger man knelt on his chest, pummeling his face. Two enormous bulls stood nearby, wooden halters about their necks, reins trailing. They cropped grass near an iron plow. The huge man arose, lifting the smaller one bodily, hurling him

to the ground again between the bulls. He pushed the bulls tail to tail and tied the smaller man's feet to the reins of one bull, his wrists to the reins of the other. Then he lifted a cudgel in each hand and struck the rumps of the bulls—who galloped off in opposite directions.

There was a horrid screaming that sank to a gurgling moan. Palaemona heard bone cracking and the small ripping of flesh, saw the body part in the middle and blood spout as the bulls galloped to the opposite ends of the field. They turned quietly and walked back, dragging the body stumps behind, and began to crop the bloody grass.

At the edge of the field was a hut and a stall. Palaemona watched as the man took the halters off the bulls and drove them into their stall. Then he went into the hut.

She ran back to the castle as fast as she could. Ran into the banquet hall where Melampus sat drinking from his golden cup. "Father, Father!" she cried. "I saw a dreadful thing. I disobeyed you, dear Father, and went into the woods alone. And I came to a field and saw a man tying another man to two big bulls, and—and—" She burst into wild sobbing and could not go on.

He lifted her to his lap and stroked her hair. "Do not weep," he said. "Little daughter, do not weep.... Sunny little thing, you have not wept in all the days I have known you. You were rash, very rash, but you paid too heavily for it. You have seen the Bullman at work."

"It's so terrible," she said. "So ugly and foul. Can't you stop it? I've been hearing screams at night. I didn't know what they meant, but now I do."

"I'll send for this Bullman immediately," he said. "You shall hear no more screams, my girl."

"Thank you, Father."

"Now let me see you smile."

She gulped back her tears and smiled.

"Let me hear you laugh."

He tickled her. She laughed. "Ah, the sweetest sound in all the world," he cried. He kissed her. "Run off now. But remember, don't go out the gate again."

Melampus instructed his men. They went down to the killing ground, fettered the Bullman, and brought him in, slavered and bloody handed. He showed no fear as he faced Melampus.

“I’m only trying to earn a living,” he said.

“By robbery and murder?”

“What can I do? I’m a robber and murderer.”

“I can do something,” said Melampus. “I can order your head chopped off.”

“You wouldn’t do that!” cried the man.

“Any reason why not?”

“A sackful of reasons. Five hundred of them, all gold. A half-year’s take is buried in a secret place.”

“Are you trying to bribe me?”

“I’m trying to save my life. I can’t think of any other way.”

“No, this does seem the best way. My coffers are empty and my wine casks dry. In the name of thirst and justice I fine you five hundred pieces of gold.”

“Thank you, your honor.”

“But I must ask you to change your place of business. The screams are keeping us awake.”

“There’s a field a mile west. I’ll take my bulls there.”

“Very well, expect to be summoned six months from now for a review of your case.”

“Yes, your lordship. I’ll start saving.”

The Stretching

That night Palaemona heard no screams. She was very pleased. The silence was like a song sung to her by Melampus, who sang no more.

The next day Melampus's steward visited the Bullman and was given a sack of gold. Some hours later a great ox-drawn wagon loaded with empty wine casks went forth from the castle. When it rolled back through the gates that evening the casks were full.

The banquet hall rocked with revelry that night. Melampus made up for a week's drought by drinking off cup after cup of undiluted wine. He drank himself into a stupor, finally into insensibility. Fragments of song drifted up to Palaemona in her chamber. She listened only for his voice threading among the shouts and the sounds of breaking crockery. She heard the loud braying laughter of the oreads. She fell asleep clinging to his voice.

Melampus was sick and disgusted when he woke up the next morning—a lovely sunny day it was, but the brightness only made his head ache. Just as he was dragging himself out of bed he heard Palaemona laughing. The clear, joyous sound went through his head like a lance. He rushed from his room and roared at her as she danced down the hallway.

“What are you laughing at? I don't see anything funny.”

The girl stopped laughing. She looked at him as if she had never seen him before. She turned swiftly and ran out of his sight. From that hour no one in the castle heard her laugh again.

There was nothing for her now but silence. The comic dance of leaf shadows was blown away by the blast of his voice. The joke of young things—of puppy, lamb, and puffed-up frog—was darkened by his anger. Streams hissed instead of giggling; the birds did not sing but mourned in different voices.

She took to following him everywhere to spy upon the force that had robbed her of laughter. So light was her foot—she flitted so quickly from tree to tree and knew so well how to melt into shadows—that he never actually saw her following. He felt the pressure of a witness nevertheless, and his mood grew heavier. Indoors, too, she followed him and was hard to catch. She darkened the mirrors so that she could hide. Calling to him rarely, her voice was like bells in the cold glass. Fingering his bedclothes, she tied one knot, almost by accident, but that was enough to give him strangling dreams.

He was easy only among his oreades, finally. Early each morning he went to the stable and whistled. A mountain nymph appeared, stretching her long arms and laughing at the sky. She grasped him about the waist, lifted him over her head, and set him solidly on her shoulders. For that first instant, astride one of his magnificent tall nymphs, the bewildered pain slipped from his face. He grasped the reins of her hair, and she galloped away. And Palaemona wandered by herself in the garden, trying to match things up.

“How he dotes on them,” she thought. “Long legs, strong back, wild eyes, flying mane, violent obedience—that’s the way to earn my lordship’s care.”

Now the hungry love in her mixed with the forbidden laughter and made a striving in her so great that the sleeping girl either had to burst into tiny pieces or be stretched. She was racked by monstrous pain. She could not stretch; her bones were locked by primal blight. She arose from her bed, took her leather jewel box, and climbed down a vine that grew to her window.

A full moon rode the sky. She went to the field where she had first spied the Bullman. It was empty. “Where is he?” she called to the birds, who answered, “A mile away—away. He drives his bulls three fields to the west.”

“Thank you, friends.”

“Do not seek him, sister. Do not—not—not.”

“Farewell.”

She went westward until she saw him plowing his field in the moonlight. She floated toward him, clinking her jewels.

“Do you travel alone, little girl?” he said.

“I do, good sir. All alone.”

“What do you have in that box?”

“Nothing really.”

“Nothing? I hear something. What’s in there?”

“Just some jewels.”

“Would you like to give them to me?”

“I’d rather keep them.”

“But I need them, you see. I must have them.”

“You’d better not rob me. I live in the castle, you know. My father is Lord of the Hill. If you offer me harm, he’ll surely cut off your head.”

With one hand he clasped her about the waist and lifted her into the air, holding her before his face. She saw the wet gleam of his mouth and snaggle teeth. He twisted the jewel box from her grasp.

“I’ll tell my father!”

“No, you won’t. You’ll be dead, little one, and eaten by worms. And I’ll keep your dainty bones to make buttons of. All your father will know is that his girl ran away and never came back. And I shall keep working my bulls and entertaining travelers and growing richer and richer.”

Quite gently he stripped her, carried her to the bulls, which he had turned tail to tail—then bound her legs to the trailing reins of one bull and her wrists to the reins of the other. He took two cudgels and struck the animals, crying, “Go!”

Wave after wave of scalding pain passed through her body. Her intention flickered in the red mist of torment. She knew that she could ease her suffering by going limp and allowing herself to be torn in two. But she braced her muscles and gave herself to agony. She heard the crackle of bones being wrenched out of their sockets, the foul twang of ligaments stretched too far. She held herself together. The bulls, angered by the unexpected resistance, lowered their heads and dug their hooves into the earth—and heaved and grunted, pulling themselves toward opposite ends of the field. Palaemonia clenched her teeth upon a scream, saving her breath for breathing, and knew a final starry anguish as she passed from the safety of blight to the peril of growth.

The Bullman, watching, saw his beasts going too slowly. He walked toward them and saw a tall shadow swimming in the moonlight. He heard reins snap. Saw a figure towering over him. He turned to flee but felt long,

long fingers lock about his neck, felt himself being lifted into the air, dangling helpless as a kitten.

He saw tumbling hair and eyes that were pits of light. He shuddered with awful dread as he saw a great white arm rising. He heard himself sobbing. Palaemona held her hand poised, savoring the idea of this brute whimpering like a whipped child. He wriggled in her grasp. She tightened her hand. His head lolled. She didn't know whether she had crushed the breath out of him or whether he had swooned with fear. She didn't care. He was a foulness in her hands. She threw him to the bulls, who poked at him doubtfully with their horns, then began to trample him under their razor hooves.

She snatched up the plow and hurled it high. Listened, and finally heard it crash to the ground. She looked about—at the bloody rags that had been the Bullman, at the bulls still trampling. Nothing would convince her of herself. She was unaccustomed to triumph. She loped homeward under the blazing moon, watching her enormous shadow run before.

“This is but the cruelty of dreams,” she said to herself. “How many nights have I grown tall in my sleep, to be dwarfed by morning. Ogres ... moonlight ... bulls ... plows ... leaping over rivers ... killing enemies ... surely a dream.”

She vaulted over the castle wall. Too heavy now for swinging on vines, she crouched and leaped through her chamber window. She curled up in her bed as tightly as she could to defend herself against dreams. But she moved in her sleep. Her head pressed against the wall; her legs dangled over the edge of the bed. She was so uncomfortable that she woke up and balanced herself on tottering long legs like a colt unused to itself. She walked up and down her room. Everything seemed as tiny as a doll's furniture. She looked down the glossy length of her legs with great satisfaction. She lifted the huge pier glass from the wall and held it like a hand mirror so that she could see her face. It seemed the same but the golden eyes glared wildly back at her. She slanted the mirror this way and that so she saw her tall tapering legs from different angles, and her muscled belly and new wide shoulders. She was fascinated by her long muscular column of neck.

She was full of angry joy. She smashed the mirror so that it could never be used by a shorter girl, and tried to laugh; the splintering glass laughed coldly back. The moon leered whitely beyond her windows. It stroked her hot quivering body. She felt its maddening weightless fingers, and was able

now, she knew, to pluck Melampus from his couch and set him on her back and canter away with him, past the fields and into the hills, running with him until he awoke from the drowse of sloth and rancor that had fastened on him like a poisoned sleep. And he would know whom he was riding, and whom to thank.

Howling softly, “Father, Father,” she ran from her chamber and sought his.

It was not to be. His chamber was empty. She coursed through the castle searching for him. He was gone. Everyone was gone. Silence lay upon the stone pile thick as fog. She rushed to the stables. The stalls were black holes; no oreades, no horses. Not even a mouse rustling in the straw.

She heard a creaking and a rumbling and ran out of the stable. The castle was gone. The walls were falling. The great stone slabs did not crash to the ground but crumbled as she watched, subsiding into dust. The flagstones were gone; she stood upon earth. Where the castle had been, a cave mouth now yawned. She rushed to the cave. A huge rock blocked its entrance. She picked it up as if it were a pebble and tossed it away—stooped and crawled into the cave. But no one was there. She came out again and ran downhill. Her garden was where it had been; it was all weeds.

“Melampus!” she cried. “Melampus! Melampus!” and heard the new musical thunder of her voice bouncing off the hill.

She heard a dry choking sound and whirled about. There in the middle of her garden was a pile of leather coils, and rising from it a long stem of neck and leather wedge of head.

“Is it you?” she whispered.

“Myself.”

The serpent did not sound like himself. Something muffled the hissing clarity of his speech. Tremors rippled down his long throat. She saw that he was weeping. One by one his tears dropped. Nothing glitters so coldly as the tears of a serpent weeping in the moonlight.

“Where is he?” she said.

“Gone.”

“Where?”

“Tartarus.”

“I don’t believe it. He can’t be dead.”

“He is not dead.”

“Then why is he in Tartarus?”

“He was taken there,” said the serpent. “Hades’ spies kept vigil. As soon as you left the castle, word flashed to the Dark Realm. ‘She has gone. She loves Melampus no longer. She has gone out the window with her jewel box and will never return.’”

“This is what Hades was waiting for. Now he could strike. He sent his Furies to take Melampus, and to bring him to Tartarus alive, for it is only the living who can suffer ultimate torment. Especially one like Melampus who has trained himself to endure bodily pain. Such a one must be punished in another way. So there he stands in an alcove of hell beginning that ordeal which only the imagination of Hades could devise.”

“What are they doing to him?”

“Tartarus is the Land Beyond Death, you know. Which means that it harbors not only the dead but also those not yet born. There is an enormous spawning tank down there. In its waters swim the tiny fishlike shapes of those striving to be born. Melampus has been stationed there. It is his task to judge each creature as it swims past, and to decide whether or not it shall be permitted birth. He is given but a fraction of a second to decide—to dip his net and scoop out the chosen one. The ones not chosen are flushed away.

“Now this alcove is dense with onlookers. Black gulls hang above the tank, diving upon the rejected, which are tasty as sprats. There is an audience of fiends, too, studying the swarm of tiny swimmers. Now when Melampus chooses one who is destined to do well in the life to come, who will be happy or heroic or useful, the demons are silent. But when they see his net holding one whom they have divined will be cruel or unjust or simply unhappy, why then they cackle their approval. Their thin, jeering voices mingle in a fiendish shriek of glee as they celebrate bad news.

“And, since by the nature of things most of his choices must be bad, he lives in this demonish din—the ugliest sound in all the world. Each time he chooses with less confidence, but he must continue to choose, must continue to dip his net, knowing that his healing art is being twisted and perverted to serve the All Nothing. And the great-hearted doctor burns with shame and pain and loss—not in the ruddy blaze of physical pain, but in the cold blue fire of mental suffering. And there must he freeze and burn for all time to come.”

“Can no one deliver him?” cried Palaemona.

“Who?”

“Me! I am strong enough for anything now. I will go to Tartarus. I will arm myself with the great plow, and harrow hell!”

“Softly, my girl,” hissed the snake. “You are new to your strength. You don’t know how to use yourself yet. It may be that your love and his torment are part of a great purpose. And perhaps not. Perhaps you simply move in that monstrous waste beyond design. I don’t know. I am trained to prediction and I don’t know. But there does seem to be a mighty force behind all this. Perhaps you have been enlarged to contain it. I do not know, I cannot tell. This much I do know: You must learn to use your giant abilities. You must be polished by brutes, honed by ordeal. A task has been decreed for you. If you fulfill it in all its dire passages you may be given what you most want. And you may not. There is no certainty; that is part of the ordeal. But to accomplish these labors is your only hope of seeing Melampus again.”

“What must I do?”

“You will receive your instructions from the king of Mycenae, whose name is Eurystheus.”

“I thought someone else was king of that place.”

“Not anymore. The fattest, laziest, meanest-minded prince in all the lands of the Middle Sea has now become the fattest, laziest, meanest-minded king—for his father died last night.”

“And such is to be my taskmaster?”

“Yes-s-s-s ... he will know you as Heraclea.”

The sky had reddened. She saw the snake more clearly now, the whole mottled green-and-black weaving length of him. She grasped the smooth throbbing cable, drew his head to hers and kissed it. “Thank you, serpent. First friend, thank you. Will you come to me sometimes and tell me what to do?”

“Sometimes ... sometimes,” said the serpent. “You’d better get some clothes for yourself, by the way.”

She stretched her great supple body, drinking the dawn wind. “Where can I get anything to fit me?”

“Go down to the river where it widens. You will find an abandoned boat. Take its sail. It will make a short tunic until you find something better to wear.”

courtiers thronged the throne room, fawning about the new king of Mycenae. A stranger entered and walked slowly toward the throne. He was of haughty bearing, very tall, wearing a black cape with bat wings. The mob fell away before him. He stood at the foot of the throne and said:

“I seek audience, O King.”

“Speak,” said Eurystheus.

“I seek private audience.”

“Private audience? On the morning of my coronation? Who do you think you are?”

“My name is Thanatos. I serve Hades.”

“Out!” shouted Eurystheus to the crowd of courtiers, who vanished immediately. “I crave your pardon, Thanatos,” he said. “And thank you for the honor of your visit. Please extend my gratitude to your master and assure him of my lasting veneration.”

“Nothing lasts, little king. My master understands this. Terminations are his specialty.”

“Do not look upon me so gravely,” cried Eurystheus. “You frighten me.”

“I do not come to frighten you, but to bring you certain instructions—which, by the way, are being issued by my master but originate with one even greater than he.”

“Oh, terror! Speak, speak, I am yours to command!”

“There will appear before you presently a young woman. She is under decree of utter obedience, and it is you she must obey. Written upon this scroll are certain tasks you will impose upon her. Of course, you will impose the second only if she survives the first, which is doubtful. The third only if she survives the second, and so on.”

Eurystheus glanced at the parchment. “Ridiculous!” he cried. “You should have used a shorter scroll, good Thanatos. No one can accomplish this first task, especially a woman. She will perish.”

“It is well,” said Thanatos. “Death has grown amorous. Nevertheless, keep the scroll and set her about her labors.”

“What is her name?”

“Her name was Palaemona. For god-task she will be known as Heraclea. She is quite young.”

“A girl! She won’t make a mouthful for any of these creatures.”

“Perhaps. I cannot tarry. You have your instructions. Farewell.”

He spread the wings of his cape and flew out of the throne room. Like leaves in a windstorm, the courtiers were sucked into the wake of his departure, and fluttered back to the king.

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The Nemean Lion

The king's palace stood on high ground in the fortress city of Mycenae. A great wall surrounded the city, its only entrance a pair of massive iron gates. When Palaemona came to the city she found the gates closed.

She shouted. No one came. She saw sentries high on the wall, but they paid her no heed. She pounded on the gate; no one answered. She stepped back, studying the gates, trying to decide whether to climb them or try to wrench the huge grills out of their stone sockets. She heard a clank of metal and saw a file of armed men coming down the avenue at half trot. They unbarred the gates and swung them open. She stepped forward. A hedge of spears formed in front of her; a voice cried, "Halt!"

The men fell back, forming an isle of metal. Through it rode a man on a white truce horse. He carried a white herald's staff. He raised the staff and cried, "In the king's name!"

He reined up his horse and shouted: "Are you she who is called Heraclea?"

"I am now, I suppose. My business is with the king."

"You will conduct it with me. I bring instructions to you from Eurystheus, high king of Mycenae."

"Why are the gates locked against me?"

"King's orders."

"I don't understand. Why the soldiers? Why am I barred entry? Why can I not speak with Eurystheus himself?"

"King's orders, king's orders. He does not deign to explain, and no one must question his decree."

"No questions? No explanations? He has been king for but three days. His reign promises to be eventful."

“I do not intend to tarry here listening to treasonous remarks. If you do not wish to receive the king’s message, I shall return to the palace. The gates will be closed. And you can go back to Thessaly, or wherever you come from.”

“Forgive me, little herald,” said Palaemona. “If I seem awkward it is because I am only a simple country lass, and feel somewhat overwhelmed by this royal reception. Give me the message.”

She smiled down at him, and saw his eyes fill with loathing. He had a sly, malicious, cheese-colored face under greasy brown curls. And the herald, looking up at her, felt himself choking with dismay. For he feared and disliked women, especially young healthy ones. And this was more woman than he had ever seen. She towered over him on tall, golden legs. Sitting on horseback he reached only to her breastbone. The muscles of her wide, sleek shoulders and long, tapering arms did not bulge, but writhed, half hidden, like serpents, with every move she made. She cast a fragrant heat like a garden in midsummer. He felt himself growing dizzy. He backed off his horse, took a bit of parchment from his pouch, stuck it on the end of his staff, and held it up to her so that he would not have to touch her hand.

She took the message and read it. “Kill the Nemean lion and bring its pelt back to Mycenae.”

“Nemean lion,” she murmured.

“The Nemean mountains lie between Corinth and Argos,” said the herald. “You had better get started.”

“What is your name, O courteous one?”

“I am called Copeus.”

She smiled again, watching his averted face darken with rage. *Copeus* in Greek means “dung man,” or one who does dirty jobs.

“Copeus ... odd name for so elegant a herald.”

“I wear that name with pride,” he said. “It signifies that I am the most loyal of the king’s subjects, the one whom he entrusts with the most unpleasant tasks.”

“Is this task so unpleasant then?”

For the first time she saw him smile, a spasm of the lips more dismaying than any scowl. He said, “It’s always unpleasant to send anyone off to certain death, especially one so young and in such blooming health. Our king is but a lad himself, you know, and for all the dread authority vested in

him, has a very tender heart. That undoubtedly is why he denies himself the pleasure of conversing with you on this occasion.”

“Convey my humble thanks to the king,” said Palaemona, “and tell him that I mean to spare him further grief by surviving this lion hunt.”

Copreus said, “The king has empowered me to give you some information about the game you hunt. Do you care to hear it?”

“Certainly. I shall be grateful for anything you can tell me.”

Studying his face, she knew that he relished what he was about to say—which meant that she would not. Nevertheless, she understood that the more she learned about the lion—no matter how discouraging it might be—the better prepared she would be to fight the beast.

“Tell me, please,” she murmured.

“First of all,” said Copreus, “it’s of monstrous size—bigger than an elephant, they say. Its teeth are ivory knives, its claws are brass hooks, and it wears a hide that no weapon can pierce. For many years it has prowled the country between Corinth and Argos, killing men and cattle, snapping up children, goats, and dogs. Hunting parties have been sent against the monster. An entire generation of the keenest hunters and strongest warriors have sought to rid the land of its curse. They failed. Many were mauled to death. They were the lucky ones. Others were wounded and eaten alive. Of late, however, no one has hunted the lion, for it seems a hopeless task. His hide, as I said, is armor. Spears and arrows skid off him like hail drops; no blade can pierce him, no net hold him. In short, Missy, the Nemean lion is pure yellow murder.”

Now the man’s cheesy face was creased in a broad smile as he looked up at her, searching for signs of fear. She gazed back at him—laughed suddenly, reached down, plucked him from his saddle and turned him so that he sat facing the horse’s tail.

“Dung man, farewell!” she chortled—and bounded away with great leaps, shouting with laughter.

The likelihood of being killed did not worry the girl. She welcomed the idea of descending to Tartarus, for Melampus was there. What did plague her was the prospect of hurting an animal. In all her life she had never injured a living creature, except for the murderous robber. How then could she bear to kill a beautiful big lion?

This was the problem she pondered as she traveled from Mycenae to Nemea. Since she could not solve it, she put it out of her mind and concentrated on smaller things. First of all, she had to arm herself. She already owned bow and arrows. Before leaving Thessaly she had found a Titan longbow on the site of the vanished courtyard. It was an enormous bow made of polished ash wood strengthened with stag bone. She did not use it in the mortal fashion, drawing bowstring only to breast, but in the powerful long-armed Titan way, bending the heavy bow almost double. In practice she had driven her bolts through a wall three feet thick.

Now, she wanted a spear and knew she had to make one. For the spears used by ordinary warriors seemed small as darts to her. Searching along the shore she found a stove-in boat, which she dismasted. She broke the mast in two and took the slender half. She did not wish to tip it with the leaf-shaped spearhead commonly used. That kind of spearhead made a large wound, but she wanted more penetrating power. She found an old iron spike and drove it into the end of the mast. Then she sharpened the spike against a rock, flaking the rust off, bringing it to a needle point. She practiced with this spear, throwing it at trees. After half a day she could split an oak in two at fifty paces.

She kept busy so that she wouldn't have to think. Or, rather, she thought of everything but her problem. Nevertheless, her thoughts came back to it; what could she do about not wanting to kill anything? She tried to do as Melampus had taught her, isolate her dilemma from her feelings and treat it as a problem in logic.

"Yes," she thought, "but would *he* ever kill anything? Not likely, not even to save his own life. Perhaps to save someone else's. I don't know."

But she had to stop thinking about Melampus. Hot tears gushed from her eyes. And it was several miles before she could think of anything except her grief.

Nevertheless, she did succeed in taking hold of herself and wrenching her thoughts back to her task.

"I seem destined to meet some terrible creatures," she said to herself. "Beginning with this lion—and, in all likelihood, ending with this lion. But if I do get past him somehow, there appears to be an array of other monsters in my future. The question is how to conduct myself. I'm large for a person but tiny in comparison with these creatures. Therefore I must cultivate other

qualities. Speed ... surprise ... I must hone my wits so that I may be swift in decision also, and fertile in tactics. Swift—swift—I must be sudden and swift.”

She found another use for her spear—as a vaulting pole. On an empty stretch of beach she came across an old temple with crumbling walls, thirty feet high, and practiced there. Holding her spear, she would run full speed at a wall, plant the butt of the spear, and hurl herself up, up. The great shaft bent beneath her, then recoiled—and she, extending her arms and flattening her body, would ride the upspring, releasing the spear as it straightened, and soaring over the wall. She vaulted rivers in this way, and huts. She loved to vault; it was like flying.

Nevertheless, the critical question was still unanswered when she reached Mount Nemea. How could she bring herself to stalk an animal and try to kill it? And so she was weakened by doubt as she stood on a slope of the mountain, deafened by a great racketing roar, waiting for the beast to approach. Smoothly, ponderously, he came—sulphur yellow, the size of three lions, his teeth a murderous grin in the sunlight. Palaemona crouched behind a boulder, watching.

And, as she saw him coming toward her, she felt her doubts dropping away. It was no animal she saw, but something else.

True lions and tigers blend with their terrain. Sun tawny, striped with shadow, they belong to their portion of earth. But this one belonged nowhere; he was an alien presence. Trees shuddered as he passed, the grass shrank away. His eyes were not gemmed with light; they were flat, blank disks, metallic. He stood outside the great life chain of hunting, feeding, flight, and pursuit. He belonged only to death and visited the living as a fatal stranger. He was a monster: a reason for heroes.

Now, watching him come, Palaemona felt her mouth filling with the taste of honey. A delicious sweet chill laved her body, tuning her reflexes, loosening her muscles. Everything came alive. Trees and rocks loomed with miraculous clarity. The grass became filaments of light. Death slouched toward her and made the world new.

She unslung her bow and notched an arrow. She waited for the lion to come closer, then launched her bolt. She saw it cleave the air and strike the beast's chest, clattering harmlessly to the ground. As fast as she could pull

arrow from quiver she launched her bolts. One after the other they skidded off the lion and fell to earth.

The lion yawned, crouched slightly, and came toward her. She tossed her bow away and hurled her great spear. It glanced off his shoulder and split an ash tree. The lion yawned and prowled closer. Now he was very close. She choked in the fumes of his rotting-meat breath. She raised her club, which was a single uprooted tree with its twigs trimmed off, and smashed it down on the beast's head. The club shattered, and the lion struck. Palaemona sprang away from the lightning jab of his paw—but not quite in time. One razor claw sheared away her sailcloth tunic and touched her thigh, and the touch was a wound. Naked and bleeding, weaponless, she ran for her spear. The lion did not follow immediately but sniffed at the bloody tunic, tail swishing—then raised his huge head to observe the futile antics of his prey.

And they were futile, Palaemona knew. But futility was no novelty to this girl. Magic salvage had been the lesson of her life. Despised, she had found love. Plain, she had become beautiful. Dwarfed, she had grown.

“I can't hurt him,” she thought. “And with a stroke of his paw, light as a caress, he rends my flesh. These are the last moments of my life. I'll try to keep busy.”

She whirled and ran uphill. The lion looked up from the tunic again, saw her running, and followed. Her tall legs flashed; she covered ten feet at a stride. The lion, hardly seeming to move, gained ground with every step. The spear weighed her down as she ran, but she held on to it. She dodged behind a huge boulder and stabbed the earth behind it, driving her spear deep—then planted her feet and pulled back on the haft. The boulder did not budge. The lion was coming uphill. Palaemona heard herself crying strange words: “All Mother, help me now!”

She pulled on the shaft, exerting all her tremendous strength. Red-hot needles jabbed her lungs. She went half blind with strain; everything swam in a red mist. But she did not let go. She bent the shaft toward the ground, feeling the rock begin to move. The movement was joy. Joy mixed with pain and became strength—then ebbed to pain again as the red mist darkened. With her last strength she pressed the shaft. The butt end touched the ground. The boulder leaped out of its age-old socket and began to roll downhill. It rolled terrifically, flattening bushes, picking up speed, going straight for the lion.

Reacting with incredible speed, he leaped out of its path. But it grazed him and bowled him off his feet. He fell heavily and lay stunned.

Filling with savage exultance as she saw her enemy fallen, she gave herself time to draw one deep breath that was pure energy. She yanked the spear from the earth. Holding it like a vaulting pole, she charged downhill, planted the butt of her spear, and leaped. The shaft bent, then sprang straight, hurling her high. But she did not release her pole as vaulters do; she clutched the spear, shifting her grip as she reached the top of her leap and turned in the air—holding the spear point-first as she dived.

The lion tried to scramble out of the way, but kept his head raised. And Palaemona, striking with all the weight of her fall and all the coiled might of her shoulder muscles, drove the needle-pointed spike into the only part of him not shielded by his armor hide—into his eye. Through the thick jelly of his eye the spike drove, deep into his brainpan. Palaemona twisted away as he writhed in agony—flailing at the spear shaft with his paws, snapping at air, snarling, frothing, dying monstrosly.

Palaemona staggered toward him. She was bruised from her fall; her wound bled. But triumph swallowed pain. She stood over the beast, watching him die. He was only twitching now. The twitching stopped.

Now she had to skin him. “Bring his pelt to Mycenae,” the order had read. But how was she to take this hide that no blade could cut? An idea came to her as she studied the great tawny corpse. She knelt and snapped off one of his claws. It was the size of a dagger, but sharper than any dagger. Using the claw as a skinning knife, she flayed the beast and rolled his hide into a bundle.

Palaemona was reeling with fatigue now, but she had a few more things to do. She pulled out all the lion’s claws to make arrowheads of. She reached into his maw and wrenched out his teeth, remembering dimly that Melampus had used ivory knives for surgery because he did not like the effect of metal cutting into living flesh.

The memory of him brought no grief now. This battle had twisted her into a new mode. She had accomplished the first of her tasks. And there was a remote hope, the serpent had said, that if she finished her mysterious labors, she might snatch her beloved from the hands of Hades. It was Melampus restored she must think of now, not Melampus gone. This reeking corpse was the lion-shape of hope.

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PROCRUSTES

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For BOAZ
Whose name meant strength,
and will again

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Characters

Monsters

Procrustes (proh KRUHS teez) Also called Stretch; an evil giant who keeps an inn; father of Basher, Bender, and Shady

Basher Procrustes' bandit son; real name Corunetes, which means "Cudgel-man"

Bender Another son of Procrustes, also a bandit; real name Pithyocampes, which means "Pine-bender"

Shady Third bandit son of Procrustes; real name Sciron, or "Parasol man"

Gods

Zeus (ZOOS) King of the Gods

Poseidon Zeus' brother; God of the Sea
(poh SY duhn)

Hades Another brother of Zeus; God of the Dead
(HAY deez)

Hermes Son of Zeus; the Messenger God
(HUR meez)

Hypnos God of Sleep, son of Night, father of Dreams
(HIP nuhs)

Mortals

Theseus A budding hero; son of Poseidon
(THEE see uhs)

Minos Son of Zeus; king of Crete
(MEE nohs)

Evander Son of the bandit Bender; large but not monstrous
(ee VAN dur)

Maktos A donkey breeder
(MAK tohs)

Bowl-head A merchant

Festus Also a merchant
(FEHS tus)

Third Merchant Nameless, and lean

The Slave An acrobatic Egyptian owned by Festus

Others

Melissa A talented donkey

The Great Sow Queen of the Swine, who purchased a husband

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The Robber Clan

Once, there was a murderous father and his three bandit sons who had never learned to pronounce their own names but called themselves Basher, Bender, Shady, and Stretch—which also described their specialties. They worked the road from Troezen to Athens, each staking out a different section where he practiced his particular brand of banditry.

The son Basher bore a huge brass club and bashed travelers over the head—but robbed them first because he didn't like to handle loot that was spattered with brains.

His brother Bender stationed himself at a curve in the road girded by pine trees. His specialty was to bend a pine to the ground when a traveler was passing and invite him to observe a curious bird's nest in the branches. No one seemed to welcome this invitation, but the bird fancier was much too big to say no to. Bender would courteously keep the enormous bow of the pine tree bent until his guest was leaning over its boughs searching for the nest—then let go. The tree would whip up with terrific force, hurling its victim into the air. It was usually a corpse that fell to the ground; it was surely a corpse that lay there when Bender left.

The third brother's post was a narrow ledge of road hugging a cliff that overlooked the sea. Now, one of his feet happened to be much larger than the other, so large that he was able to hold it over his head, shading himself from the sun. There he squatted and waited for someone to pass. At the base of his rock stood a bucket full of water.

"This is a toll road," Shady would tell the traveler. "And your fee is to wash my feet. Drop your moneybags right there; that's right—hurry, please! My feet are very hot and dusty. The big one's hot, the small one's dusty."

Shady was even bigger than Bender, who was bigger than Basher, who was twice as big as anyone coming down the road. And no one had ever

refused to do as Shady asked. He would sit, relaxed, smiling and chatting as his feet were soaped and scrubbed, then, with one clean kick, send the washer over the cliff. Some were broken against the rocks, others drowned; still others might have survived the fall and swum away were it not for a giant turtle who lived in the tidal pool under the cliff and had changed his diet from algae to fresh meat.

The father, Procrustes, called himself Stretch. He practiced a more leisurely form of larceny. He kept an inn on the southern slope of the final mountain and was the worst robber of all.

Procrustes himself had educated his sons. He trained them the way he drove oxen—with a heavy whip. His major subject was how to get hold of someone else's property in the quickest possible time and with the least resistance from its owner. He used lectures and fieldwork, peppering both with liberal applications of the whip. Some mornings started with a lecture in the boneyard. The boys sprawled among fragments of skeletons, drawing designs in the dust with splinters of bone. When they were smaller they had perched on the skulls. Their father towered above them, his voice booming down with such thunderous force that they felt the words vibrating inside them.

“To be a successful robber you must be able to tell a rich man from a poor one, even if they're wearing each other's clothes. For merchants will do that—try to deceive a hardworking bandit by exchanging clothes with their slaves. So you want to be able to tell one from the other, no matter what they wear, and you will thank me one day for beating such lessons into you.”

Then Stretch would lead his sons out to prowl the mountain paths until they came across a caravan carrying goods to market and he could test their knowledge.

Upon another morning he might say:

“Remember, what you don't want are witnesses. So kill 'em first and rob 'em later. Could get a bit messy, but it's easier to wash the blood off your hands than to chase some slippery devil over the mountain. I've tried it both ways, boys, and believe me, corpses are convenient.”

And, he might add: “These greedy, deceitful rascals won't always be carrying bags of gold, you know. They will sometimes exchange coin for gems, which are easier to hide. Now, it takes too much time to search

everyone in the caravan—every merchant, slave, porter, and drover, and every bale on every beast. So you must learn the smell of jewelry. You must be able to sniff out the presence of precious stones and tell which is which. For every gem has its own special fragrance. Diamonds smell like fresh snow, rubies like cinnamon, sapphires like fog, emeralds like crushed grass.”

Again he would lead them out upon the mountain paths, in search of a caravan. And the sons of Procrustes would go sniffing about until every jewel was found. Otherwise, they knew, their father’s lash would take their hides off, patch by patch.

The boys had grown into young giants by the time they left home, outgrown their father’s whippings but never quite their fear of him. They followed his precepts and, indeed, were grateful for what he had taught them. Only Basher was unorthodox. He, as we have seen, preferred to rob his clients first and club them afterward. Despite this dainty habit, however, he left no witnesses, so his father forgave him.

The three brothers did their robbing separately but pooled the loot. Every seventh day they would take the week’s receipts to their father’s inn, where he would divide everything equally, keeping an equal portion for himself. He tried to teach them a little arithmetic by taking more than his share, but they always accepted his calculations without question. He soon realized that he would never drive any numbers into their thick skulls and took their money anyway. Not all of it; he left them enough to gamble with, knowing it would end up in his pocket before the night was through.

All four were passionate gamblers. Procrustes had made a set of dice out of knucklebones from the skeletons of those who had been his guests. Every week, after dividing the spoils and eating and drinking hugely, the family gambled through the night, and Procrustes won all the money he hadn’t stolen. His sons didn’t care. They knew that traders would be coming down the road all week, bearing moneybags, bales of merchandise, and hampers of food and wine, which would provide the stakes for the next game, as well as the refreshments.

Thieves and murderers were hardly a rarity then—or now—but this monstrous father and his sons entered legend not only because they were at the top of their profession, but also because playful gods had caught them up in the deadliest game the world had ever known.

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The Wager

At this time the gods had been growing more and more fascinated with the pageant of human life. Man's idea of himself convulsed them with laughter. Just as we are tickled by the sight of a poodle walking on his hind legs and trying to act like a person, so the gods felt when they saw some little man imitating them, actually brandishing sword and spear and riding forth in a bronze chariot.

The Olympians were so entertained that they decided to be more than spectators. Every once in a while, they shrank themselves to people size and mingled with the human herd. They boarded ships; they walked the city streets; they went into battle on one side or the other. Gods wooed mortal maids, and goddesses chose mortal men. This crossbreeding produced demigods and demigoddesses, and, occasionally, monsters.

When they returned to Mount Olympus, the gods would follow the careers of their heroic offspring, celebrating victories and mourning defeats. They particularly enjoyed themselves when their children battled each other, for then they could wager on the result. Naturally, they all cheated. They ceaselessly meddled, starting an avalanche here, rolling a tidal wave there, always trying to help their favorites and cripple the opposition. They didn't view any of this as cheating. How could anyone *not* try to win a bet? You did what you could and cried "foul" when your opponent did the same. It was all part of the game.

Now, as it happened, Zeus had abducted a mortal princess named Europa and left her with a son named Minos, who took the throne of Crete and became the most powerful tyrant of the ancient world. About this time Poseidon spawned a mortal son named Theseus. This boy was much younger than Minos, less than half his age; but, of course, twenty years is nothing to a god, just the wink of an eye.

Poseidon, to pass an idle hour, planned some far-reaching mischief. He visited Zeus and predicted that Theseus would grow up to defeat Minos and take his crown.

Zeus roared with laughter. “You were never too bright, brother, but this is ridiculous! My son Minos is not only king of Crete, he has extended his sway over all the lands of the Middle Sea. He is the richest, most powerful ruler the world has ever seen. His army is invincible; his fleet sweeps the sea of enemy ships. How can that pipsqueak you left in some mountain village possibly prevail against him?”

“Would you be interested in a little wager?” asked Poseidon.

“Of course! Double whatever you have in mind!”

“It’s a bet,” said Poseidon. “Will you give him ... say five years?”

“Five years it is,” said Zeus. “Must you go now? Won’t you be my guest for a while? Give yourself a chance to dry off? You’re looking a bit mildewed.”

“Thank you,” said Poseidon. “Another time. I must go home now and blow away a coastal village that has offended me.”

After Poseidon left, however, Zeus grew thoughtful. “I can’t understand it,” he said to himself. “He seems confident about winning this crazy bet. There’s a mystery here somewhere. I’d better find out about young Theseus.”

Zeus sent for his favorite son, Hermes, the messenger god, whom he entrusted with his most confidential errands. Hermes turned himself into a heron and flew to the coastal village of Troezen, where Theseus lived with his mother. A week passed, and Hermes had not returned. Zeus wondered about the delay but knew that there might be good reason for it. Then, on the eighth day, Hermes came back in his own form. Ankle wings whirring, he landed before his father and bowed to the ground.

“Greetings, oh king and sire,” he said. “I have done your bidding.”

“You’ve certainly taken your time about it,” said Zeus.

“I have had much to observe,” said Hermes. “I went as a heron, you will recall. I flew to Troezen and passed low over the village, searching for boys at play. I found them on the beach, wrestling, and was intrigued to see that the smallest one of all was winning every match. I dipped lower and saw the color of his eyes. They were neither blue nor gray nor green, but like

pools of seawater, changing as the light changes—Poseidon’s eyes knew that the lad must be his son.”

“When the boys had finished playing and were heading home, I transformed myself into a fisherman. I fell into conversation with Theseus, praising his wrestling skill and wondering who had taught him.”

“‘I taught myself,’ he told me. ‘I am quite small, as you may have noticed, bullying size, actually. And since I’ve never allowed myself to be bullied, I was always getting beaten up. This was intolerable to me, and I decided to do something about it. Wandering the beach alone, observing the gulls, I noticed that they broke clams open by dropping them on the rocks. They couldn’t do that to shrimps or scallops, though, which weighed less and fell lightly. I saw that the gulls were smashing the clams by using their own weight. Pondering this, I decided that there was a message here from the gods, and I tried to puzzle out what it meant. I had an idea but needed to test it in action. I hunted up the boy I liked least and explained to him what a stinking bully he was. When he realized what I was saying, he went crazy with rage and struck at me with all his might.’”

“‘Well, sir, I’ve always been quick, very quick. I slipped inside his swing, caught his wrist, and pulled him in the direction of his blow. He sailed over my shoulder and landed on his head. I invited him to get up and try again, but he just lay there. Whether he was out cold or faking it I didn’t know, but I could see he wasn’t about to resume hostilities. So I went looking for other boys who had given me trouble.’”

“‘I won’t go through my other bouts blow by blow and throw by throw, but they all ended in the same way, and by the end of the week I knew that no one in the village would bully me again. But it’s a very small village, isn’t it, sir? Soon I’ll have to tell my mother I’m going on the road.’”

“After he left,” continued Hermes, “I became a heron again and hovered about a few more days, watching him. What can I tell you, sire? He’s very young still but with the stuff that heroes are made of.”

“So,” said Zeus. “You went to this village and watched a fast-moving runt whip some overgrown louts. Is this enough for you to project so splendid a destiny for him?”

“I seem to be arousing your displeasure, my lord.”

“I’m only trying to understand. Among your duties is to usher the dead to Hades. This requires you to visit battlefields and mobilize the day’s corpses

for the long journey to the Land Beyond Death. Which means that you witness the work of the world's mightiest warriors. Is that not true?"

"True, my lord."

"Nevertheless, you still rank young Theseus so highly?"

"As you say, I have seen the champions of every nation in glorious action and am not likely to be impressed by a young boy who can wrestle a bit. Something else impresses me, sire. He is wise beyond his years. Watching gulls feed, he detects a coded message from the gods and seeks to decipher it. The lesson he learns he then applies to his own life. And, although his battleground is local, rude, and narrow, he achieves a total victory. Then, instead of going drunk with pride, he studies that victory for further lessons. Wit, my lord, is what this nephew of yours possesses. What it comes to is that there is more of his uncle in him than his father. In his breast burns a spark of your own divine fire ... which I do not detect in your son Minos for all his conquests."

"What it comes to is that you like young Theseus?"

"Yes, I do, sire. But you should know that I do not allow affection to cloud my judgment."

"I know the depth of your loyalty, my son—and the quality of your judgment. And I appreciate both. But now I'm getting unhappy about this bet I made."

After Hermes flew away, Zeus grew even more thoughtful. At this time the king of the gods was experimenting with the idea of justice. He took what he wanted, but sometimes paid for it. He felt obliged to obey his own law prohibiting a god from killing a human just to win a bet. Otherwise, he would have made his wager safe simply by hurling a thunderbolt and gaffing Theseus like a fish.

"I'll have to get hold of some skilled assassins," he thought. "If I hire someone else to do my killing, I'll at least be following the letter of the law; further than that no one will dare question me. But I'm out of touch with things down there and don't know where to find a competent cutthroat.... I know! I'll consult Hades, who rules the dead. He is always striving to enlarge his kingdom and offers rich rewards to those who send him quantities of fresh corpses. Yes, he'll be able to advise me."

Thereupon, Zeus recalled Hermes and gave him new instructions. On his next day's journey to Tartarus he was to question Hades and return with a

short list of the world's most successful murderers. The messenger god did as he was bid. He reported back to Zeus, then hurried away from Olympus.

He flew down to the sea, stood on the shore, and whistled for a sea nymph. She emerged, dripping and smiling, but he asked her only to swim down to the great coral and pearl castle of Poseidon with an urgent message. This was not what she had expected to hear, but she was very willing to carry out the request, for Poseidon was generous to those who served him.

The sea nymph swam away, swift and sleek as a dolphin. Soon Poseidon came riding the wave to shore, tall and green-robed, flourishing his trident.

"Nephew!" he boomed. "You are several centuries younger than I. Would it not be more courteous for you to come to me?"

"I beg your pardon, I mean no discourtesy, I assure you," said Hermes. "I am here on your business, not my own, and I judged that business so urgent that I have taken the liberty of asking you to meet me here."

"What is this urgent business?"

"It concerns your wager with my father, Zeus. As you know, I serve him in all things and have never betrayed his trust. But now I must, for it concerns young Theseus, in whom I detect a budding hero—a leader, who will perhaps accomplish great things for mankind—if he is allowed to live. But that likelihood is dimming fast. And you stand in danger of losing your wager, for Zeus has obtained a list of the world's most proficient murderers. He sent me to Hades for that purpose, and he plans to manipulate events so that Theseus will encounter those that head the list—three giant brigands who infest the road running through the Saronic Mountains and their unspeakably evil father, Procrustes, who keeps an inn at the end of the range."

"What do you know about them?" asked Poseidon.

"A great deal, and none of it good."

Whereupon Hermes told the sea god all he had learned about Basher, Bender, and Shady—and their father, Procrustes.

"Thank you," said Poseidon. "This information is very helpful. Theseus must prepare himself to cope with these brutes."

"He's too young," murmured Hermes.

"He is," said Poseidon, "and terribly overmatched. That's how it is with heroes, though; they're defined by ordeal. I'll try to help him, of course, but

I'm somewhat overmatched myself contending with Zeus.”

Among the lesser gods was Hypnos, the god of sleep. He was the son of Night, little brother to Death, and the father of dreams. Outside his cave was a garden of herbs where poppies grew along with lotus and other flowers that bring sleep. Hypnos was also known as the Lord of the Two Gates, these being the Gates of Ivory and the Gates of Horn. Through the Gates of Ivory thronged those dreams that teased folk at night, tempting them into foolish ways. Through the Gates of Horn flew forth true dreams of prophecy and inspiration.

It was Hypnos that Poseidon sent for now, asking him to visit the slumbers of Theseus that night and instruct the boy through vision.

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The Skull

Some dreams, especially bad ones, seem to last [all night. Theseus was visited by such a nightmare. He had left home and was in a dark room, serving a drink to someone he couldn't see. The cup was a skull. He couldn't understand why the liquid didn't slosh out of the eyeholes and through the mouth. Whoever was in the bed must have finished the drink, because Theseus was now carrying the empty skull out of the room. It was laughing. He threw it away, but it came back with other skulls. They circled his head like pigeons, cooing and chuckling.

Theseus awoke, horrified. He ran down to the beach, wanting the salt wind to blow his dream away. Racing along the edge of the sea, he tripped on something. It was a skull. But this one didn't frighten him. On Troezen's stormy shore the bones of shipwrecked sailors were often found, stripped by the gulls and scoured by the tides. He picked up the skull.

"Good morning," it said.

Theseus stood startled, staring into the eyeholes.

"Do you know why you found me?" it said.

"I dreamed of skulls all night," Theseus replied.

"I am here to tell you what the dream means."

"Please do."

"You are to leave your mother and go traveling."

"Yes ..."

"You are to take the mountain road to Athens. You will meet those who make that road the most dangerous in the world: three bandit brothers. They have long names but call themselves Basher, Bender, and Shady. You will observe them closely, but try not to let them see you. Finally, if you get that far, you will reach an inn kept by their father, Stretch, whose real name is Procrustes. He will put you to work."

“Why would I want to work for him?” asked Theseus.

“You won’t, but you must. That job is your test, your apprenticeship. If you survive, you will be ready for a great task.”

“Which is what?”

“You will know when you’re ready to know.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t put me back where you found me,” said the skull. “Throw me into the sea. Throw me far.”

“Yes, sir.”

“A pleasant journey to you,” said the skull.

“And to you, sir,” answered Theseus.

He hurled the skull as far as he could. It hit the water and sank immediately.

Basher

Because of the dangers of the mountain road, no one traveled it alone. Merchants joined forces, hiring the most stalwart porters and drovers they could find.

Theseus wandered the marketplace at Troezen, seeking to attach himself to such a party. As a son of Poseidon, who had created the horse, Theseus had a magic touch with the shaggy, surefooted mountain ponies, and with donkeys. He intended to work his way as a groom. In the crowd he noticed a clever-looking man named Maktos, who was the father of one of his playfellows. He was leading a string of donkeys to market.

Theseus helped him water the stock and asked him if he knew of any merchants who were about to travel the first leg of the mountain road—that stretch menaced by the bandit Basher.

“Yes,” said the man. “Bowl-head’s going.”

“Bowl-head? Why’s he called that?”

“Because he wears a bowl on his head,” said Maktos. “Not really a bowl; it’s a helmet made by Daedalus himself—supposed to be able to turn any blade and ward off any blow.”

Maktos went on to tell Theseus about how the merchant had boasted to everyone of this helmet, claiming that it was made of a metal not to be found on earth but that had fallen as a whitehot lump of ore out of the starry sky. The great Daedalus had come to examine it and had recognized that the chunk of star ore could be smelted into a metal harder than any ever used before. Transporting it to his smithy, he had worked it into weapons and a set of armor. This magnificent gear had been purchased by Minos, king of Crete, the richest man on earth. But Minos didn’t get it all. One helmet had been stolen by an enterprising apprentice and had found its way into the marketplace, where the merchant had bought it.

“And now,” said Maktos, “He tells everyone he’s not afraid of Basher because the bandit’s brass club will simply shatter itself upon this wonderful helmet, confusing him so that he’ll be easily captured by the merchant’s guard.”

“I’d like to travel with him. Do you think he’d take me on?” asked Theseus.

“Come with me, lad, and you’ll meet him. I’m going to sell him some of these beasts.”

The road from Troezen to Athens twisted its way among the cliffs of the Saronic range, which towered above the Saronic Sea. “Saronic” means “belonging to the dawn,” and mountains and sea had been given that name because they faced east. The sun rose straight out of the water, bathing rock and tide in bewildering light—silver and jade, amethyst and rose. It was perhaps the most beautiful road in all the lands of the Middle Sea basin and almost surely the most perilous.

Theseus rode a donkey at the head of the caravan, which had come to a place where the road narrowed, twining around a cliff that leaned over the sea. To the right yawned a sheer drop; the sea looked like a tiny green froth far below. The lad permitted himself only one look, then took a sighting between the donkey’s ears and fastened his eyes on the road ahead. Behind him followed packhorses and donkeys laden with bales; no one else dared ride this part of the path. Merchants and guards, porters and servants, inched along on foot with desperate caution, keeping one hand against the cliff wall.

The sun was climbing out of the sea, but Theseus at this point could have wished for less beauty; the jeweled waves dazzled him. His donkey seemed to darken into silhouette as it stepped along the ledge of rock that formed the path. Then, to the boy’s relief, the narrow lane began to slope, widening as it ran downhill.

The donkey broke into a trot, as if it too were rejoicing. Then, suddenly, it braced its forelegs and brayed, its ears swinging forward. Theseus had to shut his eyes against the flash of golden light. Standing there in the path was a huge man, holding an enormous brass club.

Theseus had been training his donkey as they went along, teaching it useful tricks. Now he tapped the side of its throbbing, silky neck, and the

donkey bounded off the road like a hare and vanished into the underbrush with its rider. The bandit stared after them but did not pursue, for by now the others were coming around the bend.

“Halt!” he roared. They froze.

Theseus had hidden himself in the bushes. He saw Bowl-head settling his helmet more firmly on his brow as he strode toward the giant. The merchant came quite close to Basher, then looked up at him. Theseus heard him say, “You’re the famous Basher, no doubt?”

“No doubt,” growled the giant.

“Well, my man, you’ve picked the wrong caravan this time. I have twenty spearmen behind me here, and twenty spears will be lodged in your worthless carcass if you make one hostile move.”

The giant was grinning. Theseus saw him lazily lifting his club. It became a blur of light as he smashed it down on the merchant’s head. The helmet proved to be everything its owner had claimed. The brass bludgeon didn’t even dent it. What did happen was totally unexpected. The glittering club hit the helmet with a clear bell-like sound, driving the merchant into the ground, driving him in so deeply that only the top of the helmet remained to be seen. It looked like a turtle stuck in the mud. Basher, still grinning, raised his big foot and stamped on the helmet, driving it completely out of sight, so that where the man had stood there was only a sunken place in the earth.

Basher raised his club again and walked slowly toward the armed men. But they were there no longer. The sight of their master being hammered into the ground like a tent peg quenched any lingering spark of courage. With one accord, they turned tail and fled, outracing their horses.

Theseus heard the giant let out a great guffaw and saw him stoop and pick up an armful of moneybags, then stroll away. Theseus remounted his donkey and rode through the thicket, meaning to join the road at a higher point. Having seen Basher in action, he now wanted to observe the brother Bender. To do so, he had to climb to the crest, descend the western slope, cross a valley, and climb the next mountain in the range.

Theseus was thinking hard as he rode, the reins slack in his hands, his eyes dreaming. But the beast seemed to know the way.

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Bender

Theseus traveled slowly along the mountain road, searching every side path as he went. He wanted to attach himself to another caravan before entering Bender's territory. For two days, he saw no one, but was not lonesome. He had formed a taste for solitude unusual in one so young. And he found the donkey to be charming company. These animals are notoriously self-willed, and resist training. But his donkey, which was a female, or jenny, was clever and showed an appetite for learning that overcame her native stubbornness. She delighted Theseus, who proceeded to teach her many things—not circus tricks, but battle moves that are taught only to the best horses.

He taught her to whirl away when attacked head-on and meet her foe with a murderous back kick, which is a donkey's distinctive weapon. He taught her also to rise on her hind legs and use her forehooves as a boxer uses his fists. He didn't know whether this would work but thought there was no reason not to try.

So the boy sparred with the donkey, and she hee-hawed with pleasure as she moved on her hind legs, stepping about him daintily, striking with her forehooves. To protect himself, Theseus filled two bags with feathers and tied them over her forefeet like boxing gloves. And she had enough wit to strike carefully, so as not to injure him. When he freed her hooves and had her strike a tree with all her might, he was amazed at the power of those blows.

Theseus thought hard about what to call her. Choosing the right name for so talented a beast was very important, and it wasn't until he noticed that she had formed a peculiar habit that he decided on a name for her. She liked to put her muzzle into hollow trees and rummage around until she found a honeycomb, then crunch it blissfully, not minding at all if it was spiced with

bees. So he named her Melissa, which means “honey” in Greek. The name was particularly fitting, he realized, because her hide was a tawny brown, like clover honey.

By the end of the second day he had crossed the valley and was at the foot of another mountain. Up the slope wound the section of road ruled by the second bandit brother. It climbed, twisted, and ran through the pine grove put to such terrible use by Bender.

Theseus dismounted. “I shall wait here for a caravan,” he said to himself. He unsaddled Melissa, who frisked into the meadow and began to graze. Theseus didn’t have long to wait. By mid-morning of the following day, he saw men and animals coming toward him, led by a plump little man riding a lean horse. The man dismounted carefully. He sauntered up to Theseus and said, “Greetings. Is that your animal in the meadow?”

“Yes, sir, it is,” said Theseus.

“How much do you want for her?”

“She’s not for sale,” declared the boy.

“Nonsense, everything is! How much do you want?”

“Believe me, sir, you can’t buy her. But you can hire us both.”

“What do you mean?” asked the little man.

“You may need an extra pack beast to cross the mountain, but you will also need another drover, an expert one like me. For this road climbs to perilous heights and narrows to ledges where you must go single file. To negotiate the mountain safely, you will have need of all my skill.”

“If your skills as drover and guide are equal to your skill as a bargainer, then indeed you are worth hiring,” replied the man. “But before you name too high a price, please realize that you need us as much as we need you—perhaps even more. For you cannot travel alone and hope to pass the fierce bandit named Bender. But in my company, under my protection, shielded by my unique strategy, you will get safely to the other side.”

“I think we’ll be able to agree on a price, sir,” said Theseus. “I’m perhaps not so good a bargainer as you imagine. May I know your plan for outwitting the outlaw?”

“First, what is your name and your condition?”

“My name is Theseus, and my station in life has yet to be determined.”

“A shrewd answer. He who derives everything from his parents will have less to leave his children. My name is Festus, merchant of Phalaros. I would

tell you how rich I am, but I stay that way by always understating my wealth.”

“I perceive you are a wise man, sir. And one likely to pay an honest wage. But I am eager to hear how you propose to preserve your wealth against the depredations of Bender.”

“I have a slave from Egypt who was trained as an acrobat,” said Festus. “I shall change places with him; he shall be the merchant and I the slave. But his moneybags will hold only scrap metal, convincingly heavy and clinking like gold coins, while my actual treasure—diamonds and rubies—will be concealed about my person. Now this is what should happen. We’ll be stopped by Bender. The merchant will be told to drop his moneybags and come to the tree—from which, in due course, he will be launched. But, trained aerialist that he is, my man will turn a graceful arc in the air, land safely, and flee as fast as he can. Then, as the furious bandit pursues him, I shall simply vanish into the forest, hoping to be out of earshot by the time Bender catches the poor lout and starts doing things to him. I am very softhearted, you see, and tend to be upset by shrieks of agony.”

“A truly original ruse,” said Theseus. “I am proud to serve so able a tactician—and one so compassionate.”

During the journey, Theseus spent as much time with the slave as he could. The man was not only trained as an acrobat, but could walk a tightrope, juggle twelve apples and a melon, and do tricks with his voice. Without moving his lips he could make sounds come out of a tree stump, make a rock speak, a horse sing baritone. Theseus was especially fascinated by his ventriloquism. And the slave, flowering under the boy’s interest, spent hours teaching Theseus to throw his voice. The boy drank up these lessons. Soon he could make his voice come from unlikely places, though he hadn’t quite learned to do it without moving his lips, nor was he able to imitate other voices as his teacher could. Theseus became very fond of the talented slave and hoped fervently that the man would be able to escape the bandit’s wrath when the time came.

After climbing for half a day, the caravan entered a pine grove. Theseus, riding now at the head of the column, kept watching for the second brother to appear. He saw the bandit’s handiwork everywhere. From the boughs of adjoining trees dangled half bodies. He realized what had happened. The

bandit had bound the arms of a victim to one bent pine and his legs to another, so that when the trees sprang apart, the man was torn in two.

Before the lad could digest the entire meaning of this horror, he saw a giant figure standing in the grove, bending a tall pine until its top brushed the ground.

“One moment,” said the bandit. He spoke gently, but his voice was so big that it seemed to be rolling off the crags. “Come see this curious bird’s nest I’ve found. It’s worth a look.”

The merchant in slave’s clothing shrank back among the beasts and bearers, while the richly clad slave walked slowly toward the tree.

Having observed what had happened to Bowl-head for all his fancy plans, Theseus did not have much faith in the merchant’s strategy. But for the moment, it seemed to be working. The disguised slave had obeyed Bender’s command and was leaning over the bent tree. The huge man was holding the trunk in one hand, pressing it lower and lower. Theseus watched, forgetting to breathe. He wanted desperately to call out, to warn his friend away, but his voice strangled in his throat.

He noted that the slave bowed lower as the tree sank, lower and lower, until he was leaning upon it. And when the bandit released the tree, allowing it to whip up with terrific force, the slave was not struck by the branches but traveled up with the tree and was hurled high in the air.

As Festus had foretold, the man, trained as an acrobat, turned in the air, spread his cloak like bat wings, and slowed his fall. He landed on his feet and raced away. Theseus stole a glance back at Festus. The merchant’s face was red as a harvest moon as he tightened his mouth and hooded his eyes, trying to suppress his glee and to escape notice.

But Theseus now heard greater laughter. Bender was gazing after the slave, guffawing and applauding. Theseus saw the blood drain from the face of Festus, leaving it pale and bloated. Reason enough for terror. When violence has begun, an enemy’s laughter is a dirge. Bender, it was clear, had not been deceived.

Sure enough, the bandit turned, covered the ground in two long steps, seized Festus, and lifted him with one hand. He held him dangling. “Very clever,” he snarled. “But my father taught me the scent of gemstones. Diamonds I smell, and rubies galore!”

He spun Festus in the air and held him by the ankles, shaking him like a dust cloth. Jewels rained out of his clothing and flashed on the grass. Bender kept shaking Festus until the last stone had dropped, then he whirled the poor wretch over his head and let go. The man flew through the air, over the trees, and down into the valley below, his screams fading as he fell.

Theseus touched the donkey's flanks with his heels. Melissa stepped quietly backward until she was among the pack animals. The screaming had stopped. Theseus heard only the snuffling of horses and the creak of harness. The donkey picked her way through the herd, then whirled into a gallop. Boy and beast vanished like blown leaves.

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Shady

Theseus let Melissa amble along at her own pace. He was in no hurry now to witness another bandit at his bloody work. Sure enough, though, before the day was over he was hailed by a tall, lean man wearing a bearskin cape and leading a long file of men and pack animals loaded with bales.

Theseus didn't particularly like the look of this unsmiling fellow, but he obeyed his conscience and attempted to warn him. "Sir," he said, "I'll go with you if you insist on crossing the mountain, but I advise against it. It will be safer to go around and bypass the bandit altogether."

The merchant looked down from his tall horse and shook his head gravely. "Nothing is more costly than travel," he said. "Wages for drovers and porters, food for slave and beast ... my own time spent this way when I could be buying and selling; every extra day on the road eats into profits. And it will take an extra week to go around the mountain instead of over it."

"On the other hand, sir, profit profits you little if you're dead," said Theseus.

"There's nothing worse for commerce, my boy, than the gloomy view."

"I am optimistic by nature," replied Theseus. "But I have seen two of the bandit brothers in action, and they have a way of darkening any view. And this third brother, I understand, is the worst of the lot. No traveler has ever survived his attentions."

"None of them had a plan," said the stranger, "but I do. I had the wit to conceive it, and I have the courage to carry it out. In preparation I have recruited a strong company of guards, every one of them skilled at rock climbing and weapon handling, and I have rehearsed them thoroughly for what they must do this day."

"I see no company of guards."

“They have gone ahead and are taking their positions among the rocks, halfway down the cliff, and directly under where the bandit sits to have his feet washed.”

“Then what?” said Theseus.

“Then I shall lead the rest of the caravan along the road until the giant stops us and demands his usual toll. But I shall do more than wash his feet, lad. I shall attach a chain to his ankle and drop it down the cliff. My men below will seize the chain and pull him over the edge. Thirty strong men on the end of an unbreakable chain—over he’ll go! ... And feed that turtle with his own larcenous carcass.”

With the years, the bandit Shady had grown more luxurious in his habits and had made himself very comfortable on his perch. He no longer shaded himself with one oversized foot but every once in a while selected two slaves from a caravan—one to hold a parasol over his head, the other to fan him with a palmetto leaf. They did their work very earnestly; lazy slaves were fed to the turtle.

By this time Theseus did not have to guide his donkey by pressure of hand or knee or even by voice; she seemed to read his mind and move to his thoughts. Now, as the caravan straggled toward Shady’s lair, she sidestepped off the path and climbed to a rise behind the natural stone shelf, where loomed the rock that was the bandit’s throne. There lolled the giant, attended by his slaves. A youth held a parasol over his head; a girl was fanning him with a palmetto leaf. They were full grown, but looked like children next to his great bulk.

Shady himself looked more like a bear than a man, for he was covered by a thick brown pelt. His fur kept him hot no matter how keen the mountain wind, which is why he always insisted on being shaded and fanned. Slaves had occasionally frozen to death at their task, and the turtle had a cold meal that day.

The caravan approached. Theseus watched the deadly ritual begin. Shady’s voice shattered the silence. “Halt!”

The caravan stopped.

“You there, in the fur cape, come here and pay the toll, which is to wash my feet. Your people can start unloading those bales.”

Theseus watched as the merchant knelt before the bandit. He began to wash the giant's feet, dipping a cloth into a basin. With the fur-cloaked shape crouched before the hulking bear-pelted one, it all seemed like a legend out of the most ancient days, when bear gods ruled over the earliest man.

"Stand up," roared the giant. "Why're you clanking? What's under your cloak?"

"My most precious possession," said the merchant. "A golden chain of enormous size and unbelievable value. Take everything else, but leave me this, I pray."

"Are you quite mad?" said Shady. "Why in the world would a legitimate bandit leave his victim anything worth having? Produce it, quickly!"

The merchant had wrapped himself in the chain, whose links had been gilded to look like gold. He spun on his heel, unwinding the chain—then swiftly stooped and shackled one end of it to Shady's ankle. He dropped the other end over the edge of the cliff and leaped out of the way crying, "Pull, men, pull!"

Theseus heard the chain clanging against the rock as it fell, heard the shouting of the invisible men below. He saw Shady being pulled from his rock and begin sliding toward the edge as the chain grew taut. "I can't believe it," said Theseus to himself. "Is this clumsy trick really working? Will they really be able to pull the giant over the cliff?"

Shady braced his legs, reached down for the chain, and snapped it like a thread. Keeping hold of one end, he began to pull. He hauled it up, hand over hand, kept pulling until he had drawn up the entire length. The men came up with it—still clinging to the other end of the chain. They had not dared let go for fear of falling into the sea.

With a great laugh, Shady cast a loop of the chain about them. He swept the men up into his arms, holding them as a child holds an armful of dolls. He walked slowly toward the edge of the cliff and cast them over. Their screaming made a horrid chorus as they fell.

The silence that followed was the most profound that Theseus had ever heard. It was as if the entire deep valley were holding its breath. The great hush was broken by Shady's voice. He spoke to the merchant.

"My feet are dirtier than ever, good sir. You'd better start washing."

The merchant stooped again and began to wash the giant's feet, but he was trembling so much that he tipped over the basin, spilling the water. He was kicked off the cliff before he could refill the basin.

Theseus and the donkey had climbed away by now and melted into the afternoon mist.

The man-eating turtle dined so well that day that he burst his shell and was himself devoured by a nearby shark, which then took the turtle's place under the cliff and happily fed upon those that Shady sent down.

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The Inn

Boy and donkey came to a level place along the mountain pass. They were halfway down the eastern slope, and the shadow of the mountain made an early dusk. Theseus passed through the gateway of a sagging fence and walked toward what looked like a house.

He kicked something, stumbled, and recovered. Stumbled again. Slid. He was treading on a kind of slippery shale; it gleamed in the twilight. He stooped to look more closely.... It was not shale he was walking on but bones. The ground was littered with skulls, arm bones, leg bones, great pelvic baskets—whole bones, massive and shapely, and a rubble of broken bones.

In the midst of this boneyard stood a wooden house, looking as though it had been pegged together, room by room, without design. He went to the portal and knocked. It was a lofty, wide door, but the man who appeared had to turn sideways to slide through. He wore a blood-spattered apron. His tangled gray beard was splotted and sticky.

“Please,” said Theseus. “May I speak to the proprietor?”

“You’re speaking to him,” growled the man.

“Sir, I ...”

“Bloody work sometimes, running an inn. Not all dainty chambermaids and hot dinners, you know.”

“It must be difficult, sir. And I have come to offer my services.”

“Have you now? And where did you hear of me?”

“All the civilized world has heard of the luxurious hostelry run by the gracious Procrustes.”

“Are you jesting with me?”

“You must know, sir, that you do not look like a man to be safely jested with, even by your peers—let alone someone my size, seeking

employment.”

“Again I ask, and for the last time, boy, why here?”

“I want to learn the hotel business. I’m willing to start at the bottom.”

“Oh, I’d start you even lower,” said Procrustes. “But you look too scrawny. It’s hard work, you know.”

“I’m stronger than I look, sir.”

“That’s still not saying much. Do you know what’ll happen if you don’t suit me?”

“I’ll get fired, I guess.”

“You’ll get fed to the pigs. That’s my policy with rejects. Pigs’ll eat anything.”

“Sir, for the privilege of working in this prestigious establishment, I’m willing to adjust to any condition of employment.”

“You’re a polite little bugger, I’ll give you that. No pay during the trial period, of course.”

“I wouldn’t expect any, sir.”

“Think you’re ready for some responsibility?”

“I’d welcome it, sir.”

“I’m going to put you on doom service.”

“Doom service?”

“It gets cold here at night, what with the holes in the wall and so forth. When a guest calls for a hot drink, you’ll bring him one. A terminal tiffin, you might say.”

“Poison?”

“Just a strong sleeping potion. After he’s asleep I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Procrustes took Theseus on a tour of the inn. The rooms were haphazardly floored; some with slabs of slate, others with splintered planks. The floor of the bedchamber was simply packed earth. The bed frame was a rectangular iron grid. The floor under it had been dug away so that the bed stood over a deep pit. Theseus gritted his teeth to suppress a shudder as he saw that the bed was hung with leather straps, chains, and shackles.

“No mattress?” he asked.

“It’d just get in the way,” said Procrustes.

“Don’t the guests object?”

“They have worse things to worry about.”

“Why the hole in the floor?”

“Don’t knock it, kiddo. That pit and the grid construction of the bed save a lot of labor. The blood drips right through the grid into the pit. Two wipes with a sponge, and we’re all cleaned up—ready for the next guest.”

“Innovative ...” murmured Theseus.

“What I am is a benefactor,” said Procrustes. “If you want to know why, just listen. The chief difference between the gods and mankind is that the gods are satisfied with the way they are. Satisfied? Ecstatic! While people keep wanting to improve themselves. And what people want to change about themselves most is their size. Hardly a man or woman alive doesn’t want to be taller or shorter, fatter or thinner. Well, I can’t do much about weight, but I can help with height. This hostel offers not only food and shelter but the ultimate in cosmetic surgery. That bed of mine is one of the noblest products of an inventive and compassionate mind. On that bed, lad, the bed of Procrustes, the too-short guest is stretched, and the one too long is lopped. The bed, the bed, the Procrustean bed! ... made to an ideal length, fitted with wholesome restraints, and tended by the boss himself, mind, a pioneer in the corrective possibilities of chain and ax.”

“I can appreciate your contribution to the art of hostelry, and, of course, to humanity in general,” said Theseus. “It’s just a pity the client can’t stay on to enjoy his transformation.”

“We can only do our best, my boy; it’s all one can ask of any man.... Now, go make a fire and set a kettle on the hob. We have two guests now in the front parlor, one short, one tall. So you’ll be able to see both phases of our operation.

“I’ll do the tall one first,” continued Procrustes, “because stretching takes too much time and gets really loud, what with the stretchee screaming and moaning. It’s likely to scare the other guest off, even if we use the sleeping potion on him. He’ll try to run and I’ll have to take the time to catch him. That’s why we’ll do the tall one first. We’ll do him quick, just a head job, you know, which makes very little noise. Any questions?”

Theseus shook his head mutely. He didn’t dare open his mouth; he felt his stomach turning over.

“All you have to do is watch this time,” said Procrustes. “I want to see if you have the stomach for the work. Too many job candidates end up in the

pigsty because they're squeamish. So you just watch for now—and clean up afterward, of course. Well, maybe you can sharpen the ax.”

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Evander

On the next day, Theseus was sent to fetch firewood. He was past the boneyard and approaching a stand of trees, when he saw something move among the branches. He thought that it might be the bandit Bender coming to visit his father at the inn. A figure loomed before him, holding an enormous tree trunk as easily as if it were a log and sharpening its end with an ax.

Theseus watched, fascinated, as the big fellow raised the trunk high above his head and drove its sharpened end into the earth. Then Theseus saw that he was beardless and could not be Bender. His face was smooth and rosy; he was very young, hardly more than a boy, though a very tall, powerful one.

“What do you want?” the boy called.

“I work here,” said Theseus.

“Just start?”

“Yes.”

“Better quit while you have the chance.”

“Thanks, but I must stay. What are you doing?”

“Making a fence.”

“For wild horses?”

“For pigs. We’re moving the sty.”

“Pretty big fence for pigs,” said Theseus.

“You haven’t seen them, have you?”

“No.”

“Well ... just hope you don’t get a close look. They’re not the kind other people keep; these are wild boars, strong as bulls and fierce as tigers. No ordinary fence’ll hold them.”

“What do they eat?”

“You mean *who*. Checked-out guests are what they’re fed, and staff members whose employment has been terminated.”

“Then, these bones ...?”

“These bones are what’s left of those who have passed through inn and sty.”

“Who are you?” asked Theseus.

“I’m the boss’s grandson, little man, the son of Bender. You may have heard of him. He does a trick with trees and travelers.”

“I saw him at work. I came down that road.”

“Did you meet my uncles?”

“I saw a man with a club.”

“Yes, Basher.”

“And another man with different-size feet, both very clean.”

“Uncle Shady. So you’ve met my father, my two uncles, and, of course, my grandfather, the innkeeper—and now me.”

“An impressive family,” murmured Theseus.

“What brings you to this hellhole, little nitwit? Don’t you realize how soon you’ll be fed to the pigs? And you’ll hardly make a mouthful. You’ll be gone as quickly as an acorn. I don’t even think they’ll spit out your tiny little bones.”

“If that’s the case,” replied Theseus, “it sounds very much as though I’ll need a friend.”

“And what I *don’t* need is a friend who won’t last,” said the other. “It happened once before and made me very sad.”

“Maybe I’ll last longer than you think. What’s in that big basket?”

“You like to ask questions, don’t you?”

“That’s what friends do. What’s in it?”

“Different things at different times,” said the boy.

“What’s in it now?”

“It’s empty. Shall I put you in?”

“Then what?”

“We’ll go mushrooming.”

“Oh, I’d like that,” said Theseus. “But can’t I just walk along with you?”

“My legs are too long. You couldn’t keep up.”

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“Evander. What’s yours?”

“Theseus.”

“Jump in. I’ll keep the lid off so we can talk as we go.”

The great meadow sloped down to a stand of pines. There, where the trees cast a dense, spiky shade, mushrooms grew.

“These were the first fruits grown in the garden of earth,” Evander said. “The Great Darkness left a layer of rich, black soil under the top loam, and that’s what mushrooms need. They’re watered from underneath by demons who hate the light. Everybody knows that.”

“I didn’t,” said Theseus.

“You do now. There are hundreds of kinds of mushrooms, and they’re not all meant as food, not by any means. Most of them are sheer poison. And in between are the kind that make you do weird things.”

“Like what?”

“This white one with the orange dots makes you spin on one leg, and you can’t stop but go faster and faster when you try. This green one with the yellow ruffle makes you jump, and you can’t stop but go higher and higher when you try. Now this one, with brown shading into black, makes you stamp. And you can’t stop but stamp harder and harder as you try. And this little gray and black one makes you laugh. And you can’t stop, no matter how hard you try—not until you’re weak and gasping like a grounded fish.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Theseus. “Have you tried them?”

“I’ve watched cows and goats that’ve eaten them.”

“And they jump and whirl and stamp and so forth?”

“They do.”

“I’d love to see that. Let’s find some cows or goats.”

“I can’t. I’ve got to go back to the inn soon. Look here.” Evander stooped and parted the grass. “These are good, these ugly little ones. You can eat them.”

Theseus twisted his voice, making the mushroom say, “Don’t pick me.”

In utter shock, Evander gasped, “Why not?”

“Because it hurts. How would you like to be torn out of the ground because someone wants to eat you?”

Evander was kneeling beside the mushroom. He swiveled to look back at Theseus with great glossy eyes, just like a startled cow. Theseus felt a great burble of laughter shuddering out of his chest. He laughed and laughed and

couldn't stop. Evander sprang to his feet, crying, "It's you! It's you! It's you talking, not *it!*"

Theseus made his voice come from behind Evander. "It's not him, stupid! It's me, me, me!"

"Oh, please show me how you do that. Teach me to, please?"

Theseus tried to teach him the trick, but the huge lad couldn't manage to throw his voice. He had no guile in him. Nevertheless, he glowed with pleasure and filled the meadow with rich laughter. Theseus had always enjoyed playing with big animals—horses, bulls, and dolphins—seeming to draw health itself from their great bodies. It was the same frolicking with Evander, for he seemed very young despite his tremendous size, and totally innocent. Theseus knew they must be about the same age, but he felt much older.

Suddenly, in the midst of laughter, Evander's face grew sad. It was like a cloud passing over the sun.

"What's the matter?" said Theseus.

"Listen," said Evander. "I have to go back now, but you mustn't."

"Why not?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then don't come with me."

"Shall I wait for you here?" asked Theseus.

"I'd rather you ran away—as fast as you can."

"I can't do that."

"Then wait here. Tonight's the night my father and my uncles come to the inn, and I have to help with the meal."

"I could help, too."

"Stay here, I say. I'll come back as soon as I can, but it'll be a while."

"I'll wait," said Theseus.

"If anyone comes, hide!"

Theseus watched as his new friend strode away across the meadow, swinging the great wicker basket filled with mushrooms. Suddenly, he was gripped by loneliness. He had always liked to be alone; now suddenly it was painful. He tilted his head and whistled. Melissa had been taught to come to him when she heard this trilling, two-note signal. But Theseus knew she couldn't come to him now. He had turned her loose near the top

of the mountain and had instructed her to keep away from the inn—to roam the high ground until he returned. Nevertheless, it comforted him to hear himself whistle and imagine her galloping across the meadow.

To dispel his sadness, Theseus began to race his shadow across the field. He ran and ran until he was breathless, but was still boiling with bitter energy. He walked to the edge of the wood and began to search for mushrooms.

After some time, he fell asleep on the grass. He slept with an animal's alertness and awoke with the sense that someone was approaching. Without rising, he slid through the grass like a snake and into the trees. When he saw that it was Evander running across the field, Theseus dashed out to greet him. Evander's face was blazing, his eyes glittering. He was carrying the basket.

"What's the matter?" said Theseus.

"Do you know what my grandfather told me?"

"I can guess."

"Go ahead."

"He said, 'Be very nice to our new doom-service waiter. I foresee a brilliant career for him, and I don't want him to go to work for someone else.' Is that what he said?"

"Not quite," replied Evander. "He said, 'That new boy won't do. I tested him on a chop job, and he almost fainted when I used the ax. You'd think he'd never seen anyone cutting off a head before. Put him in your basket, take him to the sty, and feed him to the pigs.' That's what he said."

"And what did you say?"

"What I always say. 'Yes, grandpa.'"

"So, the next time you pop me in your basket, you'll take me to the sty, is that it?"

"Listen, he suspects something—that we're friends. He'll be watching, I know, to make sure I take you to the sty."

Evander snatched off the lid of the basket, disclosing a heavy sack of barley resting on the bottom. He scooped Theseus up and perched him on the sack.

"I'm going to pretend to feed you to the pigs," he said. "But I'll feed them the barley instead."

"Suppose they prefer a meat dish?"

“I won’t let them get you.”

“But if your grandfather is really watching, won’t he see through your trick? He doesn’t seem like a man who’s easily fooled.”

“He’ll see me carry a heavy basket into the sty and throw something to the pigs. You’ll scream, making your voice seem to come from the sack of barley. He’ll think you’re being eaten, and go away. Then we’ll have some time to figure out what to do next.”

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The Great Sow

Evander entered the sty. From inside the basket, Theseus could hear the grunt and snuffle of the boars and, worse than that, could smell them. Evander opened the lid and pulled out the barley sack. Theseus peered out through the wicker weave and saw two huge boars ripping it apart with their tusks, making a horrid slurping sound as they buried their snouts in the spilled grain.

Theseus screamed, twisting his voice so that the shrieking seemed to come from the sack. Evander stood among the boars, ignoring their tusks, their hooves, and the terrible hurtling weight of their bodies. They did him no harm. Those that were not feeding snuffled around him like dogs.

Evander made a sharp downward signal with his palm and Theseus ducked. The lid came down. It was dark inside the basket. It swung from side to side, and he knew he was being carried out of the sty. When the lid finally opened, he saw blue sky and jumped out. The sun was a golden wheel; the air, untainted by pig, was a joy to breathe.

“Hey—that screaming was great!” cried Evander. “Grandpa was sneaking around, I saw him. And he thought the sack was you. He went away snarling, which is his way of smiling, the old beast.”

“How come you’re so safe with those dreadful pigs?” asked Theseus. “Is it because you go in and out all the time?”

He stared at Evander. His question had quenched all the pleasure on his friend’s face.

“They’re very smart, those swine,” said Evander slowly. “They know I’m to be the husband of their queen.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m to marry the Sow.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying. What sow?”

“The Sow, the Sow, the Great Sow, Queen of the Swine. They’re selling me to her for a yearly herd of pigs.”

“How can you marry a sow?”

“She’s only half a sow, really.”

“What’s the other half?”

“Giantess. She’s woman-shaped, more or less, but bigger than my biggest uncle, and covered with bristles. And she has hooves instead of feet and two tusks sticking out of her mouth—oh, and poisonous little red eyes!”

“You’re to marry that monster?”

“And soon.” Evander choked back a sob.

“Let’s run away,” whispered Theseus.

“They’ll catch us.”

“Maybe not. You look like you can run very fast. And I have a donkey up there that goes like the wind.”

Again Theseus heard the terrible slurping howl of the sty, but magnified tenfold. Evander’s rosy face went white as cheese.

“Oh no!” he cried. “No, no.”

Theseus saw something charging across the field so fast that it was upon them before they could move. He gaped in horror. It was enormous, woman-shaped, but covered with bristles. It had tusks jutting out of its mouth, hooves instead of feet, and eyes like drops of blood.

“Husband!” she howled. “I’m here! I’ve waited long enough!” She snatched Evander up, big as he was, tucked him under one arm, and galloped off. His screams came drifting back to Theseus.

Murder sang in the lad’s heart. It drove out fear. He knew what he had to do. He reached into his pouch to see whether the mushrooms he had picked that afternoon were still there. Then he ran off toward the inn.

Wild Mushrooms

Creeping into the kitchen, Theseus could hear Procrustes in the dining hall, spouting numbers above the clink of gold. He heard the rumbling voices of the bandit sons.

In the kitchen was the meal Evander had prepared. An entire ox had been divided into three portions for the three brothers. Great slabs of roasted beef were still on the spit hanging over the hot ashes. For Procrustes' dinner a whole sheep had been flayed and roasted. There was a huge keg brimming with barley beer mixed with fermented honey.

Theseus dipped out four flagons of the brew. Into each of them he dropped a minced mushroom—a white one with orange stripes, a green one with yellow ruffles, a brown one shading to black, and a gray and black one. He stirred them carefully so that the fragments were lost in the foam. Then he sneaked into the dining hall, where the four were hunched over the great oaken table. The stacks of gold were lighted by a sheep-tallow lantern that stank and smoked and cast the huge, wavering shadows of Procrustes and his sons upon the wall. Theseus merged with one of these shadows and, agile as a gecko, scuttled up into the rafters.

Crouching on a beam, he watched Procrustes divide the treasure and then sweep the stacks of gold and smoldering heaps of jewelry to one end of the table in preparation for the game of knucklebones.

The brothers brought in the slabs of beef and the roasted sheep. They slashed off great chunks with their daggers, stuffed them into their mouths, and washed them down with barley beer. Theseus was very pleased to see that they drank off the flagons he had drugged with mushrooms before pouring fresh drinks from the keg.

They never finished dinner. Basher, who had quaffed the flagon spiked with the white and orange mushroom, began to spin on one leg. He tried to

stop, but spun faster and faster as the others roared with laughter. They thought he was simply drunk and waited for him to fall and hurt himself.

Bender stopped laughing. He jumped to his feet and kept jumping. Higher and higher he jumped. Finally, he jumped on the table. Ox bones and sheep carcass flew through the air. A glittering shower of treasure went scattering across the floor.

Procrustes and Shady were no longer amused. This was serious, kicking gold and jewelry around. Shady lunged for his brother, hoping to catch him by the leg and swing his head against the wall. But suddenly he began to stamp, pounding the floor with his larger foot, harder and harder as he tried to stop. The floorboards splintered, trapping his foot. He began to stamp with his other foot.

Procrustes, enraged by the way his sons were behaving, seized the thighbone of an ox and advanced on Shady, intending to brain him first, then tackle the others. Then he stopped, dropped his bone club, and clutched his sides as he began to howl with laughter. He howled and gasped and gagged. The laughter had no mirth; it was a grating, phlegmy seizure, which left him breathless and staggering.

Theseus watched in wonder. The mushrooms were succeeding beyond his wildest expectations. He could dare now to hope that the monster band would dance themselves into a drugged sleep. Then he would come down and cut their throats before they awoke.

In the middle of this thought, however, Bender leaped so high that his head crashed into the rafter. That huge head, whose bone was thick as a helmet, hit the beam with such force that the wood splintered. Theseus was hurled off the beam but was able to turn in the air and land upright.

He had to scuttle swiftly across the floor to avoid their trampling feet, but the eyes of Procrustes were upon him. And the terrible old man, although staggering with gusts of laughter, was moving in his direction, those bloody hands reaching out to grab him.

His plan was of no use. Theseus didn't dare wait until they fell asleep. He scampered out of the hall, out of the inn, and across the boneyard, vaulted over the fence, and raced up the hill as fast as he could go.

He finally slowed down and looked back. No one was chasing him, but he couldn't risk stopping. He swung into a trot and continued uphill, whistling the two-note signal for Melissa. Mist was rolling into the valley. It

was hard to see. He kept whistling. He was terrified that one of the bandits might have caught her. A gust of wind blew a rift in the mist, and Theseus almost wept with joy to see the barrel head and long tulip ears coming toward him.

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Rehearsal for Vengeance

Theseus rode Melissa back along the road toward the cliff where he had watched Shady sit and collect his terrible toll. The boy was thinking hard, trying to work out a strategy. But he was empty of ideas.

A gull swooped low, almost brushing his head, and, instead of uttering its usual cry, spoke words:

Balance a boulder
on the left shoulder,
And when you will,
roll it down the hill.

The bird hovered close by as if waiting for an answer. “Must mean something,” Theseus mused. “But what? When birds speak, or beasts, or any of the creatures that throng our sleep, is it perhaps a god’s ventriloquism? But what god speaks to me now?”

The gull swooped again:

Ask not my name,
nor whence I came.
I speak to your need,
so give me heed.

“A gull,” thought Theseus. “The very voice of the sea. So it must speak for Poseidon, my favorite god.”

All at once he felt a great salt wave of health breaking upon his blood.
The gull flew away, screeching wordlessly.

“Its instructions are clear,” thought Theseus. “Balance a boulder on a shoulder, then roll it down some hill. What hill? What shoulder? When the gods deign to speak, why must it always be in code?”

Gazing upward, he saw that the formation of the peak beyond Shady’s cliff resembled a great craggy head with cloud-fleece beard, set between two lower peaks resembling shoulders. And the left one, the left one, yes! was hunched over the shelf of rock where Shady always sat to have his feet washed.

The lad’s yell of joy split the air. The donkey responded with an exultant hee-haw, as if she had been following his thought from the first. She went into a gallop and carried him right up the hill. He dismounted and studied the slope. Sure enough, there, right below, was Shady’s ledge, Shady’s rock throne.

The boy knew what to do, and the donkey worked with him as if they had been rehearsing this for years. Theseus lashed strong branches together into a kind of sled, rolled a big round rock onto it, then harnessed the sled to Melissa, who dragged it up the ridge, allowing Theseus to balance it on the edge of the shoulder-shaped hill.

“So far so good,” he said to Melissa. “We’ll come back with a surprise for the big-foot ogre. Now to Bender!”

Theseus wanted to visit each bandit station before the brothers awoke from their drugged sleep and returned to the hills. The gull had inspired him. As he rode along, strategies flashed through his head, details slid into place.

When they reached the pine grove that Bender prowled, Theseus dismounted and explained to Melissa what he had in mind, speaking to her as if she were human. She tilted her ears so attentively and looked at him with such glowing intelligent eyes that he knew she understood.

In Bender’s grove they worked by the light of the moon. Their preparations were simple but strenuous. Theseus climbed to the top of a pine and wound a rope around the top of its trunk. He descended and tied the other end of the rope to Melissa. The donkey pulled, slogging through pine needles as the tall pine began to slowly bow. The tree groaned. Birds departed. Theseus walked with Melissa, his hand on her withers, feeling his muscles tremble with hers as she struggled against the tremendous strength of the tree. It was too hard, this task. No donkey could bend that pine. But

boy and beast were filled with a kind of magic that night. Moonlight danced in their veins, and with it the wild salt temper of the god who was their patron.

The pine groaned and creaked, bowing lower and lower, until its top branches brushed the ground. Theseus snatched the rope from Melissa's neck and looped it about the base of an oak, racing around and around, circling the fat trunk with his rope, binding the pine to the oak. The rope stretched tight; it sang in the wind. But it was good thick rope, and it held.

When they were finished, Melissa foraged in a hollow tree for honeycombs, which she crunched, bees and all. Theseus ate a crust of bread saved from the inn. They both drank from an icy stream. By this time, boy and beast were exhausted. Donkeys, like horses, sleep standing, but Melissa was so tired she stretched out on the grass. Theseus cushioned his head on her flank, and they slept until dawn.

The Bent Pine

The boy and the donkey awoke at first light. Before bedding down the night before, Theseus had searched through the bales left by a caravan and had found a merchant's clothing. Now he changed costume in the lilac dawn. He donned a clean tunic, a traveling cloak, and a hat large enough to shade his face. He bunched up a length of cloth and stuck it under his tunic to lend him a paunch. He wanted to disguise himself as a fat, middle-aged merchant. It would be difficult to fool Bender for long. Everything had to happen fast or it would not happen at all.

He filled two empty moneybags with rocks and bound them to Melissa's saddle. Then they hid themselves in the woods and waited for Bender to return.

Theseus had chosen a spot that overlooked the road. He saw someone coming up the slope. The figure loomed larger and larger as it came, and the boy recognized Bender. Mounting the donkey, Theseus went a short way down the road, pausing at the bent tree. He sat in the saddle, hat pulled over his eyes, pretending to be unaware of the bandit's approach. He heard a voice rumble, "Dismount!"

"Good morning," said Theseus. "Here's a wonder now—a pine tree bowing to the ground. It could not have been the wind that did this, for the other trees stand straight."

The bandit gazed at the tree and then walked toward it. As Bender approached, Theseus slowly backed the donkey toward the oak to which the pine was tethered. When he saw Bender leaning over the tangled boughs, he snatched out his dagger and slashed the taut rope with all his strength and all his fear and all his hunger for vengeance. The blade sliced through the thick hemp.

The pine tree whipped up with enormous force, hurling Bender into the air. He fell heavily and lay there shaking his head. He tried to rise, but Theseus was upon him with his dagger. He cut Bender's throat, then pulled a hatchet from the bandit's belt and chopped off his head. Theseus spilled the rocks out of the moneybags and stuffed one pouch inside the other so that no blood would seep through. Then he placed Bender's head in the bags and tied the bundle to Melissa's saddle.

He stripped off his bloody tunic and searched among the bales for a fresh one. Taking one last look at the pines, the rejoicing birds, and the big, sprawled headless body of his enemy, he leaped onto Melissa's back, crying, "Well done, old girl! We'll visit Basher now."

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The Man with the Club

Melissa made good speed, considering the steep climbs and descents. Her pace was so gentle that Theseus could sleep while riding. Dreams thronged his sleep, ugly ones and happy ones. In the last dream before waking, he was not himself but Evander, being carried off by the Great Sow.

Theseus awoke in such a fury that he was eager to meet Basher. Despite his rage, though, he proceeded cautiously, reining Melissa up when he saw the bandit standing in the middle of the road, twirling his great glittering club.

The lad knew that Basher robbed first and killed afterward. And his plan, which he had rehearsed with Melissa, was based on this sequence. Basher growled at him, “Don’t sit there gawking. Dismount!”

Theseus swung off the donkey’s back. “Why do you carry that club, good sir?” he said.

“To hit people with.”

“Why do you hit them?”

“Policy. No witnesses. Better that way.”

“Then you mean to hit me, no doubt.”

“No doubt at all. But I’ll take your money first so it doesn’t get spattered with brains. What’s in that sack—gold?”

“Yes, sir. Diamonds too.”

“Bring it here.”

Theseus untied the heavy bag from Melissa’s saddle and walked slowly toward Basher, keeping his head lowered so that the hat brim hid his face. Basher snatched the bag and upended it. Out tumbled a head; his brother’s face lay in the dust, staring up at him out of glassy eyes. A low howl broke from Basher’s lips. He stood there, stunned.

He did not see the donkey circle around and come up behind him. She backed up to him, curled forward, cocking her back hooves, then kicked him in the hinges of his knees. His legs folded. He fell. He tried to pull himself up. But Melissa stood above him, rearing up now on her hind legs.

She let fly with her forehooves, one after the other, striking with such precise force that she drove two hoof-shaped dents into his forehead. He collapsed.

Immediately, Theseus was upon him, hatchet flashing. And the blade that had cut off Bender's head did the same to his brother. Theseus took both heads and stuffed them into separate bags. Both of them swung at Melissa's saddle as she carried her master toward Shady's cliff.

The Edge of the Cliff

Having killed two of the bandits, Theseus was full of confidence as he rode to meet the third brother. Had he been more experienced, he would have known, perhaps, that the gods are like hunters who scorn to shoot sitting ducks but aim at those in full flight. When the Olympians wish to humble a man or woman, they prefer to strike at those celebrating a triumph. Theseus, of course, was being aided by Poseidon and harassed by Zeus. While the sea god gloated over his son's victories, Zeus was prodded into activity. Looking down from Olympus, he was tempted to hurl his thunderbolt and incinerate Theseus on the spot. "No," he muttered. "I must not. I'm bound by my own law not to kill anyone I've wagered against. But I must do something about that pesky donkey that helps him so much."

Theseus, who still had everything to learn about divine whim and human fate, pressed forward toward the shoulder-shaped peak over Shady's perch.

He rode Melissa to the ridge where he had previously balanced the boulder. From there, they looked down upon the bandit, lolling on his throne, waiting for travelers.

"Let's do it now," said Theseus, "before the clouds blow away and he calls back his slaves to shade him and fan him. We don't want to send them over the cliff too."

He dismounted, planted his feet, and braced his hands against the rock. Melissa stood next to him, pushing with her shoulder. "Now!" cried Theseus. They pushed ... the rock began to move. They pushed harder.

Off the ridge the boulder went, bowling down the slope, crushing bushes, leaping cracks, going faster and faster, heading straight for Shady's perch. A cloud of dust arose as it crashed into the three rocks forming Shady's throne.

The giant was hurled off his seat toward the edge of the cliff. He whirled his great arms, scrabbled with his feet, trying to keep his balance. But Theseus came charging down the slope, riding his donkey at full gallop. He yelled with joy as Shady slid over the edge.

Theseus leaped out of the saddle and ran to the edge. He wanted to see his enemy falling—see him hit the water, see the shark fin cutting toward him. But he saw nothing.

To his horror, a hand came crawling back over the edge of stone shelf like a huge crab. Another hand joined it. Both hands clutched the ledge. Theseus saw the muscles bunch and the tendons swell as, with incredible strength, the giant pulled himself up again.

Theseus reached for his dagger, but it stuck in his belt. He felt himself being pushed aside violently; it was Melissa, shoving him out of harm's way. Sprawling on the ground, he saw his donkey rise up on her hind legs and balance there, waiting for Shady's head to rise high enough so that she might strike downward and drive her forehooves into his head with the same lethal double kick that had dented Basher's skull.

The head rose. The donkey struck. But a huge hand shot out and caught her hoof. Shady howled, arched backward, and fell toward the sea, taking Melissa with him. Feeling herself fall, she rolled her eyes toward Theseus in a last pleading look.

Frozen with horror, Theseus watched her fall. He saw the double splash, saw the black fin cutting through the water. And his heart was seared with a bitterness that was to last him the rest of his life as he realized that vengeance achieved can be as treacherous as any other hope fulfilled.

He could not weep. He was ice inside. The hot tears would come, but not now. Not yet, not until he finished his task.

He climbed back to the shoulder ridge and collected the bags that held the cut-off heads. Then he set off toward Procrustes' inn. He could not stop to mourn. He had a long way to go and had to go on foot.

The Procrustean Bed

A full day passed before Theseus reached Procrustes' inn. He stood knocking at the great oaken door once more. His cloak muffled him, hiding the newly sharpened hatchet at his belt. His hat brim was pulled down over his face. In each hand he held a heavy moneybag.

The door opened. Procrustes stood there—huge and blood-spattered, his eyes glaring out of the great gray tangle that was his hair.

“A night's lodging?” said Theseus.

“That's what we offer, good sir,” said Procrustes. “Come in.”

Theseus followed him into the dining hall, so loathing the sight of the hulking figure that he was tempted to abandon all his careful planning—to pull the hatchet from under his cloak and attack Procrustes on the spot.

But rage hardened to prudence.

“Would you like a hot drink, sir?” said Procrustes. “My waiter quit suddenly, the ungrateful little rat, but I'll pour you some wine myself.”

“Thank you,” said Theseus. “But I'd just as soon go to bed immediately.”

“Of course,” said Procrustes. “You've had a long journey, haven't you, sir? Just follow me. I'll show you to your room. And to a bed that is the envy of all my competitors, if I say so myself.”

“I'll take my moneybags with me, if I may,” said Theseus.

“Certainly,” said Procrustes. “You're a man of business, and will sleep more comfortably knowing your money's right there with you. Heavy, they look, those bags. Appears you have enough for a night's lodging.”

“Yes, I'm glad to say I can afford even these luxury accommodations,” said Theseus.

They entered the bedchamber. Procrustes stood there, grinning savagely, waiting to be questioned about the leather straps and the shackles hanging from the bed frame.

“No mattress?” asked Theseus.

“You’ll never miss it.”

“Let me see if I understand the design of this interesting bed,” said Theseus. “The straps and shackles, I imagine, are to bind the guest in place. And the double chain at the foot of the bed with those things that look like bolted anklets ... what are they?”

“Exactly that, anklets. To bolt around the ankles. They’re for the too-short guest. I pull the chains and he stretches until he conforms to the ideal length of the bed.”

“And the ax in the corner—that, I assume, would be to shorten the guest who is too tall?”

“What we call a chop job, sir. But don’t worry about it. You’re too short for the ax. You’re for the stretch.”

“I do hope I’ve brought enough money with me to pay for such special service,” said Theseus. “Count it for yourself, my good man.”

He handed the bags to Procrustes, who immediately turned them upside down. Out tumbled two heads. The innkeeper recognized the faces of his sons and, in pure shock, lifted the heads by the hair. Theseus threw his voice. Basher’s head seemed to speak:

Father, father,
I am dead.
Father, father,
heed my head.

Bender’s head said:

Father, father,
we are dead.
Father, father,
go to bed.

Procrustes dropped the heads. He staggered, then lunged at Theseus, who ducked, seized Procrustes’ arm, and pulled. The innkeeper, impelled by his own weight and the force of his blow, flew through the air and landed on the bed. And Theseus, moving with the magical celerity of a spider wrapping its prey, shackled Procrustes hand and foot.

The innkeeper lay on the bed he had made, bound and helpless. Theseus glared at him. Ignoring the hatchet at his own belt, he chopped Procrustes' head off with the giant's ax. Leaving the headless body shackled to the bed frame, he gathered up the three heads of his enemies, and crossed the boneyard to the pigsty. Swinging each head by the hair, he tossed them over the fence. The pigs ate them like melons.

Theseus felt he had to speak to someone or howl like a wolf. Raising his head to the indifferent stars, he called, "You up there, who play such deadly games with me, know this. I am a poor loser. Evander, I have killed every member of the family that sold you to the Great Sow. One day, when I come into my full strength, I shall rescue you. And you, Melissa—dear, dear beast, faithful, loving heart—I shall follow you into Tartarus before my course is run, and will ride you out through all the legions of hell."

No one was listening up there. But these words were heard by a god below. In his coral castle under the sea, Poseidon was chuckling. His son had not only managed to defeat the enemies that Zeus had thrown in his path but had learned from his ordeal the great lessons that every young warrior must know: that loss is the price of love, that nightmares are the penalty for dreams, and that the chief reward of victory is the chance to fight again.

Theseus's triumph made his father very proud. At the next council of the gods, he could not refrain from teasing Zeus—a very dangerous thing for anyone to do. "Hail brother," he said. "Remember our wager about young Theseus and your royal son Minos?"

"What about it?" growled Zeus. "Do you want to back out?"

"Not exactly," said Poseidon. "The boy's been doing pretty well on the road, as you have surely seen."

"I haven't been watching his career that closely," said Zeus.

"A pity. You've missed some exciting moments. What I'd like to do, actually, is triple our stakes. How about it?"

Those crowding the great council chamber trembled as they heard Poseidon's challenge and saw their king's knuckles whitening on the thunderbolt that was his scepter. For his wrath was catastrophe.

Zeus kept his temper, however, and only glared at his brother, who had sense enough to stop his baiting. But the mischief had been done. Zeus was

boiling with spiteful ideas now—one of which was to sprout into monstrous form, and bring great hardship to Theseus when he finally did challenge Minos, king of Crete.

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SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

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For my youngest grandson,
Luke Evslin,
who has learned too soon about rocks and hard places,
but will be piloted safely through

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Characters

Monsters

Scylla
(CIL uh) A sea nymph studded with wolves' heads who devours sailors

Charybdis
(kuh RIB dis) A huge bladderlike creature who drinks the tides and swallows sailors

The Sphinx
(SFINGKKS) Gigantic stone lioness with woman's head—deadly when she ceases to be stone

Talus
(TAH los) Bronze giant who guards the coast of Crete

Gods (Egyptian)

Buto Cobra-goddess of the Lower Nile

Bast Cat-goddess of the Upper Nile

Sekbet Vulture-goddess of the Sinai

Thoth The ibis-god — wise, kindly, and powerful
(THOHTH or
TOHT)

Gods (Greek)

Zeus King of the Gods
(ZOOS)

Poseidon Zeus's brother, God of the Sea
(poh SY duhn)

Amphitrite Poseidon's wife, Queen of the Sea
(am fi TRY tee)

Demeter Queen of the Harvest
(duh MEE tuhr)

Aeolus God of the Wind
(EE oh lus or ee
OH lus)

Alcyone Aeolus's daughter
(al CY oh nee)

Mortals

Nisus Prince of Egypt who practices magic
(NYE sus)

Minos King of Crete
(MY nos)

Scylla Wolf-girl of Corinth
(CIL uh)

Charybdis Princess of Thessaly
(kuh RIB dis)

Daedalus Great inventor and artisan who serves Minos
(DEHD uh luhs
or DEE duh
luhs)

Ulysses The greatest sea captain of antiquity
(u LIHS eez)

Others

Famine Potent hag who wields hunger

The Pharaoh Father of Nisus
(FAH roe)

Amet, Crown Prince Brother of Nisus

Two Shepherds Parents of Scylla

Captain of Egyptian trading vessel

Assorted Egyptians, Cretans, and Corinthians

Wolves

A bear

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Between Scylla and Charybdis

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Introduction

The Cretan Ships

Before Daedalus, ships of every kind were steered by long, heavy sweep oars pegged to their stern. But the salty old wonderworker who had been exiled from his native Athens and given haven by King Minos of Crete replaced the great clumsy stern-oar with a hinged fin-shaped panel of bronze. He called this a *rudder*, fixed a handle to it, which became known as a *tiller*, and the ships of Minos were enabled to outmaneuver all other craft on the Middle Sea.

Daedalus also changed the rigging of the Cretan vessels so that they could tilt their sails to a quartering wind, allowing them literally to sail circles around the old-style ships which could sail only when the wind was directly abeam. And so the warships of Minos were able to defeat much larger fleets. He not only fought off the beaked ships of pirate kings who, for centuries, had harried the Cretan shores, but was able to carry the fight to the raiders' home islands.

His swift vessels fell upon the enemy like hawks upon doves. He swept the nearby waters of all who dared sail against him, and visions of empire began to dance behind his cold black eyes.

And yet, these inventions of Daedalus's that so brilliantly improved seafaring were to create a pair of monsters who wrecked so many ships and killed so many sailors that they became known as the deadliest maritime hazard of the ancient world. The way this happened is a dire and twisted tale, full of magic and mystery—the story of Scylla and Charybdis.

Shepherds and Wolves

Through the ages, children have proven almost as useful as dogs for herding sheep. So it became the custom of shepherds to marry young and keep their wives pregnant.

Our story begins with a certain shepherd of Corinth who sired eleven sons in thirteen years and whose wife was again big with child. Both parents were awaiting the birth with great hope for they had been informed by dreams that this one would be a girl—something they had wanted for a long time. They decided to name her Scylla.

But the shepherd was never to see his daughter. Awakened by the howling of wolves upon a moonstruck night, he was patrolling a pasture with his dogs when a bush grew too tall. It became a bear rearing up on its hind legs and swept the shepherd into its fatal hug.

Bears don't eat people unless they're famished and this one was only moderately hungry. But the wolves, when they came, ate one leg before turning their attention to the sheep. And what the wolves left, the vultures finished, so that only a few gnawed bones and some bloody rags were left for the widow to burn on the funeral pyre.

She had no sooner scattered her husband's ashes than she gave birth to a daughter, and allowed herself two days to get her strength back before going out with the sheep. For the wolves were emboldened now, and were raiding the herds nightly ... and a widow with twelve children to feed can't take time off.

In the days when humankind was new and raw and wild with delight at finally being created, the gods were sometimes aghast at what they had made. For this youngest race was noisier and more demanding by far than all the other breeds combined. So the gods grew short-tempered. The more impatient ones were quick to punish. They flailed about blindly at times,

and with more force than they intended. When such rage destroyed someone innocent this was called *accident* ... and still is. Accidents also had a stubborn way of following certain families once they struck.

And our shepherd family which had just lost husband and father was to suffer another loss.

The most ancient earth-goddess, Gaia, feeling herself neglected, decided to throw a mild tantrum. She shrugged her shoulders and shook a few hills in Corinth. Boulders rolled, tore up trees, hit other rocks that began to roll—and three villages were buried under landslides.

Our shepherd family dwelt beyond the farthest village, and the widow had been grazing her sheep on a grassy slope. Hearing a strange rumbling, she thrust her baby into a shallow pit—just in time. The rumbling became thunderous and a rockslide swept her away ... her and her sheep and her dogs.

By some fluke, however, the pit mouth was unblocked, and a she-wolf, prowling in search of her cubs, which had also disappeared in the rockslide, heard a thin wailing that seemed to come out of the ground under her paws. Digging swiftly, she uncovered a human baby. The wolf was very hungry, but her udders were painfully swollen with milk, and another hunger stirred in her bereft heart. With a hoarse whine, she folded her legs, and the starving frightened baby suddenly found herself wrapped in warm fur and guzzling a wilder milk.

The she-wolf tenderly closed her jaws about the naked babe and brought her to a den dug into the slope of another hill. There the infant dwelt, suckled by the wolf, who regarded this creature as a curious unfurred cub, slow to learn, but sweet natured. And the mother wolf loved the child with a fierce protective love, and kept loving her even after the he-wolf came back to the cave.

In due time the she-wolf littered again and the baby girl found herself with three wolf-cub brothers—who, in a few weeks, could do more than she could. Two years after that, a tiny tangle-haired fleet-footed girl was flitting through the wooded slopes like a shadow—and was safer in that wild place than any child in Corinth, for she was coursing the hills with five full-grown wolves.

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The Stone Crone

The kingdom of Corinth was a land riddled by sorcery. Its headland was dominated by a tall rock, looking out to sea. It had been sculpted by the wind into the shape of a cloaked hag, and the wind, whistling through its eyeholes, made it moan and howl. The figure became known as the Stone Crone, and was believed to be a sibyl of most ancient days whose prophecies had been so dire that she petrified herself.

People shunned the place where she stood, for they thought that whoever heard the Stone Crone speak with the wind's voice would die of fright. It was also believed that upon certain nights she awoke from her stone sleep and chased after young men, whom she crushed in her embrace.

Of all the folk in Corinth, Scylla alone did not fear the howling rock. She delighted in bringing her pack to the headland on a stormy night. The wolves would sit on their haunches, circling the cowed boulder, looking the way Scylla liked them best—the wind ruffling their feathery fur, their muzzles grinning, their eyes slits of green fire. Her wolf brothers were beautiful to her, and she nestled among them, listening to the wind singing through the rock, making the Stone Crone howl in a way that wolves understand.

A half gale blew upon this night, driving the clouds swiftly across the sky, so that the moon glittered briefly—like a blade. And Scylla, burning with excitement, feeling herself go drunk on sea-wind and moon-flash and weird song, howled back at the rock:

Mother, demon mother,
speak to me ...
Tell me, please,
what is to be ...

She heard the Stone Crone answer:

Wolf-girl, wolf-girl,
you shall stalk
the Son of the Hawk,
And abide the law
of tooth and claw ...
First a wedding,
then the beheading ...

Scylla sprang up. Although not quite full-grown, she was very tall, her body suave with power. Her doeskin tunic, taken from her first kill, fell to the midpoint of her long thighs. She had never worn shoes, and her feet were hard as hooves.

“Thank you, Crone!” she cried. “I don’t know what you mean, but it sounds wonderful.”

She raced off, followed by the wolves. For the wind had shifted, had become a land-wind, bearing the smell of deer, and Scylla and her brothers were suddenly famished for meat.

An Egyptian Prince

Who, indeed, was this “Son of the Hawk” whose name had been uttered by the Stone Crone?

He was Nisus, an Egyptian prince, younger brother of the pharaoh, loathed by the entire court, by the priesthood, and by the military commanders—in other words, by the most potent and dangerous people in the land. Hatred of this nature is usually based on some kind of fear, and the fear of Nisus was planted before he was born. It all began when the high priest and his corps of wizards went into the desert to visit a great demon statue called the Sphinx—which was a woman’s head on a lioness’s crouched body, measuring a quarter of a mile from tip of nose to tip of tail.

According to legend, the Sphinx had deciphered the vital riddle of the future, and upon occasion would turn to flesh and speak to those who came to her, instructing the Egyptians on how to survive in a world growing more dangerous each day. She had not spoken now for many years, but the priests and wizards visited her at sowing time and harvest and Nile-flood, and upon the birth of every royal child. They were visiting her now as the queen went into labor.

She had not spoken in the lifetime of anyone there, and no one really expected to hear anything on this occasion. So the assemblage of bejeweled old men were amazed when the stone cracked and fell away from the blazing body of the lioness. She arose, stretched, rippled her muscles. The empty eye sockets of the woman’s head upon the lioness’s body filled with cold amber light. She spoke:

“Hearken, oh priests and wizards, listen well. Children of the royal line have mortal parents, who are the pharaoh and his queen, but their ancestry stretches back to the first beast-gods of Egypt—to Ra, the Great Hawk, and

to the Horned Moon whose milk is rain, known to you as Hathor, the Sacred Cow ...”

The old men lay prostrate before the Sphinx. Their faces were pressed to the ground because the sight of her, come alive, was too terrible. And they shuddered at the sound of her voice, but sought to answer according to rote:

“Have mercy, Ra, Ra, Hawk of the Sky ...”

“Bless us, Hathor, Sacred Cow ...”

“Cease your monkey-chatter!” roared the Sphinx. “Be silent and heed my words!”

The crouched old men shuddered and were silent.

“A prince is about to come among you now,” said the Sphinx. “He will be born tonight when the shadow of a hawk crosses the horned moon. He is a younger brother and will not rule. But he inherits more than the throne. He shall be gifted with special vision. He shall have the demigod’s crystal eye that slides along the shifting cusps of Time’s great spiral and *remembers* the future. He will tell you truths you are too foolish to heed, but heed them you must, or perish.”

“Not perish ...” quavered the old men. “Not that, please. Ra, Ra, have mercy now. Spare us, Hathor, Sacred Cow.”

“Silence!” roared the Sphinx. A paw lashed out and struck a wizard, pinning him to the ground exactly as a cat pins a mouse. She drew him toward her and lifted him to her mouth. She ate him raw, wriggling, but his head went in first so his screams were muffled by the sounds of crunching.

Priests and wizards swooned in terror. When they regained consciousness, the Sphinx was stone again. She lay still, half-covered by drifting sand, as they had always seen her. And they would have thought that it had all been a dreadful dream except that one of them was missing, and the stone mouth was bloody.

Nevertheless, on their way back to the treasure-city of Rameses where their queen lay in labor, they did assure one another that it had been a dream—that they had been felled by sunstroke, as was not uncommon in the desert, and that as they lay in a swoon, their companion had wandered away, dazed, and was wandering still.

One of the wizards questioned the high priest: “Could we have all dreamed the same dream at the same time?”

“Obviously,” said the high priest. “We must have. For any other notion is intolerable.”

So they all publicly agreed, and secretly knew better. And the words of the Sphinx rankled in them, filling them with fresh fear every time they remembered. And when little Nisus, their new prince, began to speak fluent Egyptian before he was a week old, their terror turned to hatred.

Feeling as they did, they would surely have killed the babe, except that they really believed he was descended from the Hawk and the Cow, from Isis and Osiris, and Set, the Destroyer ... and that whoever dared harm such an infant would, himself, be snatched up by a beast-god and torn to pieces.

Nisus grew into a beautiful boy, lithe, gentle mannered, with a clear fearless gaze. His hair was as black as a night-hawk’s plumage—except for a single lock that turned golden when he was about to utter a prophecy. He would be chatting of this or that, or be listening quietly, perhaps, when all at once a strand of hair would begin to glow like an ember in the middle of his head. And he would say something that horrified his elders. He would speak a simple devastating truth with no trace of impudence or of jeering—but wearing an expression almost of wonder, as if listening to what another person was saying. And indeed, it was as if something else were speaking through him.

One scribe employed by the priesthood wrote down all the child said. “I’ll need a complete record of this heresy,” the high priest had said. “We may find it useful one day.”

One short sentence spoken by the prince was written upon a separate scroll by the scribe, and marked for special notice. It was an utterance that had aroused special hatred.

Standing on a balcony of the palace with his father, watching a victory procession, the boy felt a heat striping his head, and knew that the prophetic strand was turning to hot gold. He heard himself saying to his father:

Our triumphs are disasters ...
Slaves shall be our masters.

The pharaoh was not pleased to hear this, but let the displeasure slide from his mind. He was a dying man and knew that he was dying, and had resolved to let absolutely nothing trouble him.

But the high priest heard, and the scribe, and the words of Nisus were written down on a special scroll, to be saved until the hour of vengeance.

The pharaoh died soon afterward. His eldest son was too young to take the throne, so the pharaoh's brother, a silent brooding man, was named regent, or temporary king, to serve until the crown prince was old enough to rule.

This heir to the throne, whose name was Ahmet, took Nisus aside and said, "Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you when I become pharaoh?"

"If you were to become pharaoh, dear Brother, I should expect dreadful things to happen to me. But since you shall never occupy the golden chair, my future is wide open."

"What do you mean I shall never be pharaoh? Are you plotting against me, you little cur? Are you forming a cabal? Fomenting sedition? I'll have your tongue torn out by the roots, your hands cut off, your eyes gouged out ..."

"Poor Ahmet," murmured Nisus. "I'm afraid you'll have to postpone your brotherly intentions. You're in no position to command the Royal Torturers to do anything. And my prophetic insight tells me you shall never be."

Ahmet raised his ivory and ebony staff and tried to smash his brother's skull. Nisus dodged easily. "You'd be better advised to save your own life instead of trying to take mine," said Nisus. "What you should do, Prince, is bribe a shipmaster to smuggle you aboard and bear you overseas to another place."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you," cried Ahmet. "You'd like me to run off and leave you a clear road to the throne."

"You poor simpleton," said Nisus. "Neither of us is destined to rule. Do you think that sullen brute, our uncle, having held the scepter, will ever let it go? Haven't you seen the way he looks at you, hatred smoldering in his eyes? Why, he hardly bothers to conceal it. Why should he? He's used the Royal Treasury to buy half the priesthood and as much of the nobility as he needs. He's ready to make his move. Inside a week, he will instruct a shocked populace to observe a month of mourning because their crown prince has accidentally died. To demonstrate his grief he may even build a little pyramid just for you. After that, it'll be my turn because I'll be heir,

but he won't find me. Brother, Brother, listen to me. You'd better dig into your treasure chest and bribe that captain."

"You're raving," snarled Ahmet. "I'm going to tell my uncle, the regent, what you've been saying."

"I'd stay away from him if I were you," said Nisus softly, but his brother was stomping away.

Nisus never saw him again. The next day, a terrible rumor flashed from mouth to ear: Ahmet was dead! Sure enough, the Grand Council was convened, and the regent solemnly announced that his beloved nephew, the pharaoh-to-be, had been bitten by a rabid monkey and had expired within the hour in a foaming fit. After decreeing a month of heavy mourning and ordering a magnificent state funeral, the regent made two other announcements: He would spend his personal fortune to build a tomb for his nephew, and he was taking immediate steps to provide for the safety of his younger nephew, Nisus, who, of course, was now heir to the throne.

But when the king's men went to search for Nisus, they found that he had vanished. The regent ordered them to ransack every corner of the kingdom, and they searched all Egypt from the Forbidden Mountain to the Red Sea but found no trace of the strange young prince.

Cobra and Cat

On the third night out, while sleeping on the deck, Nisus was visited by a pair of winged creatures with elongated women's bodies. Their hands and feet were talons; one had the face of a cobra, the other of a cat. They crouched on either side of him, their claws clicking on the wooden deck. He coughed and gasped in the stench of their breath, which smelled like a slaughterhouse floor. The cobra-woman spoke. Strangely, her voice was beautiful, like the wind seething among the reeds that grow on the Nile shore.

"You know us, Nisus. You have met us in your childhood, for you were prone to nightmare."

"And still am, I guess."

"No," she said. "This is not a dream. We are real, painfully real, as you shall learn."

"You are Buto," he said, "Cobra of the Lower Nile. And you, oh silent one, are Bast."

Cat-face yawned, flexing her talons.

"And you, oh failed Prince, belong to a branch of the family we detest," said Buto. "And since you are a mortal, we can safely torment you. But we shall refrain on one condition."

"Name it."

"You are a favorite disciple of Thoth. He has taught you the secret of the mandrake."

The mandrake was a plant with a forked root. When pulled from the ground, it uttered a thin cry like a newborn babe. The Delta folk believed that each plant harbored the soul of an infant born dead, and that mandrake, made into a broth and eaten by a pregnant woman, would make her bear triplets and quadruplets. So mandrake was eagerly sought by slave traders

who would contract with new husbands for all the extra babes their brides could produce.

But the plant was very rare and exceedingly difficult to find without the aid of magic. And the god Thoth, he of the ibis-head, one of the few kindly gods in the Egyptian pantheon, had taught Nisus that magic. But possession of this knowledge was supposed to be a secret, and Nisus was appalled to learn that these fiends had found out.

Now, in the royal court of Egypt criminals were routinely tortured—a criminal being defined as anyone who had happened to offend the pharaoh or one of his favorites. This practice was not confined to Egypt, but it was recognized that this most ancient kingdom could boast of the world's most talented torturers, who had perfected abominations still unknown in less developed lands.... So Nisus, who had grown up at court, was perfectly aware of the variety of agonies that could be inflicted upon the human body. Nevertheless, he did not fear what any mortal could do to him. He knew that if the pain became unbearable he could blank himself out, cast himself into a deep coma, and slip through the portals of death where he would be safe from any man's malice.

But, for all his bravery, Nisus now found himself frozen by terror before the menace of cobra-headed Buto and cat-headed Bast. For these were gods; he could not escape them by dying. They could follow him into the cool glades of death and torment his ghost through eternity.

"Well?" hissed Buto. "Will you do as we wish?"

"Or should we begin doing things?" purred Bast, unsheathing her talons.

"I submit to your wishes," said Nisus. "But I must beg you to be patient. Even with the skills taught me by great Thoth, I cannot find mandrakes that aren't there. But I promise you to hunt as diligently as I can."

"We are not very patient by nature," said Buto. "But we shall grant you a certain amount of time to accomplish your task."

"No tricks!" snarled Bast. "We'll know immediately if you try to deceive us, and you will feel the full weight of our displeasure."

Hissing and yowling, they lifted themselves into the air, and the sweep of their great wings pressed a deeper darkness upon the ship as they flew away.

Nisus didn't know what to do. His whole nature forbade him to obey the beast-gods. He simply could not bring himself to produce more slaves to

sate their greed. But, if he didn't ... It was a hot night but he shuddered at the thought of what they could do to him.

He tried to cast himself into a sleep, something he could usually do. But the terror was biting too deeply; he could not sleep. So he prayed: "Oh great Thoth, wise and kindly ibis-god, instruct me now. For terrible visions have come out of the night. Buto and Bast bid me abet their crimes, and I cannot obey, and dare not refuse."

Again, Nisus heard the sweep of great wings. He cowered to the deck, thinking that Buto and Bast had heard his prayer and were returning to punish him. Whiteness split the night, perched atop the mast. To his delight Nisus saw that it was no flying cobra or cat but an ibis, royal bird of the Nile, favorite incarnation of the great Thoth. The voice of the ibis was like the rich chuckle of the river when it ran swiftly in a narrow place. It shed peace.

"Close your eyes, Nisus," said the voice. "Sink into the realm of deeper knowledge, for I come with a countervision."

Nisus felt himself not sinking but rising into sleep. He seemed to float above the deck. A panel slid open in the profound darkness. He looked upon a radiant sward in a place he had never been. Upon that meadow grazed a herd of enormous cows, big as hippos, and graceful as horses. Their hide was pale gold, their eyes were pools of molten gold, their hooves and horns were gilded. Toward the herd over the shining grass slithered two shapes—a cobra, long as the ship's anchor line, and a cat the size of a tiger. Nisus knew that they were Buto and Bast, but wingless now.

Two cows raised their head, swished their tail, and galloped toward the invaders. The cobra rose upon its coils, its hooded head weaving, its tongue darting. The cat crouched to spring. The cows were blurs of gold as they leaped into the air. One landed upon the cobra, one upon the cat, their sharp hooves chopping. The cobra wriggled free; it was bleeding. And the cat was limping. Hissing and snarling they returned to the attack. Now the cows met them with lowered horns. They used those horns as a fencer uses his sword. One cow impaled the cobra and lifted it, writhing, into the air. The other cow drove her gilded horns straight into the cat and pinned it to the grass.

Nisus watched as the snake and the cat died. The cows withdrew their bloody horns, wiped them clean upon the grass, trotted back to the others,

and began again to graze. Snake and cat vanished, then the meadow vanished. The gold slowly faded.

Nisus was standing on the deck. A cool night wind bathed his fevered face. He stretched his arms to the ibis. "What does it mean?" he cried.

"It means," said the ibis, "that golden cattle are your only bulwark against Buto and Bast."

"And what does that mean?" said Nisus.

"Buto and Bast recognize no law save their own desires," said the ibis. "They fear but one power, that of Hathor, the great mother, the golden cow that rides the sky at night and whose milk is rain. Therefore you must go to Crete and raid the unique herds of King Minos, taking three golden cows and one golden bull. That is the meaning of your dream. And you must take cows and bull to the Isthmus of Corinth, for there alone grows grass rich enough to pasture the golden cattle. You shall abide in Corinth. Your bull will be a bull; the cows will calve; your herd will grow. And Buto and Bast, who dread only Hathor, will view the golden cattle as a sign of her favor, and will refrain from harming you even though you defy them in the matter of the mandrake. Do you understand?"

"Not completely, my lord."

"Well, you shall learn by doing. Change the course of this vessel and sail for Crete."

"I thank you, great Thoth," cried Nisus.

The white bird uttered a rich chuckle, and his white shape split the darkness again as he flew away.

The Bronze Giant

When morning came, Nisus asked the captain to put about and sail for Crete. This captain, who was also the owner of ship and cargo, refused. Nisus gently repeated his wish to visit Crete.

The captain, remembering that this difficult passenger was a prince, after all, tried to bridle his temper and explained that he had no intention of changing course for the pirate-infested waters to the west. What he meant to do, he said, was skirt the coast and sail north to Phoenicia where he would trade his holdful of Egyptian cotton for Phoenician dye and cedar planks and cedar oil from Lebanon.

Even more gently, Nisus stated that it behooved the captain to change his course. For he, Nisus, promised to protect ship and cargo from all pirates, and would lead the entire company to splendid adventure and fabulous wealth.

“Even if I were inclined to believe your crazed promises,” said the captain, “how do you think I could manage to sail directly against a head wind?”

“You take care of the navigation,” said Nisus, “and I’ll take care of the wind. I’ll whistle one up that will take us right to Crete.”

“I’ve heard enough,” cried the captain. “Be silent immediately or I’ll have you chained like a madman and set you ashore at the first landfall.”

Whereupon, it is told, the amazed crew saw the prince’s head catch fire. Then they realized that what they saw was a single lock of his black hair changing color, glowing red-gold. They saw him raise his hand, his fingers making horns, and point at the captain—who uttered a shriek, raced across the deck, and leaped into the water.

Nisus put his fingers to his lips and whistled. The crew heard the masts creak as the wind shifted. “Put about!” cried Nisus. They seized the lines

and pulled down the huge clumsy sail, then raised it again as the bare-masted vessel swung around, pointing its prow at the setting sun.

The captain was still afloat, but soon became a speck as the ship scudded toward Crete under a freshening east wind. They still heard his screams, and knew that sharks were gathering.

King Minos summoned Daedalus to the palace and said, "I have another task for you, my artful one."

"It is my pleasure to serve you," said Daedalus, bowing low.

"I want to arrange the security of this island while my war fleet is absent—which will happen more and more frequently as I begin to attack my neighbors in a serious way. But the seas are wide. Anyone who can sail a ship is a potential enemy, and can raid us while I am invading someone else."

"What you need then," said Daedalus, "while your navy is patriotically pursuing your plans for empire, is something other than a war vessel to repel enemy shipping. Do I understand you correctly?"

"You do."

"Give me a few hours to think, Your Majesty, and I shall return with a plan, Athena willing, of course—and Hephaestus."

"Oh, I think my half brother and sister will favor our designs," said Minos, "and inspire you with another of your brilliant notions."

He spoke this way because he sought every opportunity to claim that he was a son of Zeus, something he wasn't too sure of but wished fervently to believe, and even more, to make others believe.

But whether the gods did, indeed, favor Minos, or whether imperial designs are advanced by some other agency, Daedalus was again kindled by inspiration almost divine. He created a unique sentinel for the island of Crete.

It was a statue cast in bronze, the great hollow of its thorax stuffed with springs and wheels and cogs so artfully constructed that they endowed the bronze figure with its own weird energy. Daedalus named him Talus, meaning "ankle," for the energy flowed through a veinlike channel that ran from head to foot. The vein was stoppered at the ankle by a single bronze pin. There was never a sentinel like Talus. Tall as a tree, tireless, invulnerable to weapons, he was completely obedient to the orders issued

by Daedalus. He circled the island three times a day. Whenever a ship approached, he threw boulders at it, sinking it, or driving it off.

One of the under-officers approached Nisus and requested permission to speak.

“Permission granted,” said Nisus, smiling at him—which confused the officer because the former captain had smiled only when about to do something cruel. This is why none of the crew had been sorry to see him go overboard.

“What I wanted to say, Your Highness, is that these waters have proved perilous of late.”

“Pirates, do you mean? Why, we haven’t seen a sail in days.”

“No, Prince, the war galleys of Minos have swept these waters clear of pirates. And that war fleet itself is no menace to trading vessels; the Cretans are eager for trade. But Minos is away now; his ships blockade the island of Thera. And when the king sails off with his fleet, he leaves a giant patrolling the shores of Crete. He hurls boulders at any ship that approaches. He usually hits what he aims at, and what he hits, sinks.”

“A single giant to patrol the entire coast?” said Nisus. “That would hardly seem sufficient.”

“He’s supposed to be some sort of extraordinarily magical monster, performing far beyond what flesh and blood can do.”

“Well, my good man, you awaken my curiosity. I’m eager to see this unusual creature. Don’t worry, though. I shan’t endanger ship or crew. We’ll anchor a safe distance offshore, and I’ll smuggle myself onto the island in a small boat, do what I have to do, and return to you.”

“Oh my Prince,” cried the man. “We have known you only a few days but we have learned to love you. Now you’re proposing to throw away your life trying to do what no man can. I pray you, desist. And I know that I speak for the entire crew.”

“Thank you,” said Nisus. “I value what you have told me more than you can know. Still, I must ask you to have faith in me and not despair of my life. I may be a bit magical myself, you know.”

Having been warned of the bronze sentinel that patrolled the Cretan coast and hurled boulders at approaching vessels, Nisus kept his ship offshore and, when night came, dived overboard and swam in.

He slept on the beach, and in the morning pushed inland, looking for the cattle. He found them grazing on a meadow, and stared in admiration at the great sleek animals, hot gold against the green grass.

He heard something and whirled about. Coming toward him was what looked like a giant in full armor. Then he saw that it was not armor. The giant *itself* was made of bronze, but moving as if alive. Nisus came to a lightning decision. He knew that he would be helpless in the grasp of that metal monster. Knew that he had only one chance—and only if he was able to reach the beach.

He needed to be on the beach because he needed sand. One of the wizardries he had learned from Thoth was the *djinn* trick of calling up a sandstorm. The ibis god had taught him a magic whirling dance that would make the sand rise in tall spouts and whirl with him. Then the spouts would go where he pointed.

He was racing through a fringe of trees toward the beach. He had chosen this route because Talus was too wide to pass between the trees and had to crash through the bush. Nevertheless, the bronze giant was enormously powerful and could cover twenty yards at a stride—and had almost caught up to Nisus before he burst out of the trees onto the beach.

Nisus immediately began to whirl. Tall spouts of sand arose and whirled also. Nisus whirled faster and faster, trying to thicken the flying sand to make himself invisible. Then, suddenly, remembering how the metal monster was constructed, he had another idea. To move the way it did, it had to be jointed at shoulder, elbow, wrist, hip, knee, and ankle. But being made of bronze and having no hide, the joints were open.

Whirling among the spouts of sand, Nisus pointed to Talus, who was groping toward him. The sand spouts moved that way and swirled about the towering figure. Nisus stopped whirling. The air cleared. The giant stood stiffly on the beach. Stiffly, creakily, it was trying to raise one massive leg. With a mighty effort it began to move toward Nisus, but rigidly, so slowly that Nisus saw that his idea had worked. Sand had settled into the metal joints, clogging them, making it almost impossible for the monster to move despite its inhuman strength.

So Nisus was able to race back to the meadow, cut out three cows and a bull, and drive them to the beach and into the sea before Talus had moved ten yards.

Nisus swam the cattle out to the ship, and heard the men cheering as he approached.

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Prince and Wolf-girl

Scylla crouched on the brow of a hill, howling to the moon. She was very lonesome. It was spring, and the rest of the pack had paired off, leaving her to herself. She raced downhill and through the woods, over a meadow and up a steeper slope to the top of the headland which looked over the sea.

She walked toward the cliff's edge.

"No-o-o," called a cavernous voice.

She whirled about. It was the cowed boulder, the Stone Crone; her eyepits were full of moon-glare; the wind was blowing through her mouth-hole and was a voice.

"No-o-o."

Scylla faced her. "No what?"

"Don't do it. Don't jump."

"I don't want to live anymore," cried Scylla. "I'm too lonely."

"You have come into your strength. It is springtime. You need a mate."

"I can't find one. I'm too different."

"It's time you learned that," said the Crone. "You're not a wolf. You're a girl. You must find a man."

"A man? Never! Good-bye. I'm going off the cliff."

"That won't solve anything."

"Why won't it?" said Scylla.

"Those who kill themselves, particularly those who are young, return as resentful ghosts who wander the earth trying to reclaim their estranged bodies. Such ghosts are the very essence of loneliness, and are condemned to wander through eternity never finding what they seek. You must try another way."

"What way?"

“Do you remember what I told you once when you asked me what was to be?”

“I remember some windy verse. I was very happy that night. I was among my brothers. It was beginning to storm. Everything was wild and beautiful.”

“I’ll tell you again what I told you then:

You shall stalk
the Son of the Hawk ...
First a wedding,
then the beheading ...

“I still don’t know what that means,” said Scylla.

“It means that someone is coming to Corinth—

Strong in battle,
rich in cattle ...
He is your destiny.

“Not if he’s a man,” said Scylla. “I can’t bear men. They’re too ugly—with their bald bodies and useless noses and dull eyes and tiny teeth.”

“He’s not quite a man,” said the Crone. “He’s part wizard, as you are part wolf. He’ll know how to please you.”

The Crone fell silent. Scylla moved to the edge of the cliff and looked down upon the dark heaving mass of the waters. It was a long way down. Surely, such a fall would shatter even a stubborn ghost. She shuddered, backed off, turned and raced into the woods.

The next day, Scylla was prowling the edge of the forest. She hadn’t eaten, but was too disheartened to stalk any game. She stiffened as the wind brought her a rich meaty smell. She followed the spoor across a meadow. In the distance she saw a blur of gold, and circled so as to conceal herself among a fringe of trees. Moving silently, blending with the shadows, she came close enough to see.

The odor was coming from three golden cows and a golden bull. Scylla hadn’t realized how hungry she was. She slavered as she watched the cows. She wasn’t sure she could pull one down without the help of other wolves.

For these animals were enormous, and the bull was larger still; his gilded horns were sharp as spears, and he was carved of living muscle.

The bull bellowed suddenly and lowered his horns. The cows gathered in a tight group and became a hedge of horns. Scylla saw why. A bear was lumbering toward them across the meadow—a springtime bear, fresh out of hibernation, famished and foul-tempered.

A man sprang out from behind the cows and placed himself in front of the bull, facing the bear. Scylla gaped in amazement. She hadn't smelled him. He didn't quite smell like a man; he smelled of spice-wood and hot sand. He wore only a short, embroidered apron and a spiral hat. He was very slender, boyish, almost birdlike, not one to fight a beast that the mightiest hunter dared not face alone.

The bear reared up, towering over the man, prepared to take him into its fatal hug. Scylla stared at the man. Was he actually smiling, or was his face twisted by a rictus of fear? He raised his right hand and pointed at the bear. His fingertips glowed. Five streams of blue light flowed toward the bear. It whimpered and dropped to all fours—rolled over like a huge affectionate dog, waving its paws in the air. The man laughed aloud and tickled the bear's belly. The huge animal whined with pleasure.

Without conscious decision, Scylla found herself walking across the grass. She stood before him. She was much taller. Looking at his slender figure and seeing a smile kindle his face as he gazed back at her, she was swept by a desire to do what the bear had failed to do—hug him to her until she felt his ribs breaking. If he dared raise his candelabra of a hand to melt *her* will with blue flame, she would seize that arm, whirl him off his feet, smash him to the ground.

He did not raise his hand. But one lock of black hair turned red-gold. She couldn't stop herself from gasping.

“What's the matter?” he said.

“Your hair's on fire.”

“No it's not.”

“I see it. Some of it's burning.”

“Just changing color,” he said. “It's not hot. Feel ...”

He tried to take her hand and put it on his head. She bit him. He stared at his bleeding hand in wonder, then stared at her. She was licking the blood off her lips.

“You bit me,” he murmured.

“You tried to burn me.”

He shook his head, a head that changed as she watched. His hair became feathers. His eyes grew huge and flared with wildness. Nose and mouth merged and solidified, became a sharp beak. It was a hawk’s head he wore. Great wings sprouted from his shoulders.

“What are you doing?” she cried. “What are you?”

“A prince of Egypt,” he said. “Rightful heir to a throne I shall never occupy. Nevertheless, blood is stronger than politics, and Egypt’s rightful king on certain great occasions can become an earthly mode of Horus, the hawk-god.”

“Can you use those wings?”

“On great occasions.”

He seized her. She drew back her fist, preparing to knock him senseless—for a blow from that fist could fell a full-grown stag. But before she could strike she felt herself being lifted into the air, a feeling so delicious that she unclenched her fist and wrapped her arm about his waist as he bore her upward through the shining air.

They were level with the cliff top now. Beyond it she could see a great blue drench of sea. Looking down over her other shoulder she saw all of Corinth beneath her, and realized for the first time that what had seemed large as the world to her was only a narrow land bridge between two landmasses.

Nisus sent a prayer eastward. “Dear Thoth, cross my flight. Appear to us and bless our marriage.”

His heart thrilled as he saw a great bird coast down toward the cliff and clutch a spur of rock. He swerved in the air and headed toward the cliff, holding her more tightly. They landed on the shelf of rock, and Nisus saw that the winged one that had answered his call was not the holy white ibis but Sekbet, the vulture-headed goddess of the Sinai.

Scylla heard her hawk-man utter strange gargling words to the towering vulture-headed female, crying “Sekbet ... Sekbet...” Nisus knelt before her and pressed Scylla to earth. She felt rage growing in her, but was dazed by strangeness and did not resist.

Sekbet was saying words above their heads. She shadowed them with her wings, grasped the arm of each in her clawlike hands and lifted them to

their feet. Scylla felt her face being pressed to the hawk's face. Then Sekbet flew away. Nisus balanced on the shelf of rock, watching her dwindle in the shining air. He turned to Scylla.

"We're man and wife," he said.

The words meant nothing to her. Wrapping her arm tightly about him, she crouched on her powerful legs and sprang off the rock so that he had to stretch his wings and coast on a current of air. She laughed with joy. He meant nothing to her but the wonderful new idea of flying.

Their marriage was an uneasy truce. He had taken her high and tamed her with pleasure. But when they returned to earth, when he put off his hawk's head and wings, then she resented him. He had worked a sorcery upon her, she knew. He was happy, this stranger. He was exulting because he had tamed the wolf in her. He dared to glow with a pride of ownership, and her resentment grew.

The ibis visited the prince's sleep and said: "You really can't tame a wild animal. You can cage it and bribe it and beguile it, but you must never let your attention lapse or it will turn on you and rend you."

But for the first time in life Nisus chose to ignore a warning from Thoth. He was obsessed with his big gray-eyed, leaf-smelling girl. Each time he embraced her he entered the core of mystery—felt himself touching the primal power that had formed a rubble of chaos into the garden of earth, and ignited its mud to life.

The Beast-gods Strike

There was a species of earth-goblin with stunted legs, shovel hands, and big yellow blunt teeth, and these misshapen creatures had proven very destructive when Egypt began. They had almost caused it to end as soon as it began because they attacked crops from underneath, pulling plants down by the roots and devouring them so greedily that they often bit their own fingers. And the people and animals were left to starve among their stripped fields—men and women and children and cattle.

They prayed for help, not really expecting any, but not knowing what else to do. But the god Thoth, always a friend to humankind, heard their prayers. He sent the goblins a collective dream; they saw a stand of delicious fat tubers growing on the slope of a certain mountain. Drunk with greed, the entire tribe came above ground and rushed to the mountain—where Thoth was waiting with a great net.

He cast the net and caught the goblins, and bore the packed screaming mass to a dead crater. He dangled the net above the crater and threatened to throw the goblins in, then hurl huge boulders down upon them. His captives screeched and wept and pleaded with him—until he agreed to spare them on one condition: that they would devour no more crops but feed only on underground herbage and earthworms. He bade them swear a mighty oath, then released them, and they scurried down the nearest hole, so frightened that they shunned ploughed fields forevermore.

Now it is not the nature of gods to accept defeat, and among the Egyptian gods, the evil ones far outnumbered the good ones, and were even more stubborn. And Buto and Bast were perhaps the most stubborn and vengeful. Thwarted in their effort to bind Nisus to their purpose, they cast about for

another way to locate mandrake roots and make the Nile wives more fertile so that they might produce more babies for the slave trade.

It was a scorching day. The cat-goddess and the cobra-goddess had buried themselves up to their heads in Nile mud, trying to keep cool. Those heads were hissing and whispering to each other:

“I was thinking,” said Buto. “Do you remember an ancient tale of vile little goblins who used to eat all the crops before Thoth stopped them?”

“Dimly,” said Bast. “What about them?”

“I don’t know,” said Buto. “But I may have the glimmer of an idea. I’m going to leave you now.”

“Leave this cool mud and go out under that sun? You’ll regret this.”

“No, I shall find a hole and slip underground. It’s quite cool if you go deep enough, and I want to do a little hunting.”

“Hunt what—worms?”

“Farewell,” said Buto, and slithered out of the mud.

The cat-headed goddess settled herself more deeply, closed her eyes, and slept. She was awakened by a sound of weeping. A purple dusk had closed in and Buto had returned bearing something in her jaws. She set it on the ground for Bast to see. It was a squat twisted figure with bowed legs and shovel-shaped hands and blunt yellow teeth. His face was writhing with fear, and he was weeping.

“What is it?” said Bast.

“One of those goblins I was telling you about,” said Buto.

“Can you make it stop that horrible blubbing?”

“You heard my friend,” said Buto. “Shut up!”

The goblin wept louder than ever. With one hand Buto seized him by the neck, with the other she scooped up some mud and stuffed it in his mouth. He choked and coughed, and spat out the mud—and clamped his teeth tight so that he would not sob.

“That’s better,” said Buto. “You might as well start learning to be obedient. You’re going to spend a long time serving us and any disobedience will bring much pain.”

“If we must have a servant, let’s get a prettier one,” said Bast. “I can’t bear to look at him.”

“You won’t have to. He’ll be gone most of the time, digging up mandrake roots.”

“Him?”

“Certainly,” said Buto. “I tortured him a little on the way here and learned all the goblin secrets. Dwelling underground they know more about plants than anyone. Nisus may have learned the secret of the mandrake from Thoth, but these creatures were born knowing it. He’ll bring us armfuls of roots every evening. We’ll make him come by night so we don’t have to see him. And so the pauperized Nile wives will bear many children. The slave traders will buy them and pay us a rich commission.”

And it all happened that way. But success did not lull their hatred of Nisus. For among the traits that compose an evil personality is the tendency to forget friends in prosperity, but not enemies. And the cat-goddess and the cobra-goddess remembered Nisus with loathing, and often discussed what they would like to do to him if he were not protected by the magic of the golden cattle.

“We’ve amused ourselves by talking about that scurvy little rat long enough,” said Buto. “It’s time for action.”

“What kind of action?” said Bast. “He’s girded about with those accursed golden cattle and is immune to our direct assault.”

“There’s such a thing as indirect assault.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Let us fly to Corinth, you and I, and make some on-the-spot observations, what do you say?”

Bast purred agreement. They spread their wings and flew north by west over the Middle Sea.

The beast-goddesses separated when they reached Corinth, for they had agreed to divide the task—Buto to learn all she could about Nisus; Bast to pick up information about the strange girl he had married.

They met again three days later, and each knew that the other had much to tell. “You go first,” said Bast.

“Well,” said Buto, “it seems that our little fugitive has prospered in this place. There is a verse about him on everyone’s lips; it goes like this: ‘Rich in cattle, strong in battle’—for Nisus has made himself the most powerful man in Corinth. His herds have increased, and with the increase, his influence has grown. He has been able to pacify the twenty warring chieftains whose tribes were always massacring each other. Some he was able to persuade, others he vanquished on the field. In short, he imposed

peace upon them, and became, in effect, king of Corinth, although he does not call himself so. The one thing he is not praised for is his marriage. His bride seems to be no one's idea of a queen."

"Aha!" cried Bast. "I have learned much about her. She's a half-savage thing, they say—raised among wolves. He practically snatched her out of her den, it seems, and forced her into marriage. Well, not forced her, perhaps, but he was able to put on the hereditary Horus form, assume hawk-head and hawk wings, and introduce her to flight. And that pleased her so much she agreed to marry him. But now, it appears, he never puts on his wings; they have virtually stopped flying, and she grows restless."

"I heard something else that may prove important," said Buto, "although it may only be rumor. It is said that Minos, king of Crete, from whom Nisus stole the golden cattle, has decided to come with an invasion fleet, reclaim his cattle, and punish Nisus. All in all, my dear Bast, the situation seems ripe for some creative mischief making."

"Ripe indeed," purred Bast. "And I think we should start with this wild waif he took to wife. What do you say we cook up an interesting dream for her?"

"Excellent!" cried Buto. "We'll do it this very night."

In her dream, Scylla found herself near the great roasting pit in the courtyard of the castle. The fire blazed and the flayed sheep was turning on the spit. She was very hungry, but the odor of the roasting sheep revolted her, and she knew that she would never eat cooked meat again.

Then she was on the bank of a narrow, swift river, kneeling next to a wolf that was hooking fish out of the rushing water. He was teaching her, and she was able to snatch fish out of the river with her hand, and eat them alive. And the taste of the living food was a powerful boon to her, and she knew that she must again dwell among the wolves, and shun the enclosures of humanity forevermore.

Then it was night. She was among the wolves, throbbing with joy, climbing a hill to greet the new-risen moon. For summer had gone; the air was crisp, and the wind freighted with the smell of game—and the risen moon that night would be a hunter's moon. The pack climbed to the very top of the knoll and began to call the moon to its full rise. And the howling was music to her ears.

The wind had shifted to the east now and was bringing a new smell, not of deer, but of rich beef, sleek and fat and slow of foot. She howled louder than the others and began to run down the slope, calling the pack to follow, racing to the meadow where the golden cattle grazed. She was flanked by her den brothers. She dug a hand in the ruff of each and felt herself being borne along, her feet barely skimming the earth.

She awoke from her dream. Her husband was asleep. Quiet as a shadow, she slipped out of bed and out of the chamber.

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The Wolf Pack

Nisus awoke in the middle of the night to find himself alone. He hadn't heard her leave, but she could move with absolute silence when she wished. He went to an arrow-slit and looked out upon the garden. It was swimming in moonlight. He went back to bed but could not sleep.

She came with the dawn, stepping silently. He did not question her, just stared. Her nature was too direct and violent for pretense. She stood stiffly, her hands clenching and unclenching. Her eyes were glowing, her lips swollen. He saw that she was trying to subdue a profound excitement. When she spoke her voice was hoarse and clotted.

“Some nights I can't sleep. I must run beneath the moon.”

“Where did you run to?”

“Nowhere. I kept within the castle grounds.”

He felt his hair glowing. The chamber disappeared. He saw a moon-silvered meadow, huddled cows, shadowy shapes leaping, eyes that were pits of green fire, flashing teeth. He heard howling, snarling, the phlegmy scream of a cow in agony. He saw that cow lying on the ground, belly torn out, something dragging at its entrails.

He put on his cloak and took his spear, and without a word to his wife left the chamber. She looked after him, growling deep in her throat. She knew where he was going and what he would find.

A wolf slid into the room—a great gray male with black markings. It laid its head in her lap, then took her hand in its jaw, those jaws which could bite through the thighbone of a running stag, but which could also hold an egg without breaking the shell. She withdrew her hand and pushed the head away. She spoke to the wolf—not in shaped language as humans speak, but in grunts, yelps, whinings, faint howls. Most of it was without sound,

though; she probed its eyes with hers so that her thoughts could pierce its head, and the wolf could send its thoughts back.

“Why are you here? I bade the pack leave Corinth tonight and hide in the hills beyond.”

“I came to get you. We want you to come with us.”

“I can’t. I must stay here.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand. I don’t understand, myself. But I must. At least for now. Leave me, Brother. Gather the pack and hasten out of Corinth to the hills beyond.”

The wolf stood on its hind legs and put its forepaws on her shoulders, and licked her face. It dropped to all fours and sprang out of the room.

Tears welled from her eyes and ran down her face, but she made no sound of weeping. “They still have time,” she thought. “He’ll find the dead cattle and wolf tracks, but he won’t be able to organize a chase until morning. By then they should be safely away. But will he know that I ran with the pack under a hunter’s moon? That I did what I have longed to do for so many months? That I howled upon the hilltop and called them together—and we ran the cows as if they were deer, and, oh glory, once again I used myself as I should be used, hamstringing the first cow and bringing her down so that the others could feed? Oh, the sweet wild taste of blood in my mouth, the immense fellowship of furry shoulders pressing mine, crisp air in my lungs as I ran and ran with my brothers, and the dazzle of the low-riding moon in my eyes—Yea, the hunter’s moon, lighting up our prey, but etching shadows so that we could not be seen. Such a night is worth dying for, which I well may do, if he learns that I actually hunted with the pack tonight.”

Scylla, however, had underestimated her husband’s weird insight, which canceled time and abolished distance. He didn’t have to visit the meadow to know what had happened to his cattle. Before leaving the castle he ordered his archers and spearmen to ride out with him on a great wolf hunt.

The horses were swift, and the wolf pack, unused to fleeing anyone, traveled at a leisurely pace. The hunters caught up with the wolves as they entered a deep valley. Nisus ordered one party to ride ahead and block the outlet of the valley. He stationed another group at the valley mouth. Then he

arranged his archers along the sides of the valley where they could look down upon the file of wolves trotting below.

“Now!” cried Nisus.

The archers launched a deadly hail of arrows. The spearmen rode down and drove their weapons into any wolf that was still alive. When all the wolves were dead, Nisus ordered their heads cut off. Returning to the meadow at dawn, he bade his men stick a wolf’s head atop each spear and drive the hafts into the ground.

Then he galloped to the castle and asked Scylla to ride out with him. He led her to the meadow and showed her the furry heads grinning atop the spears. “This bloody palisade,” he said, “will serve as a warning to all beasts who seek to ravage my herds.”

Scylla did not answer. She turned her head so that he could not look into her eyes.

The Invasion

Minos sailed against Corinth with seven hundred war vessels, each carrying thirty men-at-arms in addition to its crew. So he was able to disembark an army of twenty thousand men after an unopposed landing on the beaches of Corinth.

Everything went easily at first. He was able to secure his beachheads and move several miles inland before nightfall. Only one thing marred his satisfaction. He had seen no sign of any Corinthian. He would have preferred to have been marching over corpses; the advance would have had more reality for him—but the fishing villages were totally deserted and the few farmhouses were empty, and their fire-pits cold.

Then things changed. It was a sweltering night. Clouds hid the moon and stars, and the men had fallen into a heavy sleep. Then, suddenly, the wet darkness fledged strangers with blades—swift-moving warriors who overwhelmed the sentries, attacked the sleeping Cretans, spearing them before they could awake, killing perhaps a hundred in a very few minutes ... and then melting into the blackness.

In the morning, Minos restored discipline by executing a few officers whom he accused of not posting enough sentries. Thereupon, he ordered an immediate advance, and the spearmen and the archers and the war chariots rolled onward in a metal wave.

But things did not go well. The invaders advanced during the day, but the night belonged to the Corinthians, whose sneak attacks continued, always with small groups of men. They continued to slip past the sentries no matter how thickly they were posted, and each time killed a certain number of Cretans. The losses were never so great as upon the first night; nevertheless, it was a steady bleeding, and Minos knew it couldn't be permitted to continue.

The Cretan king considered himself a great tactician, and indeed could boast of an unbroken string of victories. But now he felt himself thwarted. These Corinthians simply did not fight fairly. They refused to mass troops and meet him on the open field where he could use his war chariots. And he was particularly eager to use these chariots, for Daedalus had invented a new weapon—hub-knives that whirled as the wheels turned, mowing down the enemy like a line of farmers scything wheat. But without massed troops to move against, the chariots were just useless vehicles, and their horses a burden to feed.

And if the Cretans could advance across the open spaces, the Corinthians owned the forests. They knew every tree, every bush. It was death to follow them into the woods. The Cretans were sure to be ambushed. They fell into pits concealed under branches and strewn leaves; the pit bottoms were lined with sharpened stakes whose points were smeared with poison. Those who fell in died horribly. Innocent-looking trees could prove deadly too. Some of them were bent, tied down by vines, and when the vines were disturbed the tree would whip up with murderous force, squashing the armored men like beetles.

The war dragged on. The defenders took losses too, for the Cretans were brave, skillful fighters when they could manage to get within weapons' reach. Twice Minos sent his ships back to Crete for reinforcements—another forty thousand men. Finally, by sheer weight of numbers, the Corinthians were driven to the northeastern corner of the isthmus, to the city of Pagae, which Nisus had fortified.

Pagae backed upon the sea, and walls encircled it on three sides, walls of massive stone. Minos ranged his forces in an arc about the city walls, and a siege began.

One night, in the third month of the siege, Minos stood at the portal of his tent staring at the night sky, trying to read the next day's weather. The moon was out, and the stars, but there was a hazy ring about the moon, which sometimes meant rain.

He heard a rush of wings. Two enormous creatures coasted down and came to earth, one on each side of him, dwarfing him. In the bright moonlight he could see that their wings were membranous, like bat wings. One had the head of a cobra, the other of a cat. They were a frightful spectacle, but Minos had a fund of icy courage and the kind of pride that

forbade him from showing fear even when he felt it. So he stopped his hand from darting to his dagger, and managed to speak calmly.

“Good evening,” he said. “I’ve been studying the sky to see whether tomorrow will be fair or foul. What do you think?”

“Thick clouds but no rain,” said the cat-headed one. Cobra-head said: “You are reputed to be a great military leader. To what do you attribute your present lack of success?”

Minos was not used to being questioned, and this question was exceedingly unpleasant. Nevertheless, as he looked at the enormous winged cobra looming above him and blotting the moonlight, he knew that he would have to answer whatever she asked.

“I asked you a question,” she said. “Why are you doing so poorly in Corinth?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I’ve encountered a string of disasters in this accursed place. It was a bloody business getting this far. But I thought that when I had finally penned the enemy behind walls, I’d be able to finish them off. But the siege has turned sour too. My catapults are the best in the world—designed by Daedalus, you know—but for some reason they keep breaking. And when they do hurl their boulders, why the great rocks seem to turn to mud in midair and splatter harmlessly against the walls. The gods have turned against me. I can’t understand it. My father is Zeus, you know.”

“He has hordes of children,” said Bast. “He has visited Corinth, and many of his descendants fight against you.”

“Nevertheless,” said Minos, “he has always favored my designs, until now.”

“Your alleged father, Zeus,” said Buto, “is prone at times to play with the idea of justice—something quite alien to our Egyptian brand of god. He never allows it to interfere with his personal affairs, of course, but in spectacular, less urgent matters, like warfare, he often prefers to present the appearance of neutrality.”

“True,” said Minos.

“That is why your prayers for victory have met with silence.”

“I don’t only ask Zeus for victory,” said Minos. “I pray also to my half brother, Ares, God of War.”

“He can’t hear you,” said Bast. “He’s in Persia now, a spot he favors, for truces there are as bloody as wars.”

“You seem to know a lot about the affairs of the pantheon,” said Minos.

“Yes,” said Buto. “We gods keep track of each other, even when we operate in different territories.”

“You are gods?” asked Minos.

“Goddesses. I am Buto, Cobra-goddess of the Lower Nile. My cat-faced colleague is Bast, who rules the upper stretch of the river.”

“I am honored by your visit,” said Minos, bowing.

“And want to know its purpose, no doubt,” said Bast.

“Well ... yes.”

“We are keenly interested in your campaign, Minos. For your enemy is our enemy.”

“Do you mean Nisus? I had heard that he was an Egyptian.”

“A verminous specimen,” hissed Buto. “And the human being we most abhor. We wish to deliver him into your hands, oh King.”

“Do so, Goddess, and I shall be eternally grateful.”

“Listen carefully, then. Your father, Zeus, has chosen to ignore your prayers for victory. But, perhaps, he will be moved to do you a more modest favor.”

“Such as?”

“You must ask him to turn you into a wolf—just temporarily.”

“A wolf? Me? Why?”

“So that you may woo your enemy’s wife,” said Buto. “A beautiful girl, incidentally, named Scylla.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Pay close attention, and you will.”

Whereupon Buto told him a tale that made him very thoughtful.

After the goddesses had finished their tale, and given him detailed instructions, and answered his questions, they flew away. Minos gazed after them, then spoke to the sky:

“Oh Father Zeus who put on the shape of a bull to woo my mother, Europa, please, I pray, grant me the form of a wolf for my courtship.”

Lightning hooked out of the sky and touched Minos with sizzling blue flame. He disappeared. Where he had stood was a clot of darkness and two pits of light. The little king had become a huge black wolf with amber eyes. He knew he had become a wolf—but with his own intelligence and the power of speech.

“Thank you, Zeus,” he cried, and loped toward the city.

He circled the walls looking for a way in. Finally, he saw a Corinthian patrol filing out of a side portal. He raced toward the wall and slid through the gate before it closed. He prowled the streets, trying to decide where Nisus dwelt. He spotted a graceful stone building inside a large garden, and leaped a low fence into the garden.

He was assailed by smells, somewhat bewildered, but delighted to discover a new sense in himself. He smelled parsley, mint, and wild asparagus; rabbit in the tall grass and an owl in a lemon tree. He lifted his muzzle and howled softly.

He waited, tasting the wind. He howled again, still softly. He smelled someone coming—a young woman. Her odor was a condensation of the garden scents, lemons, and mown grass. She came straight to him. He reared up on his hind legs and put his forepaws on her shoulders. She embraced him.

“I don’t know you, Brother. Of what pack are you?”

“I suppose you would call me a lone wolf.”

“You speak like a man! How is that?”

“Well, lovely girl, in another incarnation I am Minos, king of Crete. But I have fallen in love with you, Scylla, with the kind of love that makes all things possible. And I have put on this form to please you.”

“Oh, you do. You please me very much,” murmured Scylla. “But—”

The wolf raised its paw. “I know what you’re about to say—that we cannot truly belong to each other unless you become a wolf too. Well, I can manage that.”

Can you?” cried Scylla. “Will you? It’s my dearest wish. And if you do, I shall adore your very shadow. Can you do me now? I want to be mist-gray with black markings.”

“Mist-gray,” said Minos, “with black markings. It shall be done.”

“Now? Right now?”

“Not quite yet. First I must have a pledge of your love.”

“What kind of pledge?”

“A perilous one. A bloody one.”

“I’ll do anything, anything.... Tell me what you want.”

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Transformations

Rush torches burned in their sconces on the stone wall, making shadows dance. For Nisus never slept in darkness; he slept fully clothed, ready to spring out of bed and take command should the enemy launch a night attack.

But he was sleeping deeply now, and Scylla stood over him, studying his face. His hair was uniformly black now; the magic tress did not glow. “I’ll have to cut off a lot of hair to make sure I get the right clump,” she said to herself. “And he’s bound to wake up. But Minos says that without that magic tress Nisus will lose his power and be easily vanquished. But he’ll wake up; I know he will. It would be easier to use an axe and chop off his whole head. Yes, I’ll take it to Minos and say, ‘Behold my love pledge’—the head of your enemy, hair and all! And he’ll be very pleased and take me to Crete. And I’ll be queen and sit on a throne sometimes. But mostly we’ll be wolves, as he promised, and live in a den, and run beneath the moon.”

The wall was hung with weapons—swords, spears, battle-axes. She took down an axe and approached the bed. She raised the axe and held it poised. She was trying to remember the exact look of the wolves’ heads stuck on the lances, trying to travel backward in time to that loathsome bloody meadow so that hatred might empower her to do this deed.

Now, axe poised, she gaped in amazement. For one lock of her husband’s hair glowed golden-hot. She called on all the strength of her shoulders and arms to swing the axe and chop off his head in a single scything blow. The axe did not budge. She could not force it down. It was as if an invisible vise had clamped about it. The heavy weapon pulled itself from her hands, cleaved the air and hung itself back on the wall.

She stared after it; when she turned back, Nisus was standing before her. He spoke gently: “You don’t need an axe. Your intention is enough.”

She gaped at him; she couldn't speak.

"Your hatred has killed my love," he said. "And must alter me forever. You may tell Minos that your mission has succeeded. You have widowed yourself, and he can reclaim his golden cattle. But tell him also that he must not massacre the Corinthians, nor ravage the land, nor take slaves, or my vengeful ghost will torment him forever. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Farewell, Scylla."

As she watched, he turned into a hawk—not a human with hawk-head and wings, but an entire hawk, a magnificent peregrine, and among the black feathers of its head sprang one gold plume.

The hawk spread its wings and flew out of the room.

Kings are not a grateful breed, and Minos was even less so. He was born to be served, he believed; others were born to serve. It was the natural order of things, and anyone in a position to do him a special service should be considered immensely privileged, and needing no further reward.

So he had no intention whatsoever of keeping his promise to Scylla. Why, he had already done much for the girl. Had changed his shape for her, spent an entire hour with her, actually vowed affection. A girl so honored should live happily the rest of her life on the rich memory.

"Besides," he said to himself, "I don't want to take her to Crete. She approached a domestic problem by trying to cut off her husband's head. And that sort of thing can be habit-forming. I know. I have a heavy decapitation habit myself. Is not my royal insignia the executioner's double axe? ... So I'll rid myself of her before she gets any ideas about my own valuable head."

Whereupon he instructed the men of his guard to admit no one to his presence but members of his military staff; all strangers were to be kept away. "Especially," he said, "a big gray-eyed wench. Don't let her anywhere near."

Thus it was that after ridding herself of her husband, the young widow was truly bereaved by being denied the sight of her lover. Befuddled by passion, however, she blamed everyone but him. Blamed the Royal Guard for being overzealous in their duty. "If he knew I was out here trying to get in, he'd tell them to let me through," she said to herself. "But there's no way to get word to him. Besides, he's busy with the truce, and withdrawing

his army, and preparing the fleet. He's king and has to make all the decisions himself. No wonder he can't think of other things. But when all this damned business is wound up why then he'll come to me. He *will*. Because he loves me. I know he does. He told me so himself."

Nevertheless, when the Cretan ships departed, Scylla found herself on the beach gazing after them. In the very center of the fleet was a somewhat larger vessel with purple sails and a polished brass ram—the king's own galley. Scylla heard herself whining like an abandoned dog. She couldn't stand the sound of her voice. She dashed into the surf ...

As it happened, the fleet was sailing before a slack wind. As Scylla began to cut through the water she saw sailors scurrying about the decks. Sails dropped, oars poked out of the row-holes. The maneuver slowed the fleet so that Scylla was able to thread among the vessels, catch up to the king's galley, and grasp its stern.

"Minos!" she screamed. "Oh Minos, my king, my wolf, my love!"

The king, standing in the bow, heard her voice. He kept his face expressionless, and did not turn his head, but barked a command. Two rowers leapt from their bench, rushed to the stern and swung their heavy oars, pounding Scylla's hands until they were bloody pulp and she could hold on no longer.

The ship sped away. She was alone in the sea, many miles from shore, and so grief stricken that she didn't even try to swim. She sank then, and would have drowned.

But Poseidon, God of the Sea, who had been watching this interesting spectacle, was so moved by Scylla's strength and beauty that he immediately made long-range plans for her, and began by changing her to a sea nymph—who could not drown. Long practice, however, had made his wife, Amphitrite, very skillful at dealing with rivals. Without hesitation, she worked a second transformation on the new Nereid, changing her into a sea monster—a beautiful powerful nymph from the waist up, but six ravening wolves below the waist.

No sooner did Scylla become a monster than all memory of her past was blotted from her mind. She lost all ability to feel or think, and knew only hunger, a raging unappeasable hunger—for human flesh.

Obedying blind instinct, she swam westward from the waters of Corinth to a much-trafficked sea-lane, the Strait of Messina, off the coast of Sicily.

There she sank to the bottom and waited for a ship to pass.

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Charybdis

Demeter, Goddess of Growing Things, was furious with her nephew, Ares, Lord of Battles. Many times she had pleaded with him to refrain from fomenting his wars until the harvest was in. Often, he had agreed. But this year, a prime growing year with a rainy spring and a gentle summer, when Demeter was exulting in rich crops, Ares suddenly decided he couldn't wait an hour longer before launching a series of bloody battles.

Evenly matched armies attacked and counterattacked across the ploughed fields, trampling everything green and leaving the earth littered with corpses. So Demeter was in a foul mood as she overflowed the fields in her winged chariot, observing the devastation.

She spotted something moving, and flew lower. A richly clad young woman was striding across the field, followed by two gnarled men carrying spades. Demeter kept watching them because they were headed for a certain orchard sacred to herself, which no mortal was permitted to enter.

Demeter hovered invisibly, still watching, as the young woman, whom she recognized as Charybdis, princess of Thessaly, marched into the orchard and straight up to Demeter's most cherished tree—one that grew the world's sweetest figs. But their chief virtue was that every fig would replace itself as soon as it was picked.

Charybdis spoke to her gardeners. "Start digging," she said. "Uproot this tree. Take it to the palace orchard and plant it there. Right outside my window, please—so that I may be able to reach out and pick the figs and eat them in bed."

The gardeners drove their spades into the earth. A wind blew through branches and became a voice, saying, "Stop ... Stop ..."

"Who speaks?" cried the princess.

"It is I, the dryad who dwells in this tree and is its spirit."

“And I am Charybdis, the king’s daughter, to whom no one ever says ‘Stop!’”

“But your gardeners must not dig me up,” said the voice. “For you must know that I am sacred to Demeter, Goddess of Growing Things. No mortal is allowed to eat of my fruit, let alone transplant me.”

“I am a princess,” said Charybdis, “and not accustomed to denying myself anything I desire. Nor do I discuss my intentions with trees. Dig on!” she called to the gardeners.

“No, no, you don’t understand. Demeter is a kindly goddess but terrible in her wrath. She will do dreadful things to you if you dare to lay impious hands on me, her favorite tree.”

“Such threats do not faze me in the slightest,” said Charybdis. “I don’t believe in that fat old witch anyway. Nobody’s actually seen her. She’s nothing but an ignorant myth.” She turned upon the gardeners. “You there, what are you standing around for? Dig this thing up immediately or your heads will be on the chopping block before morning.”

Demeter had heard enough. She whistled up a hailstorm. It struck out of the cloudless sky; sharp chunks of ice rattled into the orchard, touching no tree, but lashing the princess and her gardeners—who fled across the field, whimpering with pain.

But Demeter’s wrath was not appeased. “She’s arrogant, that hussy,” the goddess said to herself. “And not used to being thwarted. She’ll be back with her gardeners and their spades ... No, she won’t. I’ll give her something else to think about.”

Whereupon Demeter returned to Olympus and sent for one of her servants. This was a dreadful servant whom she employed only when people seemed to be losing respect for the Queen of Harvests. The servant’s name was Famine. She was an emaciated hag, almost a skeleton. Her flesh hung on her like rags on a scarecrow. The fleshy part of her nose was gone; her eye sockets gaped, and she had gnawed her lips away ... so that her face was four holes and a hank of hair.

“Where have you been?” said Demeter sternly.

“In Persia, my lady, with your nephew, Ares.”

“Don’t talk to me about that murderous lout,” cried Demeter. “Look what he’s done to my crops with his damned wars.”

“I don’t mean to anger you, Goddess,” said the hag. “But you asked me where I was and I had to tell you. I was with Ares, as my duty demanded. For Famine follows War, you know.”

“Your first duty is to me.”

“Yes, my lady; that’s why I left Persia and hurried here at your first summons.”

“Enough of this. I have a special job for you.”

Charybdis awoke early the next morning. Something drew her to her window, and she gasped with pleasure. There in the orchard, twigs webbed with dew, was the fig tree she had failed to get the day before. It was stretching one branch toward her; on that branch grew a luscious fig.

“What magic is this?” murmured the princess. She had no way of knowing that the tree was a mirage planted by Demeter, and that the fig, the luscious fig was Famine itself, transformed.

Charybdis reached out, plucked the fig from the bough, and stuffed it into her mouth. It was sweet to chew; it went down smoothly. But when it hit her stomach it blossomed into hunger. More than hunger; it was a thirst, but for food. A thirst that dried every juice in her body, squeezing her entrails into one burning mandate—food!

It was early for breakfast. But roaring like a lioness, she stormed into the servants’ quarters and slapped the cook awake. He gathered the other servants and rushed to the kitchen. She sat in the great dining hall, pounding on the table, roaring with impatience.

The servants came in, bearing food. A tureen big as a trough, full of porridge. An enormous ham, smoked but not sliced. Forty eggs. A barrelful of milk. She devoured it all.

“Half-rations!” she bellowed, flinging the ham bone at the cook’s head. “Starvation fare! Bring food—fast!”

The cook scurried back to the kitchen and bade the undercooks serve what had been meant for lunch. Charybdis sat in her place, pounding at the table. Her father, a small man, quite mild mannered for a king, sat staring at her in amazement—which changed to horror when the servants piled food before her and she attacked it as if she hadn’t eaten for a month.

A haunch of roast ox, an immense platter, the size of a chariot wheel, loaded with barleycakes soaked in butter. A great glistening ball of cheese. Also cakes made of ground nuts and honey, and a peck of fruit.

Stupefied by food, she went back to her chamber and slept heavily ... and awoke hungrier than ever. She charged into the dining hall, roaring for food. No one answered. The king had prudently decided that this was a good time to visit foreign lands, and had slipped away. And the servants, seeing the king go, had left also.

Silence hung over the castle. She rushed to the storeroom and studied the carcasses hanging from meat hooks. She lifted down an entire flayed sheep, sat on a keg and began to consume it. It wasn't cooked, but she didn't care. In a few hours, all the carcasses were gone, the sheep, and oxen, the dressed goats, the pigs; she had eaten them all.

She decided to take another nap before dinner. But when evening came, there wasn't a scrap of food to be found in the castle. She thought for a moment, then went out to the field where the cattle grazed.

Charybdis grew huge on her gross diet, became a giantess with a bladder of a face, kegl-like arms and legs, and a quadruple paunch. But for all her size she was as swift-moving as an angry sow, and usually caught whatever or whomever she was chasing. Having eaten all the livestock—cows, calves, bulls, sheep, goats, and pigs, and swept the barnyard clean of hens and chicks and roosters and ducks and geese—she had to go far afield for her meat.

She visited farmhouses, snatched babies from their cradles, and ate them raw. And when the parents came to object, she ate them too, clothes and all—belching, and spitting buttons. The terrified people flocked to the temple of Zeus, and their prayers rose to Olympus.

Now, Zeus rarely heeded prayers. He enjoyed paeans of praise, but preferred to ignore unpleasant facts, and most prayers were complaints. Now, however, the special agony in these voices caught his attention, and he listened closely. Then seethed with rage. For he had recently passed an edict prohibiting cannibalism—with extra penalties for eating children.

He looked down and saw what Charybdis had become. He whirled her off her feet and out of Thessaly—across mountain and plain to the sea, and westward to the Strait of Messina, where he dropped her to the bottom, just opposite the place where Scylla squatted.

He penned her in an underwater cave, saying, “Your hunger shall become thirst. As you once devoured all within reach, now you shall drink the tides

twice a day. Swallow them and spit them forth, and your name shall be cursed by sailors forever.”

And so it was. Twice a day, Charybdis burned with a terrible thirst and drank down the sea, shrinking the waters to a shallow stream—then spat the water out in a tremendous torrent, making a whirlpool near her rock in which no ship could live. Broken timbers floated up again and were washed onto the beaches, and became driftwood. The corpses sank to the bottom and were eaten by crabs and octopi and other creatures who dwelt in the sea.

The Strait of Messina became known as a deadly passage. But Sicily was a rich coast, and ships were sent there despite the peril. Vessels trying to steer away from the whirlpool as they passed through the strait would come too close to Scylla, who would turn her body in the water so that the wolves were uppermost. Six savage heads would sweep the deck, seizing sailors in their terrible jaws and devouring them on the spot.

And if a captain couldn't stand the idea of six great sea wolves eating his men, and steered to the left, he would feel his ship spinning like a chip as Charybdis drank the tide and drew his vessel out of sight forever ...

Between Scylla and Charybdis

Ulysses was, by all accounts, the ablest captain ever to command a vessel on the Middle Sea. He was also the wiliest of the Greek battle-chiefs. He possessed absolute courage and extraordinary physical strength. All in all, he was perhaps the most resourceful hero of the ancient world. Yet, sailing home, victorious, from the Trojan War, he lost all the ships of his fleet and every man of their crews. And though he himself finally reached the shore of Ithaca, it was as a naked bleeding castaway, unrecognized, friendless, a beggar in his own kingdom.

Why did it take him ten years to make the two-month trip from Troy to Ithaca? Why so disastrous a voyage? Why so many storms, shipwrecks, fatal landfalls?

It is said that he attracted the hostility of several very vengeful gods and goddesses who spun sorceries about him and hurled monsters in his path. But why? How did this island king, reasonably pious, and worshipful of the power of the gods if not their goodness, manage to draw upon himself such a variety of divine disfavor?

The reasons are instructive, though frightening.

Some said that Ulysses had angered Poseidon by blinding his favorite Cyclopes, who had wrought gorgeous troughs for the sea-god's string of green-maned stallions. But Poseidon, although quick to wrath, was not really vengeful. He sometimes feuded with his fellow gods, but thought humans too insignificant for his full displeasure.

Rather, it was Amphitrite, the sea-god's wife, who sought to punish Ulysses, and her grudge was rooted in the way Poseidon had courted her. This joyous daughter of Oceanus had loved to frisk among the blue waves and come out at low tide to dance on the shore. Poseidon glimpsed her dancing on Naxos and fell violently in love with her. But she feared his

stormy wooing and fled him to the depths of the sea. Whereupon he tried to woo her with gifts. Of coral and pearl and the bullion from sunken treasure ships he wrought her marvelous ornaments, but she spurned them all. Finally he created something entirely new for her, a talking, dancing fish. He dubbed the creature *dolphin* and sent it to Amphitrite. The dolphin pleaded Poseidon's cause with such wit and eloquence that Amphitrite yielded. She reigned as queen of the sea for many centuries, but the dolphin remained always her favorite of all creatures of the deep and she employed a string of them to pull her crystal chariot.

Now, as is told, Ulysses was the finest archer since Hercules, and kept his skill polished by practicing with his bow whenever possible. Often, during the voyage, he would try to shoot seabirds and flying fish. This kind of archery was a special challenge to him because he had to gauge the wind exactly, but he rarely missed. One day, though, while aiming at a shark, a gust of wind made his arrow swerve and pierce a dolphin—which tried one last leap and sank in a bloody froth.

Amphitrite learned about this and never forgave Ulysses. As queen of the sea she was able to strew disaster along his route—whirlpools, riptides, hidden reefs, wandering rocks. And he never learned which god was tormenting him.

But his archery was to earn him another enemy, one even more dangerous. And this mischance too was rooted in events that happened long before Ulysses was born.

Alcyone was a daughter of the wind-god, Aeolus. She married Ceyx, son of the Morning Star. They were so happy they aroused the envy of the unhappily married Hera, who sent a storm to wreck the ship on which Ceyx was voyaging. When Alcyone learned of this she drowned herself to keep him company. But Zeus pitied them and turned them into a pair of kingfishers. Each winter thereafter Aeolus forbade his winds to blow for a space of seven days so that his daughter, now a beautiful white kingfisher, could lay her eggs in a nest which floated in the sea. It is from this episode that we derive the word *halcyon*, meaning a period of calm and golden days.

But one fair morning, Ulysses detected a speck in the sky. He couldn't tell what bird it was and it seemed far out of bowshot. But he wanted to test his prowess to the utmost. He bent his bow almost double and loosed his

shaft. It flew up, up, out of sight. When it fell, it carried a white kingfisher with it. The beautiful bird sank and Ulysses' heart sank with it. Although he didn't know why, he sensed that it was unlucky to kill this creature, and that somehow he would be made to suffer for what he had done.

Fortunately for him, however, he could not possibly guess how much suffering he was to do—he and his men also. For the wind-god now loathed him totally, and his power for mischief among mariners was matchless. He sent strong head winds when Ulysses tried to sail out of port, sent savage following winds when Ulysses approached a lee shore. And, finally, cruelest trick of all, when Ulysses' ship was approaching Ithaca, coming so close the men could see the brown hills of home, Aeolus sent a gale that blew the ship hundreds of miles off its course. And it took Ulysses three years to get that close again.

And now Aeolus decided to destroy Ulysses and his crew altogether. He sent a strong east wind that drove the ship westward toward the coast of Sicily, which was called Thrinacia at that time. Now Ulysses, master seaman that he was, always knew the location of his ship even in the grip of a storm and in darkest night. So he knew that he was approaching the Strait of Messina. Although he did not know specifically about Scylla and Charybdis, he had heard that the strait was a graveyard for ships. The wind was driving him too fast, he would be entering the strait before he had made a plan. He shouted to his crew, bidding them drop sail, turn the bow into the wind, and cast out the anchor.

The bare-masted ship rode the chop uneasily, but the anchor held. Ulysses paced the deck, thinking hard. A bird coasted in and landed on the deck. Not a gull, but a hawk, a huge one, with a single golden plume among the black feathers of its head.

“Hail, Ulysses,” cried the hawk.

“Hail to you, whoever you are.”

“I am one who has come to counsel you about your passage through the Strait of Messina.”

“Indeed? I welcome any advice.”

“Hearken then. Where the strait narrows, two huge rocks sit facing each other. Under each of them lurks a monster.”

“Then the tales are true!” cried Ulysses. “I should have known that on this accursed voyage the worst is always true.”

“Long ago,” said the hawk, “in another incarnation, one of those monsters was my wife. Many years have passed since we were young and beautiful and celebrating our love in raptures of flight—many years, many murders, and many foul enchantments. I am as you see me—a hawk. And she is a sea monster, half nymph, half wolf pack, and wholly lethal. Her name is Scylla ...”

The hawk paused. Tears dripped from his amber eyes. Ulysses stared; he had never seen a hawk weep.

“Good hawk,” cried Ulysses, “tell on! I must know about these monsters.”

“And I have come to instruct you, Captain. I have watched your career and learned to admire you. Also to pity you. For you, like me, have been pursued by vengeful gods and your life altered by their hatred. To resume, Scylla dwells under the right-hand rock. If you pass too close to her, six wolf-heads will sweep your deck, devouring at least six of your crew.”

“Then I must steer away from Scylla—toward the other rock.”

“But under the other rock lurks a thirsty monster named Charybdis who drinks the tide at one gulp, making a whirlpool that sucks down any ship within its swirl.”

“Monster to the right, monster to the left! How do I sail through?”

“Keep to the middle way,” said the hawk. “Exactly to the middle way, for it is not much wider than your ship. Indeed, it will be almost impossible to do unless you are sailing before a gentle wind, directly astern. If you must swerve, do it toward the right-hand rock and favor my former wife. For she will take only six or eight of your crew, but thirsty Charybdis will suck down your entire ship, drowning everyone on board.”

“Thank you,” said Ulysses.

Before he could finish saying it, however, the hawk had flown away.

The wind changed suddenly, and Ulysses was delighted. For it was a gentle wind now, one that would take him into the strait and push him through with sufficient leeway so that he could steer his course, keeping exactly to the middle way, avoiding both monsters.

He shouted commands. The crew leapt to their places, shipped anchor, raised the sail, and turned the bow westward toward Thrinacia.

“My thanks to you, great Aeolus,” said Ulysses to the sky. “I’ve encountered so many contrary winds on this voyage that I was afraid I had

displeased you in some way. But now I know that I enjoy your favor.”

But the wind-god deserved no gratitude. The gentle wind he had sent was a piece of treachery on his part. For he wanted Ulysses to enter the strait and be destroyed that very day. Had he sent a head wind or a crosswind, Ulysses, he knew, would have sheered off and tried another time.

Ulysses suspected nothing as the ship scudded easily toward the mouth of the strait. He took the helm himself, trusting no one else to steer with the precision that was needed. The roaring of the waters grew louder and louder; he saw spray flying as Charybdis swallowed the tide and spat it back, caught a shuddering glimpse of dry seabed and gasping fish—then the tide roared back, beating itself to a white foam. He looked at the other rock. Scylla was not in sight, but she was lurking underneath, he knew, ready to spring.

The gentle wind blew. Ulysses steered his course, keeping exactly to the middle way, and they were passing through, out of reach of both monsters.

He squinted, measuring distance, then heard an appalling sound—the sails flapping. He felt the ship shudder beneath him, and yaw slightly, and knew that the wind had fallen. What he did not know was that this was Aeolus’s plan: to call off the gentle east wind just when the ship was between the rocks, so that it must fall prey to one monster or the other.

“Drop sail! Start rowing,” shouted Ulysses. He turned over the helm to one of the men, instructing him that if he could not keep the middle way he must veer to the right rather than to the left. Then he drew his sword and stood at the starboard rail.

The long oars poked out of the row-holes, projecting beyond the width of the hull. And Scylla, lying in wait just beneath the surface, seized two of the oars and dragged the ship toward her. Ulysses saw the polished shafts suddenly snap like twigs. The deck tilted violently. He was thrown against the rail and almost fell overboard. He picked up his sword and climbed to his feet, and saw enormous fanged heads arching over him.

He leapt toward a wolf-head and slashed at it with his sword. Its head-bones were strong as iron; he could not cut through. He reversed his sword and hammered at its teeth with his hilt. Useless. But his attack had slowed the wolves; some men were able to scurry away, but four of them were caught. He heard them screaming as they were eaten alive. Ulysses himself suffered a mangled forearm.

By then the ship had passed beyond the monster's reach. Four torn, bleeding bodies lay on deck. "Do not throw them into the sea," said Ulysses to his crew. "Mop the blood off the decks and wash the bodies of your comrades. When we make landfall we shall build them funeral pyres and dispatch their ghosts in honorable fashion."

So ended Ulysses' encounter with Scylla and Charybdis, nor when the voyage was over did he count this his worst disaster, for he had lost but four men. But the memory of the monster who was half beautiful sea nymph, half wolf pack, held a singular horror for him. He could never forget the sight of the Nereid turning gracefully in the water and becoming six pairs of savage jaws.

As for Nisus, he had suffered too much as a human ever to resume his original form. He remained a hawk and served Thoth in his ceaseless struggle against the beast-gods of Egypt.

THE SIRENS

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The goddess Athena promised a tiny fishing village that it would become the most famous city in the world if it took her name. And, as a sign of her pledge, she planted a wonderful tree. Thousands of years later, a little girl took the name of this tree as her own. It is to her, my granddaughter, Olivia, that I dedicate this book, which she will read in time to come.

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Characters

Monsters

The Sirens (SY rehnz) A pair of winged sea nymphs, Teles (TELL uhs) and Ligiea (LY gee uh), whose voices call sailors to drown

The Jellyfish A clot of the primal slime that feeds upon everything within reach

Gods

Zeus (ZOOS) King of the Gods

Poseidon (poh SY duhn) God of the Sea

Athena (uh THEE nuh) Goddess of Wisdom

Hermes The Messenger God
(HUR meez)

Apollo The Sun God
(uh PAHL oh)

Artemis Goddess of the Moon
(AHR tuh mihs)

Ares God of War
(AIR eez)

Demeter Goddess of the Harvest
(duh MEE tuhr)

Hestia Goddess of the Hearth
(HEHS tih uh)

Aphrodite Goddess of Love
(af ruh DY tee)

Helios A Titan who drove Apollo's sun chariot across the
(HEE lih ohs) sky

Demigods

Circe Daughter of the sun's charioteer; a highly skilled
(SUR see) sorceress

Proteus A changeable demigod who serves, and betrays,
(PROH tee uhs) Poseidon

Cora A meadow nymph
(KOH ruh)

Mortals

Butes A brave youth
s
(BU teez)

Ulysses The greatest captain of antiquity—and since
(u LIHS eez)

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Ulysses and the Sirens

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The Owl Goddess

An ancient proverb says:

When gods are at odds,
they bloody the sky,
and rivers run dry.
Monsters slay,
mortals die.

Indeed, the strange tale of the Sirens and their victims is rooted in the feud that raged between Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, and Poseidon, God of the Sea.

In the beginning, everything was alive. The earth twitched like a sleeping bear. The sea threw vast tantrums called tidal waves. Trees capered, rocks sang.

“This must cease,” said Zeus to his High Council. “We gods can float serenely above such disorder. But the race of humans we have planted upon earth is a more fragile breed—unable to abide amid rollicking seas and frolicking trees and mountains that skip like rams. We shall have to impose a little order.”

Thereupon, with one gesture Zeus froze the revels. Rocks fell silent; trees stopped dancing.

But there were creatures who inhabited the wild secret places; there were the nymphs of river and sea, of mountain, wood, and field; there were the goat-haunched satyrs of the grove, strong as stags, but so lightfooted no blade of grass bent under their hooves. These creatures, the naiads, dryads, and oreads, these musky antic satyrs, refused to obey the edict. Gathering all the vital mischief of the locked tides, the silenced rocks, and rooted

trees, they roamed sea and earth trying to break the great taboo and recall everything to life, trying to kindle the untried hearts of those called human with a spark of the old green fire.

This thwarted wildness festered also in the hearts of the gods, who sought to amuse themselves by fighting with one another. Their feuds, that flared like summer lightning, blasted the total harmony designed by Zeus and shattered his enormous repose. He again summoned the gods to his throne room and imposed a second truce, promising eternal punishment to anyone violating its terms.

Now it was that a demigod named Proteus received a message from Athena, asking him to visit her. This Proteus happened to be a strangely talented creature who could change his shape in the twinkling of an eye and become any living thing he wished. He was also Poseidon's most trusted servant, and general tutor to the beautiful, sleek nereids who swarmed the Ocean Stream. Proteus was very surprised by this invitation from the owl goddess, for Athena was Poseidon's sworn enemy. But curiosity was stronger than doubt, and he hastened to her.

The place the goddess had chosen as her own was a certain mountain of the Olympian range. There she had set up a gigantic loom and spindle. Enthroned on her mountain, plucking cloud-wool and dyeing it in the lights of sunrise and sunset, she wove marvelous tapestries which she flung in colored scrolls across the sky.

Nearby loomed a strange rock formation—a cup-shaped boulder and, propped within it, a stone shaft, knobbed at one end. Together they resembled pestle and mortar, but enormous ones.

Although his curiosity was aflame, Proteus approached hesitantly. He was a bit afraid of the goddess. In all his changes he preferred small, meek females, and Athena was very tall, and anything but meek. For the hard climb he had transformed himself into a mountain goat, but just before reaching the top he resumed his favorite shape as a white seal.

“You are a welcome sight,” said Athena, “although a strange one. It is not often that a seal is found at these altitudes.”

“Not a bad choice, my lady. A fur coat is useful up here. The wind blows chill.”

“Do you have any idea why I have sent for you?”

“None ... but I am honored by the summons.”

“As you may know, Zeus has declared a truce, prohibiting us gods from feuding with one another. And those of us who have no desire for peace shall have to find others to carry on our vendettas. My own plans for pursuing my quarrel with Poseidon are quite extensive, and I need your help.”

“You wish me to betray my master?”

“Precisely,” answered Athena. “Are you bribable?”

“In matters of morality we lesser breeds model ourselves upon the gods.”

“Then you *are* bribable,” declared Athena.

“What do you offer me to betray my master?”

“I am not so rich as Poseidon, you know, who commands the vast bounty of the sea. Nor as rich as Hades in whose inlaid ceiling of sky diamonds imitate stars, and whose floor of earth is veined with gold and silver. Basically, O Proteus, I have only wisdom to offer.”

“I see.”

“I know it doesn’t sound like much compared to what is held in the coffers of earth and sea. But remember this; wisdom is the key that unlocks the secrets of nature. He who possesses only one of these secrets can enrich himself beyond the dreams of avarice.”

“You don’t know how avariciously I dream, O goddess.”

“Beware, Proteus, I am not one to forget a favor refused. I don’t ask that many, nor am I refused that often. And, in all modesty, I make a dangerous enemy.”

“Please, Athena. Your threats frighten me so that I shall have to go to Poseidon with my tale. And he, in turn, will report to Zeus that you are planning to break the peace.”

Her pale eyes were upon him. They were the color of the northern sea as it turns to ice. Proteus felt himself shudder. Sealskin is extremely tough, and very densely furred, with a layer of blubber beneath it to give seals perfect protection against the arctic blasts. Nevertheless, those eyes stabbed through him like twin icicles, freezing him to the marrow. He found himself wondering how he had been able to muster courage to refuse this goddess anything.

Finally, her face broke into a smile. A wintry smile, to be sure, but better than the frown she had been wearing.

“Well,” said Athena. “As dispenser of wisdom, I should be wise enough myself to know when a craving must go unsatisfied. I bear you no grudge, Proteus. And you must try not to think so unkindly of me.”

“O goddess,” cried Proteus, “I am overwhelmed by your forbearance, and truly regret my inability to help you. Permit me, by way of apology, to offer you this pearl I produced during my recent stint as an oyster. It is a flawless gem, as you can see—although, I must admit, your own beauty must dim the luster of any jewel.”

“You are courteous and sweet-spoken, Proteus. Is there anything I can do for you before you leave?”

“Tell me, what is wisdom exactly?”

“Ah, my friend, it is too vast an attribute to be described in one sentence. I’ll tell you this though: its central idea is ‘know thyself.’”

“Is that better than knowing *yourself*?”

“Same thing, but in god-speak. More impressive.”

“You see, goddess, I am very changeable. I have so many selves that I don’t know which is the real me.”

“The real you, eh? Shall I help you find it?” asked Athena.

“Can you?”

“We can try—together. Why don’t you run through your changes for me?”

“Here? Now?”

“*Here* and *now* are two of my favorite words, Proteus. I have steeped them in wisdom.”

“Do you want to see *all* my transformations? There are so many.”

“First, answer a question for me out of your own special knowledge. Is it true that every enchantment bears within it its own thwart?”

“If by that, my lady, you mean a counter-spell, one that nullifies or reverses the magic, the answer is yes. But I’ve never tested the theory personally.”

“Has no one ever tried to thwart your transformations?”

“They have. They have. But they have failed. From the first, I knew that whoever could seize me and hold me through three metamorphoses would prevent a fourth change and return me to the shape I first adopted.”

“And no one has been able to do this?” asked Athena.

“No one,” said Proteus. “You must understand that I can change myself into a wolf or crocodile, and snap off any hand that grasps me. Or become a viper, for example, and sting my captor to death.”

“I see.... I see. Very interesting,” said Athena. “Now, why don’t you show me a few of your favorite transformations, where the real you may perhaps reside. I know! Become once again the creature you were born.”

“That is by no means my favorite incarnation,” said Proteus. “In fact, it doesn’t please me at all.”

“Nevertheless,” said Athena, “as I think of it, I do want you to begin there. I believe it will give us a clue to what we seek.”

Proteus was thinking very fast. There was something about the situation that was making him uneasy. He never transformed himself idly, but only in response to some specific task, or some emergency. And the more he thought about it the less inclined he was to go through a series of changes under the gaze of this stern goddess who seemed to be growing taller every moment. Her shoulders and arms gleamed like marble now in the gathering dusk. And the icy stilettos of her eyes were skewering him, paralyzing his will.

He tried to fight free of her gaze, to simply bid her farewell, and depart. He heard her say, “Well, I’m waiting.”

Still, he hesitated.

The goddess spoke again. Her words seemed to be falling from a great height. “Proteus, begin!” It was no longer a request; it was a command. He was unable to disobey. Hating himself, he returned to the shape he had worn when entering the world.

“What do you call this thing you’re now being?” asked Athena. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Sea-blob,” he muttered.

“You look something like Phorcys, but even uglier, if possible. And smaller.”

“Yes, I’m sort of a cousin to the Sea-hog.”

“Very odd ... let me look at you.”

Her long arm reached out; she scooped him up and held him to her face. To his horror Proteus felt hands stronger than any he had ever felt before tightening about him.

Immediately, he changed himself into an eel and began to wriggle out of her clutch. But her strong fingers shifted, found a new grip, and squeezed tighter.

He became a bull in her grasp. His massive weight forced her arm down. He crashed to the ground, landing on his hooves, and whirled to gore her with his horns. But she had fallen with him, still clutching as she fell. Her grip grew tighter and tighter; she was under him. He rose into the air, trying to somersault and come down horns first, impaling her.

They were wrestling beside the giant loom. Still gripping him, Athena reached with her other hand and snatched a skein of thread. Moving with the weird celerity of a spider, she wrapped him around and around. Now, this thread was not spun from cloud-wool or sheep's wool or earthly flax, but had been given to Athena in another story by Atropos, Destiny's Hag, who with her crone sisters spun the thread of life, measured it out, then stretched it or cut it. And this unique thread was fatal to freedom, and could bind anything in the world, however strong.

The bull lay trussed, helpless. Proteus changed into a tiger and slipped his bonds. Blazing with hatred, he sprang full at Athena, wanting to sink his claws into that snowy flesh and rip her to bloody rags.

She caught him in mid-leap and held him away from her body so that his claws could not reach her. He curled up, meaning to rake her with his hind claws, and tear her guts out. But all this time her arctic grey eyes were stabbing into the pools of green flame that were his eyes. Again, their ice entered him, cooling his tigerish blood, freezing his will. He tried to strike with his back claws but she held him off. She sat upon her throne, drawing him onto her lap. Her fingers were rods of power, sinking into his pelt, welding themselves to him. Her other hand stroked his fur.

All his rage dissolved. He felt a delicious languor filling him. He was a pussy-cat in the lap of a goddess. She had held him through three transformations. He felt his tiger bones shrinking, and his gorgeous hide turning into aspic. And he was again what he had been born—a Sea-blob, magic thwarted, helpless in her hands.

Proteus felt her turning his head so that he had to gaze upon the great stone pestle and mortar. "See that?" she asked.

"Yes, goddess."

"Know what I use it for?"

“No, goddess.”

“I heap flowers in it and crush them to make the dyes that color my stuffs. Not only flowers—sometimes I crush other things.”

“What other things?”

“Those that need crushing. *Now* do you understand why I wanted you to become a Sea-blob?”

“I hope not.”

“In your present form you will fit very comfortably into that mortar, and should prove eminently crushable. I shall pound you into a jelly and boil that jelly into a potion. Use of that potion together with certain magic spells should enable me or anyone I designate to transform others into what shapes we will, giving us a distinct advantage over our enemies.”

“Please, Athena! Don’t pound me into a jelly. Don’t boil me into a potion. I can be more useful to you, alive and intact.”

“What, *you!*—who refuse me a small favor?”

“I am yours, body and soul!” cried Proteus. “Yours in all my variety; yours, flesh, bone, marrow, and wit. The cold blades of your eyes have cut my own will out of me as a fishwife fillets a flounder. I am yours, entirely yours. Command, and I perform.”

“I don’t know, Proteus.”

“At least let me try. What are you risking? You can always catch me again and put me into your mortar.”

“Very well, you have convinced me.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

“Now listen carefully,” said Athena. “I have recruited a very promising young witch called Circe. Are you acquainted with her?”

“The sun god Helios has a daughter by that name,” said Proteus. “Very tall, flame-haired, willful, a dangerous beauty, in fact.”

“That’s the one,” said Athena. “She is to be my chief agent in the struggle against Poseidon. I want you to go to the Isle of Sobs where Circe dwells and instruct her in the techniques of transformation.”

“I shall do so, goddess.”

“To accomplish her task, however, she will need two assistants, whom you will furnish. You must search the Ocean Stream for a pair of the strongest, swiftest, cleverest sea nymphs you can find. You will bring them

along with you to the Isle of Sobs and train them to assist Circe in her performance of the dark arts.”

“Very well, goddess.”

“Are you sure you understand what I require?” asked Athena. “Any error or omission on your part I shall view as simple disobedience, and shall punish severely.”

“As I understand it,” said Proteus, “I am to train Circe in the art of transformation. Find two sea nymphs and train them as well.”

“Correct,” said Athena. “Succeed, and prosper. Fail, and suffer.”

Athena was happy with the plot she was weaving. She planned to attack Poseidon at his most prideful point and turn his strength to weakness. For the sea god, like all gods, was nourished by worship. He spread terror upon the waters until those who traveled the sea, or farmed its waters or dwelt by its shores, had been taught to beg for mercy. Before embarking on a voyage, sailors would sacrifice to him, and pray for fair winds. Fishermen would pray for a rich harvest of fish, pirates, for plunder. And those who dwelt on the coast would beseech him to withhold his storms, or at least, strike somewhere else. Across the entire Middle Sea basin, Poseidon was the god most fervently worshiped.

What Athena now planned was to set Circe and her nymphs astride the busiest sea-lane and have them wreck ships and enslave their crews. Whereupon, the goddess reasoned, seamen, finding their prayers unanswered, would withdraw their faith in Poseidon and sacrifice upon other altars. Thus, Athena would be making her enemy suffer in the only way that gods can suffer—by being diminished.

As we know, Proteus had been thoroughly terrified by Athena; he was now obeying every one of her instructions. He combed the sea for the two strongest, swiftest, cleverest nereids. In the waters off the sickle-shaped island called Corfu, he found a pair of sisters named Teles and Ligiea. He invited them to the Isle of Sobs to assist Circe in her sorceries. At first, they refused. They relished the boisterous, free life of the ocean. They loved to follow fishing boats, capsize them, and swim off with the handsomest lads.

As it happened, though, the fisher-folk had grown cautious of late; their boats hugged the shore, and the sea nymphs had been hunting in vain. When Proteus told them that Circe practiced a magic that could trap the

wiliest crews, the nereids dropped their objections and agreed to join the sorceress on the Isle of Sobs.

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The Isle of Sobs

For the first month or so, all went well as Proteus taught Circe and the two nereids the arts of transformation. Circe was a natural sorceress, already adept at the basic spells and incantations, and she learned faster than Proteus could teach. The nymphs, although not so talented as Circe, were fascinated by magic, and very eager for instruction. Nevertheless, after a while, Proteus found himself growing quietly frantic.

Although things seemed peaceable, he sensed a feud simmering between Circe and the nymphs. He knew that if the quarrel flared into open warfare, it would disrupt Athena's plans, and he would be held responsible. The goddess, enraged, might very well pluck him off the island and pop him into her great stone mortar, pound him to a pulp with her stone pestle, then boil him into a potion. So he was desperate to patch up a truce.

He knew that it was Circe who was mostly to blame in this matter. She was very proud, and fiendishly jealous—qualities which often go together. Although only a demigoddess, she considered herself as regal and potent as anyone in the Pantheon, and entitled to the same divine honors. This opinion was not shared by the nereids, who hadn't a reverential bone in their supple bodies. They viewed her not as a goddess, but as an arrogant redheaded witch, full of insufferable pretensions.

The more Proteus studied the situation, the more impossible it seemed. The root of the matter was that the sisters were simply too beautiful. Circe could not bear the sight of them. They were tall, powerful, blooming creatures, bursting with health, giving off a wild caramel musk of sea and sun. And although Circe was very handsome and stately herself, these glossy nymphs made her seem wan and haggard. She could not forgive them.

Proteus decided that the only thing he could do was separate Circe from the nymphs. He saw an opportunity to do this, for by now they had learned what he had to teach, and were ready to go into action. He called them together, and said:

“Our mistress, the goddess Athena, appeared to me last night, and gave me certain instructions which I shall now pass on to you.”

“Why did she appear to you and not to me?” cried Circe. “I’ll accept no instructions secondhand!”

“You’ll have to take that up with Athena herself,” said Proteus. “But be guided by me, dear lady, and do not provoke the goddess—not, at least, until you have practiced some magic on her behalf and showed her how valuable you can be.”

“Very well,” gritted Circe. “What did she have to say?”

“She recognizes that you have learned all that I have to teach about the arts of transformation, and are ready now to disrupt sea-traffic, wreck ships, and capture crews. But she wants you to divide your efforts. You, Teles and Ligiea, will be responsible for luring the ships onto the rocks, and, when the sailors have made their way to shore, you shall lead them to the palace, then return to the rocks. Circe will welcome the crews, enthrall them, transform them—and impound them in their stalls and kennels and sties. Any questions?”

“How do we get the ships to wreck themselves?” asked Ligiea.

“In a classic fashion,” said Proteus. “You will go to where the rocks are thickest and most jagged, and build fires there. Such fires are the most ancient signal for clear passage and safe harborage. The helmsmen will naturally steer toward your flames, and the ships will break upon the rocks. Now to your tasks, ladies! And may the blessings of Athena attend your labors.”

They dispersed. The sea nymphs went down to the shore; Circe returned to her palace to prepare her spells and potions.

What happened then made it seem as though Poseidon had somehow learned of the plot against him, and was wielding the weather to thwart it. Every night for the next month it rained, not steadily, but in sudden bursts. And these showers would fall right after the nymphs had built their fires, dousing the blaze completely, and wetting the firewood so thoroughly that it could not be used again until the next day’s sun had dried it. Proteus began

to grow fearful once more. He knew that without occupation the sorceress would find a way to attack the nymphs, who would surely counterattack with great enthusiasm.

He turned himself into a white seal and swam out to where the sisters perched on the rocks. He coasted onto their flat boulder and said:

“It’s no use; we can’t keep the fires going; we’ll have to change tactics.”

“Dear Proteus,” said Teles, stroking his head, “we’re not going to be here long enough to change any tactics.”

“What do you mean?” barked the seal.

“She means we have decided to leave,” said Ligiea. “We hate Circe. We love you, but we loathe her. And it’s very boring here. We’re going to swim back to our own waters and capsize fishing boats again. That redheaded hag can go choke herself on her potions.”

“You can’t go,” cried Proteus. “You’ve pledged yourselves to the service of Athena, and must fulfill your vow, or she will avenge herself. You don’t know her as I do. She’s terrible when aroused.”

“And we’re terrible when not aroused,” said Teles. “We’re mouldering away here on this stupid island. Where are all the shipwrecked crews we were promised? We sit here building fires, and Poseidon rains on them, and Circe glares at us and mutters nasty things under her breath, and nothing happens, nothing at all.”

“Listen to me,” said Proteus. “And things will happen. We’ll make them happen. That’s what I came here to say. You’ll no longer build these fires that only get snuffed out. You’ll lure ships another way.”

“What way?”

“You’ll sit here on the rocks and sing—Yes! So beautifully that anyone hearing you will be enchanted and follow the sounds right onto the rocks. So ravishing will be your song that even if the helmsman stays on course, the sailors will dive off the decks.”

“Do you really think we’ll sound that good?” asked Teles. “We’ve always sung, but I had no idea that our voices were *that* irresistible.”

“They aren’t,” said Proteus. “Not quite yet. But they will be. Your voices are very rich and musical—but somewhat raw. I will train them. I will teach you to pitch your song so that it can be heard over the keening of the wind and the booming of the surf—and to fit simple words to your melodies so that they speak right to the heart.”

“You can do that too?” asked Ligiea. “We know you’re good at magic, but are you good at everything?”

“Not quite everything. But music is only magic that has found its voice. Trust me; I can teach you. Singing here upon these rocks, your song will be a silver noose that will catch anyone listening, that will draw them to you, and make them yours for as long as you care to keep them.”

Indeed, Proteus did teach the sisters to sing. And their song was as enchanting as he had promised. Ship after ship broke upon the rocks. And when a helmsman refused to forget his duty and steered away, why then the sailors dived off the deck, as Proteus had predicted, and swam toward where the sea nymphs perched.

Teles and Ligiea, very happy with their own singing, followed the rest of Proteus’s instructions. They led the sailors to the palace, where Circe then took charge. She would take her guests to a great dining hall, and serve them a bowlful of delicious red porridge, cooked according to a magic recipe. The sailors would gulp the food down greedily and immediately find themselves transformed. Whereupon the nymphs would never see the men again. Never, that is, in human form. For Circe’s evil spell had changed them all into animals. Her courtyard became a zoo. Lions roamed there—wolves, elephants, wild bulls, deer, rabbits. Snakes dwelt in the grass. Trees and hedges were thronged with new birds. The kennels were full of howling dogs, the sties full of pigs; a herd of horses grazed the meadow.

Now, the nymphs, though very fond of animals, hated to see these beasts who had been men. For each of them, no matter what his shape, would gaze at the nereids with intelligent, suffering, human eyes.

Nevertheless, things went well for a while. And Athena, looking down upon the Isle of Sobs, was pleased by what she saw. She praised Proteus for serving her so well. She appeared to Circe as well, and promised that she would reward her services by making her the most powerful sorceress in all the world.

Proteus, feeling that his labors were completed, swam away from the island. He was weary of Circe and the fatal rocks and of seeing man transformed to beast. He resolved to live another kind of life for a while. So he changed

himself into a bear, and, since the weather was growing cold, found a cave, and sank into a deep sleep.

As soon as he left the island, however, things went badly.

It happened one day that two shipwrecked crewmen quietly turned back while being led to Circe's palace, and returned to where they had come ashore. The sisters, who did not notice this, were surprised when they found sailors waiting for them upon their rock.

"You're in the wrong place!" cried Teles. "You should be with the others at the palace."

"No," said one sailor, whose name was Pero. "We're in the right place. We want to be here with you."

"You can't," said Ligiea. "It's not allowed. We'll have to take you to the palace."

"No," said the second sailor, whose name was Procles.

"Yes," said Teles. "Come on now, or we'll have to carry you."

"Please," said Pero. "Let us stay. Sit down and sing to us."

"Please," said Procles. "Do sing to us. Sing song after song. We love your voices. In fact, we love everything about you. And when you finish singing, we'll tell you stories. We've sailed to very strange places and have curious tales to tell."

As the moon climbed and paled, the sea nymphs sang their songs to the shipwrecked sailors. And, when the songs were finished, the sailors told a tale of voyages.

They had sailed to certain southern lands where the customs were different from those they had known. Trees were shaped like parasols, their fruit brown, and hairy, and as heavy as rocks. The people of this land thought that cats and monkeys were gods who had warred with more powerful gods and been shrunken into bestial shapes. But they were gods, nevertheless, and had to be worshiped.

By the time the tale was told the sailors were falling asleep. The nymphs watched them doze, and conversed in urgent whispers.

"Circe will find out," said Ligiea, "and send her servants to hunt them down. She'll go into a fit of fury when she realizes we've been hiding them. And you know what happens to anyone she takes a dislike to. She'll change these men into little animals and feed them to something big."

"What shall we do?" asked Teles.

“Look at them; they’re fast asleep now. So tired, poor darlings. Circe must be asleep too. We’ll take them back to the palace, right to the witching room, and do a little magic ourselves. We’ll be the ones who transform them. Then they’ll be able to hide themselves among the other animals. And, one day, when we find a way to get rid of the wicked Circe, we’ll change the poor dear creatures back into themselves, and swim away with them.”

“I suppose it’s the only thing we can do,” said Teles. “But it’s almost dawn, so let’s do it.”

Tenderly, they lifted the sleeping lads from the rock, and carried them toward the palace.

All was still. Everyone was asleep. Even the dogs had stopped howling. They crossed the courtyard past the huge shadowy shapes of the animals. Earlier, a hundred eyes would have been burning holes in the darkness, but now the eyes were shuttered as the beasts twitched and moaned, clawing at the walls of a changeling dream.

Had the nymphs looked higher, however, up into the top branches of a cedar, they would have seen one pair of blazing eyes. They belonged to the owl—Athena’s own special bird, which she had given to Circe as a sleepless sentinel. The owl watched the sea nymphs carrying the boys through the courtyard and toward the palace gate. She spread her great wings and slid silently into the air. By a cruel twist of fate, the sisters did not notice the owl, and had no way of realizing that they had been observed by Circe’s spy-bird.

The nymphs entered the dark palace and made their way to the witching room. They stretched the boys on slabs of stone and began muttering the spells that Proteus had taught them. Remembering the tale they had been told, they changed Procles into a monkey, and Pero into a cat.

The monkey perched on Ligiea’s shoulder. Teles had drawn the tomcat into her lap, and was stroking him when a horrid scream split the air, and Circe appeared before them. She was pointing a wand at them; it trembled in her hand. Her voice was so choked with rage that she could hardly utter her spell, but she managed to mumble:

Hobble, gobble,
I tell you that

with these words
You shall be birds,
and feed the cat!

Indeed, she did intend to change the sisters into birds and feed them to the cat. But in her fury, she mishandled the powerful spell and made the mistake of beginning the transformation by giving the sisters wings. The quick-witted nereids immediately spread their new wings, flew straight at Circe, knocking her to the floor, then flew out of the room, out of the palace, off the island, and out to sea.

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The Sirens Sing

Between the small island where Circe dwelt and the enormous island which is today known as Sicily, lay a hidden reef that could tear the bottom out of any ship that tried to sail over it. But the reef was easy to avoid because two tall flat-topped rocks stood to the northeast of it. They were a distinctive formation that could be seen for miles; when they came into view, a helmsman would simply steer to the north or to the south of the reef.

It was upon these rocks that Teles and Ligiea landed after escaping from the Isle of Sobs. They were drunk with flight, happy to have been given wings—full of glee because what had been meant as a punishment had turned into a gift. On the other hand, they felt very confused. They were changed inwardly as well as outwardly, and no longer recognized themselves. Most curious of all, they were torn by new hungers. And, in satisfying these hungers, were doing things they found repulsive.

For nereids do not eat the flesh of beast or fish or fowl. Like swans they feed upon algae and seaweed and other succulent mosses. Now, however, they found themselves as savagely rapacious as sea-hawks. On their flight they had skimmed the surface of the water, catching fish in their new talons and gobbling them raw. Flying high, they had stooped to strike birds on the wing—heron, cormorant, and albatross—and had devoured them, feathers and all.

But the sisters had been only partially transformed, and the falcon in them was warring with the loving, joyous sea-nymph nature that had once been theirs. For all that, they were too young and healthy, too intoxicated by flight to brood about themselves. There was one concern though that they could not shake off. As they grew accustomed to the wild, fear-spiced taste of raw flesh and to the warm saltiness of fresh blood, they realized that if

they became hungry enough they might be tempted to make a meal of a nice plump sailor.

But thinking of sailors made them remember the two enchanted lads they had left on the Isle of Sobs. What would become of the monkey and the cat who had been Pero and Procles? Would Circe pursue them with her vengeance? Feed them to a lion or a crocodile? Or would she forget about them and let them mingle with the rest of her zoo? If so, would they be locked in their animal shapes forever? Could they be rescued? The winged nymphs had much to wonder about as they sat on their rocks and gazed back toward Circe's island.

Out of their joy and grief and terror and wonder, they began to sing. And, hearing themselves, they realized that bird-notes had entered their voices now and made them more beautiful than ever. The heart-wrenching emptiness of the ocean waste was in their song, the seethe and chuckle of the tides, and all the shifting colors of light upon water.

They gave their song to the south wind, and it drifted out to sea. They sang and sang. The sun was sinking. Bloody light streaked the waters; the sea grew dark, then purple.

Suddenly, the sisters saw the lilac darkness bulge with a greater darkness. They heard a whipping of sails, a wrenching of wood and metal, and a clamor of men shouting. The nymphs dived off their rocks just as a ship rushed between them and broke upon the reef. The sunken rocks had torn the bottom of the ship out. It sank in a matter of minutes, dragging most of the crew with it.

A few men were struggling in the water. The sisters pulled them out and hauled them onto the rocks, where they stood, huddled and shivering.

"Sister, sister!" called Teles. "Let us not keep them. I have my reasons."

"I know," called Ligiea. "I'm growing hungry too."

"What shall we do?" cried Teles. "If we throw them back, they'll drown. They can't swim to shore."

"We'll fly them there," answered Ligiea. "But let us do it now, quickly!"

Each nymph clutched two amazed sailors in her talons, lifted them off the rock, and flew them to dry land. They set them gently on the beach and flew away as fast as they could.

The sisters returned to the rocks and sang to the moon. A new loneliness entered their song, a new amazement, and a greater hunger.

Circe's owl flew from the Isle of Sobs to the mountaintop where Athena dwelt and told the goddess all that had happened. Athena flew off and sped to the bird-women's rocks. She hovered invisibly over their perch. She listened to them sing and understood what happened to ships that sailed within reach of their voices.

All this pleased her mightily. "Ha, ha, ha," she chuckled to herself as she flew away. "Those rebellious nereids are more useful to me now than they were on Circe's island. Perched atop their rocks, singing with the voice of the sea itself, they cast their song like a silver loop about passing ships and draw them onto the reef ... Yes! They will become a great navigational hazard, as wonderfully destructive in their own way as Circe is in hers. And every sailor that is drowned shall weaken the worship of Poseidon among seafaring people. I am pleased, very pleased with the way things have worked out. I shall give those sisters a new name: *Sirens!*"

The word meant "noose-throwers," or "those who bind." And that is the name the winged sisters were to bear till the end of time.

Afterward, however, Athena pondered the matter more deeply. "The Sirens have one weakness," she thought to herself. "They're destructive without meaning to be. They pity the shipwrecked crews, and, one day, may give way to that stupid compassion. They can't stop singing any more than a pair of nightingales can, but they may start pulling sailors out of the water—which wouldn't do at all. Now, I want to keep them where they are, singing ships onto the reef, but it behooves me to make those waters even more deadly. But how? Shall I plant a school of sharks there? No, they're very brave and strong, those nereids, and, once their pity is aroused, would not hesitate to pull a sailor out of the very jaws of a shark. I'll have to think of something worse."

She thought and thought, and finally produced a truly hideous idea.

Cannibal Fat

The elder gods knew that a fire as hot as the sun smouldered deep beneath the earth, sometimes burning through its crust and into the bowels of mountains, making volcanoes.

To contain this buried heat something was needed as unimaginably cold as the fire was hot. And, in the dawn of time, Uranus, the First One, accompanied by the Cyclopes and the Hundred-handed Giants, had traveled to the iciest wastes and quarried the frozen seas for what became known as “black ice”—the only substance in the universe capable of insulating the earth’s surface from the fire below.

Enormous blocks of this black ice were used to construct a wall to hold the fires where they were, and to keep the surface of the earth cool enough for the seeds of life to grow. Eons later, when fish and birds and animals and man had been planted in the world, the spare blocks of black ice were kept in a cave gouged into the slope of Mount Olympus. And in this same den of abysmal frost were stored the leftover seeds and stuffs of creation.

Uranus had stationed a dragon at the mouth of the cave, for he wanted no one to enter. In time, Uranus was deposed by his own son Cronos, who then became King of the Gods, only to be deposed in turn by his own son, Zeus, who, in the family tradition, after getting rid of his father, named himself king. But under each reign, the cave remained a forbidden place, and the dragon stood eternal vigil.

Now, however, Athena needed to visit the cave to help herself to some of its taboo stores. She knew what manner of beast squatted before its portals, but the warrior goddess was not one to be dismayed by a dragon. Wearing breastplate and helmet, she carried her long spear in one hand and her shield in the other. This shield, unlike any other, was useful for more than defense; it proved deadlier than the spear. For it had belonged to the young

hero Perseus—and was the one into which the image of Medusa’s snake-haired head had burned itself.

Athena came striding up to the cave. The dragon flailed its tail and spat fire at her. Athena lifted her shield to deflect the flames. At the same time, however, the dragon looked upon the image of Medusa and was immediately turned to stone. The goddess stepped lightly over the stone dragon and entered the cave.

She searched among sacks of seed and huge bins until she found what she wanted. It was an enormous keg, bound with hoops of copper. She broke it open; out bulged a mass of something that quivered and pulsed and glistened. She had uncovered a mass of cannibal fat, some of the primal stuff of creation, a bit of which became part of every living thing. It fed upon other forms of life and converted them to energy for its own host—whatever form that took, be it ape, dove, crocodile, or crocus.

Wielding her spear, using its sharp, leaf-shaped head as a knife, Athena sliced off a throbbing lump of blubber. She stuffed it into an empty keg, hoisted it onto her shoulder, and strode out of the cave.

On her way out, Athena knelt and breathed into the stone mouth of the dragon. The stone hide cracked, became leathery scales; the spike tail twitched; flame flickered about its maw. It was alive again, as Athena had intended. She wanted the cave to appear undisturbed so that her theft would not be discovered.

The next ship that approached the Sirens’ fatal reef happened to be captained by an old, very stubborn seaman, who insisted on acting as his own helmsman, although he was quite deaf. But it was this deafness that saved his vessel. The Sirens’ song didn’t captivate him because he couldn’t hear it, and he steered his ship clear of the reef. But his crew were young men who heard perfectly. They were noosed by the song, and jumped overboard.

The Sirens saw men swimming toward them; then they saw that the water was churning strangely. A large, glistening blob floated to the surface. They couldn’t make out what it was; they had never seen anything like it before. It was a jellyfish, but huge, twenty times larger than any they had ever known. It was altogether transparent; they could see its pinkish entrails clenching.

The sailors were swimming toward it. Instead of slithering away, it moved toward them, oozing out from its own center, spreading over the surface of the water. The living aspic covered the men, curled about them, folding over on itself. And the horrified nymphs saw that the men were inside the creature, completely wrapped in glistening jelly.

The Sirens tried to scream but couldn't interrupt their song. They kept singing as they watched the men being digested.

The sisters had no way of knowing that it was Athena who had dropped that primal lump of cannibal fat into the sea, where it became, quite naturally, a carnivorous jellyfish. What they did know was that it meant certain death for any sailor to fling himself overboard in those waters—knew that their song was a death-song now, made more deadly by its very beauty. Nevertheless, they couldn't stop singing any more than the wind can stop blowing or brave men can turn back from danger.

The Meadow Nymphs

Before bees began, there was a clan of meadow nymphs who had learned to plunder flowers of their sweetness and to distill the fragrant juice with the cider of apple, fig, and pomegranate, making a drink so magically delicious that anyone who tasted it wanted nothing else.

One day when the nymphs were brewing their potion in a big pot, the odor floated to the top of Olympus where the gods dwelt. Down swooped Zeus and Hermes to see what smelled so good. They smiled with pleasure when they saw the cluster of meadow nymphs, for the leaf-clad creatures were very fresh and lovely. Two nymphs drifted toward them, bearing dripping ladles, and crying “Taste! Taste!”

Zeus gulped down a ladleful of the drink. He drank again, then raised his arm and spoke:

“O lovely creatures of meadow and field, I thank you for concocting this marvelous potion. But you must control your overflowing generosity, my dears. For all sweetness carries a sting, and those tasting this drink will find their idea of themselves foolishly enlarged. They may fancy themselves immortal—a condition reserved, as you know, for me and my family. Therefore, to avoid trouble, this drink, fit for the gods, is hereby declared fit *only* for the gods. All lesser breeds shall be forbidden to drink it. Is this understood?”

“Yes ... yes ...” murmured the nymphs, pressing about him. They never really listened to what any male of any species had to say—god, demigod, or mortal—but they were expert at reading face and gesture, and knew that Zeus was feeling very pleased and important. So they pretended to understand what he had said, and queued up for his blessing—which he bestowed heartily upon each, with a hug and a kiss, Hermes assisting.

Whereupon, the gods flew off believing that they had passed a solemn law, and the nymphs drifted to their flowerbed, giving no thought at all to what had been decreed.

So it was that the drink became known as *nectar*, or “deathless”, and was not only the favorite beverage of the gods but the foundation of their diet. Boiled with ground yellow wheat kernels, it was used as a food, and was known as *ambrosia*, or “immortality”. And the gods feasted daily upon nectar and ambrosia.

It happened one day that a nymph running across the meadow found her way blocked by a flock of sheep. Without pausing, she leaped onto the back of a ram and, stepping lightly from sheep to sheep, raced over the tightly packed mass. Then she heard a curious mewling sound. She leaped down and ran to a ewe that was sprawled on the grass somewhat separated from the others. Kneeling, the nymph saw that the ewe was suckling a human infant, a boy.

Looking about, she saw bloody rags on the grass, a bloody tuft of wool, some raw bones—and realized that the child’s parents must have been eaten by wolves, and that the baby had found his way to a mother sheep whose newborn lamb had also been eaten. The nymph cradled the infant in her arms and raced back to her sisters who shouted with joy when they saw the beautiful babe. They immediately adopted him, vowing to care for him as no child had ever been cared for. Indeed, they raised the child tenderly and merrily, and he was very happy among them. But Cora, the nymph who had found him in the field, was always his favorite, and she doted on him. *Butes* was the name he was given, meaning “herdsman.”

He grew into a boy, golden-skinned, lithe as a satyr, with a poll of reddish-brown hair and amber eyes that could turn almost yellow. The nymphs swore that those eyes glowed in the dark—like a cat’s.

The beautiful boy grew into a beautiful youth, and was the cause of the first quarrels among the clan. For every nymph in the meadow planned to marry him as soon as he was ready. Now, this was the only flaw in the boy’s happiness. *Butes* loved them all, and couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing any one of them. Actually, he felt quite ready to select a mate—but was trying to put off the day of decision by pretending to be more childish than he felt.

Nymphs are not easily fooled in such matters, though, and things were growing tense. One of the larger ones lost her patience one evening, slung Butes over her shoulder, and began to run off into the woods with him. But she was caught by Cora, who broke a branch over the head of the abductress, and snatched him back.

Then she took him aside, and said: "My child, you are a child no longer."

"Of course not!" he cried. "I'm grown up—or almost."

"Yes," she said. "You're almost a young man—almost ripe. And my sisters of the glade are growing restless, very restless. Each of them wants you for her own, and they are accustomed to going after what they want."

"Dear Cora," said Butes. "Please understand that I have done nothing to encourage them."

"They don't need much encouragement," said the nymph. "One look at you is enough. And spring is almost upon us. The moon kneels lower each night, and shines more hotly. I can't keep knocking them over the head one by one, as they try to carry you off."

"What can I do about it? Go away?"

"Just for a little while," said Cora. "Just to give them time to roam meadow, grove, and stream for shepherds or woodsmen or satyrs—enough for all."

"I don't mind going," said Butes. "I'm getting restless too. Perhaps I'll go to sea."

"To sea?"

"Sometimes I walk on the beach and watch the ships spreading their wings to the wind, and I want to be aboard."

"No, no!" cried Cora. "Sea voyages are too long. And too perilous. There are storms, shipwrecks, monsters—all sorts of dreadful things can happen."

"You know, I think I'd like danger. I've never even seen a monster."

"If I have my way, you won't," said Cora. "But you can see something even more exciting. As you know, twice a year we of the Meadow Clan deliver our nectar to the gods. We take turns making the journey to Olympus. My idea is for you to make the next trip. It will take you away from here for a month or so. Give you a chance to visit the gods in their own wonderful home, and perhaps make some useful contacts. A friend or two in high places do a young man no harm. By the time you come back,

each nymph will be paired off, and you will be safe for another year—by which time, perhaps, you will have chosen someone for yourself.”

“That can only be you, dearest Cora.”

“We’ll see.” she murmured, kissing him in a way that meant she had already seen all she had to. “But go, my child,” she whispered. “You must not linger. By first light, we shall begin loading the donkeys, and off you shall go.”

Indeed, the nymphs began to load the donkeys at daybreak, and had finished before the sun was high enough to dry the grass. Butes, wrapped in a cloak against the morning chill, kissed each nymph goodbye, saving Cora till last. She drew him aside, and gave him a crystal flask.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Something you’ll need,” she said. “I had a dream last night, the kind that shines a light into the darkness of time to come, showing us more than we want to know. Monstrous perils are to be flung into your path, my lovely boy. If you are to live long enough to be my mate, you shall need the special protection of a god.”

“Which one?”

“You shall meet them all on Olympus, and be able to choose for yourself. When you select one, be it fierce Ares, subtle Hermes, radiant Apollo, or deft Hephaestus, give him this crystal flask, making sure no one else sees you do it.”

“What’s in it?”

“Nectar. Ordinary nectar. But you shall describe it as something extraordinary—drawn from a blossom hitherto unknown and of matchless flavor, and especially brewed by the clan-mother herself for the exclusive use of whichever god you offer it to.”

“But,” said Butes, “when he tastes it, won’t he know it’s the same nectar he’s been drinking every day?”

“No,” said Cora. “He’ll believe what you have told him. It is a god’s nature to welcome praise and to magnify it even as he hears it. He’ll swallow every word of your tale about the special nectar in the flask. Vanity will combine with imagination to convince him that your gift is all you say it is. And he will stand ready to befriend you—at least until someone else gives him a better gift.”

“I shall do as you bid, dearest Cora. But must it be a god? How about a goddess?”

“No!” cried Cora. “Not a goddess! Any goddess you give that to will immediately boast about it to the other goddesses to make them jealous—and she’ll succeed. You’ll have gained one goddess as a friend, and the rest as enemies.”

“You are as wise as you are beautiful,” said Butes. “I’ll do exactly as you say.”

“The sun is climbing fast. You must be off.”

“Farewell,” said Butes. “I shall return.”

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A Fatal Gift

When Butes led his string of donkeys through the marble pillars that marked the entrance to the garden of the gods, he was met by a hundred-handed giant named Briareus who served Zeus as doorman and porter. The giant swiftly unloaded the donkeys, and holding a heavy keg of nectar in each pair of hands—there were fifty kegs—he carried them easily up the garden path toward the palace.

Butes understood that his beasts could not be allowed to enter the garden because they would eat the flowers. He led them a short distance downhill, then turned them out to pasture on the slope.

The peaks of the Olympian range wear snow in the winter, but the dwelling of the gods is divinely shielded from the weather. In palace and garden it is always June.

Dusk had fallen by the time Butes had climbed the slope again. The gods were preparing to dine. Their table stood in the garden. It was a massive slab of marble resting on four tree stumps. This evening, the younger gods were dining alone, for their elders had been summoned to High Council by Zeus, and were meeting in his throne room.

The hundred-handed Briareus had a brother equally well-furnished with hands, who was the gardener for the gods. His name was Botanus, and he had traveled the world over seeking the most exquisite flowers to transplant upon Olympus. He had also hunted down those songbirds whose voices were sweetest and brought two of each to nest in the trees around the palace. At dusk in that garden the voices of the birds thronged the air, and the scent of the flowers hung most heavily. Music and fragrance became one, a distillate of that happiness which is the natural element of the gods—who, walking in their garden at dusk, were reaffirmed in their divinity, and worked up an appetite for dinner.

Butes passed between the marble pillars and into the garden where the gods had begun to dine. The lad dared not approach. He clutched the flask of nectar and stood there, gawking.

The gods were clad in light. Apollo in golden light, shot with crimson. His sister Artemis in pearly shifting hues, hot silver fading to silver-brown, turning to sunken fires as when the moon hangs over the sea, watching itself drown. Ares was cloaked in the ominous smoulder of watch-fires, the tragic glare of funeral pyres. Hephaestus was lit by the bright open flame of the forge. Hermes was clad in a strange, blue-silver light, as of cold intellectual fires. Athena brooded in owl-light, the murderous dusk in which the great bird hunts.

Bewildered by radiance, diminished by awe, Butes fell to his knees before the glorious assemblage. He wanted to sink lower than his knees, roll in adoration before them like a dog rolling in the dust. As he knelt there, a fragrance reached him. The fragrance became music, the music of a voice speaking just to him, murmuring, "Butes, arise!"

He arose, feeling himself fill with powerful joy. At the end of the great table he saw another light—a soft light, but one that seemed to swallow all the rest. A soft pink flame as of roses filtering sunlight, becoming fragrance, turning to birdsong. He saw the rosy light parting, as when a beautiful woman brushes away a plume of hair that veils her face.

There, at the end of the table, was the naked face of beauty itself—the face of Aphrodite, Goddess of Love.

Forgetting all that Cora had warned him against, he leaped onto the table. Threading his way through flagons and platters and past the astounded faces of the feasting gods, he raced toward Aphrodite. Kneeling before her, he thrust the flask at her with both hands, crying:

"For you, Aphrodite! For you alone!"

By the last glimmer of twilight, Aphrodite led Butes through the garden. She was murmuring to him, but he couldn't answer. He was choked with joy. She wore a blue tunic, and her feet were bare. A dove rode her shoulder. She led Butes to the roses. The rose was her flower as the dove was her bird. Among trees, the apple was sacred to her, and the myrtle.

"I value your gift," she said. "And I value him who brings it even more. But you have been rash."

“Because the other goddesses will be jealous?” asked the lad.

“Yes, sweet boy.”

“I would risk more than their wrath to please you, my lady.”

“Nevertheless,” said Aphrodite, “their anger is to be feared. When you leave this place, I want you to take certain precautions. Do not go hunting. For Artemis is the Huntress Maiden, Queen of the Chase; she can turn an arrow or spear in mid-flight. And some hunter, trying to aim at a deer or a wild boar, will find himself accidentally killing you.”

“I shall shun the chase,” said Butes. “I don’t like to kill animals anyway.”

“Do not walk across ploughed fields,” said Aphrodite. “They are ruled by Demeter, who may send a snake to bite your heel.”

“I shall avoid ploughed fields,” said Butes.

“To fend off Athena’s wrath is more difficult,” said Aphrodite. “She is implacable when seeking vengeance. I shall have to buy her mercy. She covets a certain marvelous mirror made for me by my husband, Hephaestus; it permits me to see the back of my head when combing my hair. I don’t know what good it will do her; she’s always wearing that ugly helmet—but she wants it anyway. I’ll give her the thing if she agrees to forgive you.”

“Your beauty is matched only by your kindness to me, O Queen of the Night.”

“We may fail to appease their wrath, no matter what we do,” said Aphrodite. “So I shall try to protect you with my most potent charm. By rose and by dove, by apple and myrtle, I enjoin that no harm shall come to you for what you have done today. In the name of love and beauty and brave, foolish enraptured generosity, let all hear this:

Butes, Butes,
I give you power
over bird and flower.
Things with wings
shall attend you,
and night and morn,
the watchful thorn
defend you.

She took him in her arms and kissed his face. “Now leave this place,” she said. “As swiftly and silently as you can. Collect your donkeys and hurry home to your meadow. And be very careful along the way.”

But the other goddesses were waiting beyond the garden wall, and even Aphrodite had not gauged the depths of their jealousy.

“Remember the early days?” said Artemis. “When we used to thin out the swarming mortal herd by a great all-night hunt with dogs and horses and torch-bearers? There’s nothing I’d rather do tonight. Anyone else in the mood?”

“Why, I can’t think of anything I’d enjoy more!” cried Athena.

“That ill-mannered little wretch seems to move quite spryly,” said Artemis. “He should give us a good run.”

“I’m definitely in the mood,” said Athena.

“So am I,” said Demeter.

“It seems a bit cruel,” said gentle Hestia. “But our dogs do need the exercise, don’t they, Artemis? So it would be a kindness to them, wouldn’t it?”

“We’ll give him a sporting chance,” said Artemis. “Allow him a big headstart and course him in the forest instead of the open field, so that he’ll be able to dodge around and hide behind trees and so forth. It’ll be a great chase.”

“How will we get him away from Aphrodite?” asked Demeter.

“She won’t keep him in the garden long,” said Artemis. “He’s too small for her. Besides, I happen to know that she’ll be otherwise engaged this evening.”

“Oh? ... With whom?” asked Demeter.

“Apollo, Ares, Hermes ... anyone *but* her husband. Now I’m off to fetch my hounds.”

“I’ll go call the torch-bearers,” said Hestia.

“I’ll round up the horses,” said Athena.

“I’ll stay here and see that he doesn’t slip away,” said Demeter.

The goddesses separated. The gods were still at the table. It was a hunter’s moon, almost full, bright enough to cast shadows.

Manhunt

All night long, Butes had been running for his life. Now at dawn, he was still fleeing, pursued by the hounds, and torch-bearers, and screeching goddesses. By daybreak, the pack had flushed him out of the woods and into an open field. He could run like a hare, but he was weary now, and the dogs were gaining fast. Mingled with their baying was the thunder of hooves and the bloodthirsty screams of the goddesses, riding close behind the hounds.

“This is it,” thought Butes. “I’m about to die. Pity ... it’s too beautiful a morning for such sad things to happen. Not that I’d go gladly even if the weather were foul. But my options seem to have run out. Let me try to persuade myself in these final moments that a kiss from Aphrodite is worth a painful death. So I’ll take a last look at that kindling sky, and try to be thankful. Last looks are too late, but what can I do?”

He fixed his eyes on a strange opalescent cloud that was floating above his head. He didn’t know that he was looking at the underside of dove wings—those of Aphrodite’s messenger pigeons, whose colors changed with every changing light. They were not there by chance. Aphrodite had dispatched them on an urgent errand. Each one carried a rose-branch in its beak.

The dogs’ howling turned to snarls as they came in for the kill. Their glittering eyes and savagely grinning muzzles were very close now. Behind them Butes saw weapons gleaming: the spear of Athena, poised for throwing; the silver arrow that Artemis was notching; Demeter’s sharp pruning knife.

Things were dropping between him and the dogs. Butes cringed away; he thought the goddesses had begun to throw their weapons. What pierced the ground, however, were not weapons, but rose-branches dropped by the

pigeons. They were planting themselves, as Aphrodite had instructed. Magically empowered by the blessing of the love goddess, the rose branches dug themselves into the earth, and a wall of thorns began to grow. A thick impenetrable hedge of barbed branches wove themselves about the crouching boy.

The springing hounds found themselves impaled on the thorns. They tore free, and fled, whimpering. The goddesses reined back their horses and rode around and around the hedge. Artemis shot her silver arrows into it. Athena flung her spear. But neither could pierce the densely woven thicket. Cursing, Athena scooped up her spear and flung it again. It stuck harmlessly in the tangled branches.

“Let’s burn it down!” cried Demeter. “I’ll command the torch-bearers to relight their torches.”

“Those branches are too green to burn,” said Hestia.

“Not if the fire is hot enough,” said Athena.

“Besides,” said Demeter, “even if they only smoulder, the smoke will suffocate him.”

Then, to the astounded goddesses, it seemed as if their very words had summoned fire. A zigzag bolt of blue lightning sheared the air. Thunder spoke out of the clear sky. The thunder became the voice of Zeus, and that voice was full of fury.

Aphrodite, after dispatching her doves and her roses to protect Butes, had flown to the King of the Gods, and cried:

“Your daughters and your sisters defy you, Zeus! At this very moment they are disobeying your edict against man-kill. Bearing a grudge against a poor lad, they are hunting him to his death. Look down, look down! Behold how your subjects disport themselves as your benign attention is occupied with mighty matters of state. Behold!”

Zeus, who always found it difficult to resist Aphrodite, looked down and saw that she spoke the truth. He was enraged, and made himself even more majestic in his fury because Aphrodite was watching, and he wanted her to admire him. So he flung his lightning bolt and spoke in a voice of thunder, frightening the four goddesses out of their wits, causing them to turn their steeds and scatter in every direction.

Aphrodite seized the great knotted hand of Zeus and kissed it. She smiled her most radiant smile, one that told him her gratitude knew no limits. Then

she raised her arm, and the thorn-hedge fell away from Butes.

The field was empty. The sun had climbed now. Birds rejoiced. It seemed to Butes like the most beautiful morning he had ever known. And life—every breath and throb and leaf whisper and birdnote—seemed infinitely precious.

“Thank you, Aphrodite,” he murmured. “And my thanks to you, O thundering Zeus. The nectar my nymphs shall make for you will be sweeter than ever. And twice as often now, shall we bear our brimming kegs to your mountain home.”

But Butes was never to see his nymphs again. For Athena, festering with hatred, leaped off her horse and whistled up her owl-chariot. The great white arctic owls—larger than eagles—drew the chariot swiftly through the sky until they were over the meadow where the nymphs dwelt.

Cora and her party were among the flowers, plundering them of their sweetness. The chariot dipped. Athena pointed her hands and mumbled a curse the way a snake shoots venom through its hollow teeth.

To the nymphs below it was as if the summer afternoon had become a hot golden fist. They were gripped so tightly that they couldn't move their heads to look down at themselves. But each could see the others darkening, dwindling, sprouting hair upon their bodies—saw many-paned eyes bulging, membranous wings growing. By the time Athena drove off, cackling triumphantly, the entire clan of lovely meadow nymphs had become a swarm of bees.

They tried to speak to each other, tried to call to Zeus and Hermes who had once praised them. They pled with the gods to annul the curse, to restore them to themselves. But instead of their own voices, they heard only the sound of buzzing and realized that their prayers would not be answered, and that they would never be permitted to return to their own shapes.

Of all things in the world, love clings most stubbornly to old forms, and Cora so passionately wanted to be recognized by Butes when he returned that she was partially shielded from Athena's curse. Though transformed into a bee like the others, she had become their queen, and for an hour each day was granted speech.

And it was Cora who told Butes what had happened when he returned to the meadow and found the nymphs gone, replaced by a swarm of strange

creatures among the flowers. He tried to choke back his tears, tried not to show how horrified he was at the sight of the fat black and yellow bee that hovered at his ear, whispering.

“Do not grieve, my boy. But look to your own safety. For the ruthless Athena hates you still. You must leave this place, go as far as you can, as swiftly as you can.”

“No,” he cried. “When I leave here I shall go to Aphrodite and beg her to restore you. She saved me from the wrath of Athena; perhaps she’ll do the same for you.”

“No, no,” cried Cora. “You must not go to her. I am enchanted now, even though the enchantment be foul, and am able to see the future. If you return to Olympus, you are doomed. What you must do is go to sea. You wanted to do that once—remember? Well, now you must. For Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, is Athena’s enemy and may protect you against her.”

She darted off suddenly and vanished among the flowers.

Butes, blinded by tears, stumbled out of the meadow and headed for the beach.

“There’s nothing for me here,” he murmured to himself. “If there’s anything for me anywhere, perhaps I’ll find it at sea.”

Butes

Athena appeared to Circe on the Isle of Sobs and said: “A ship sails this way. On board is a youth whom I loathe beyond anyone else in the world. His name is Butes.”

“Well, my lady,” said Circe. “If he lands here, you’ll soon be rid of him.”

“Listen carefully,” said Athena. “I want you to bestialize the crew, but not Butes.”

“He is to be spared?”

“Certainly not. I don’t want him alive in any shape or form. I’m lending you my owl-chariot. You’ll be able to fly over the ship and drop a spell upon the crew, turning them into a pack of starving wolves. But allow Butes to retain his own form. He won’t keep it long. The wolves will tear him to pieces.”

“All shall be done according to your wish,” said Circe. She climbed into the owl-chariot and flew off.

The chariot streaked across the sky until Circe spotted a ship below. The owls flew lower, and the sorceress studied the deck to see if she could identify Butes, whom Athena had described.

But she herself was being identified by two pairs of very sharp eyes. She had come near enough to the reef for the Sirens to recognize their enemy. Their song changed, rang with trumpet notes, became a battle hymn, as they rose off the rock and flew toward the chariot.

Their wings were powerful. High above the owl-chariot they arced—then dived, screaming. The owls saw what seemed like eagles diving upon them, talons poised. Like terrified horses kicking a coach to pieces, the owls frantically pecked themselves free from the traces and flew away as fast as they could.

The chariot, of course, plunged toward the sea. Circe barely had time to turn into a bat and slip out before Athena's chariot hit the water and sank.

Circe had done well to become a bat for it flies faster than any bird, and the one thing she wanted now was to escape the Sirens. She sped homeward and was so frightened, and so unused to being frightened, that she remained a bat for hours before returning to her own form.

The Sirens flew back to their rock and began to sing their triumph. But their joy turned to astounded grief when they saw the ship they thought they had saved rushing toward them. The wind was gusting. "Pray that they're blown away from the rocks," whispered Teles.

Just as she spoke, the vessel was caught in a crosswind. Its sails flapped. The ship yawed, but before it could be blown away from the reef, sailors began jumping overboard and swimming toward the magical song.

The Sirens kept singing and their voices filled with grief as they saw the enormous slime spreading toward the swimmers.

The ship was heading straight toward them. A slender lad had lashed himself to the great sweep-oar, and was guiding the ship upon the reef. Again the wind shifted, growing into a gale, hurling the vessel toward the line of sunken boulders. It hurtled between the Sirens' rocks. As it passed, the helmsman swung a knife, cutting himself free of the steering oar, and leaped off the deck.

As he fell, Ligiea, still singing, rose into the air and caught him in her arms. She set him down gently on the rock. Teles flew over and joined them.

Butes lay sprawled between the bird-women, breathing their salt fragrance, and wrapping himself in the sound of their wonderful voices. As he listened he began to feel alive for the first time since losing Cora. Felt himself fill with a wild inventiveness.

"One of you, take me in your claws!" he said. "Fly over that vile aspic monster, and hover there; I want to watch him at work."

"Why?" said Ligiea, as Teles kept humming. "You'll only see him digesting your shipmates. It's not a pleasant sight."

"To vanquish an enemy," said Butes, "you must get very close. It's rarely pleasant but always necessary. Will you take me there, please?"

Teles kept singing as Ligiea grasped the boy in her talons, spread her wings, and flew off the rock. She flew over the jellyfish, and hovered there,

dangling Butes from her claws.

He studied the huge blob as it fed upon his shipmates. He gritted his teeth, fought down nausea, and forced himself to watch. Forced himself to examine every bit of the monster, and watch every movement it made.

While it seemed shapeless at first sight, he recognized that it had a definite physique, although blurred. The center of the creature was slightly sunken, and seemed softer than the edges. That hollow served as mouth and gullet. The edges of the blob gripped its prey and folded it toward the middle, where the mouth sucked it down toward pink intestines.

“I have a plan,” he yelled to Ligiea over the wind. “But it’s dangerous. May I ask you to share the risk with me?”

“You *are* asking,” answered the Siren.

“If my plan works, it will rid your waters of this horror.”

“What must I do?” asked Ligiea.

“Hold me by the ankles. Circle away and come flying back, dipping low enough so that my hand may just skim the surface.”

Hearing the steely ring of the lad’s voice, seeing the set of his jaw and the frosty gleam of his eye, she asked no further questions, but shifted her grip so that she held both ankles in one set of talons. Then she circled in the air, and flew back, dipping low, so that his hand just brushed the water.

That hand held a curved scaling knife. And when Ligiea flew over the jellyfish which was devouring the last of the sailors, Butes stabbed his hand down, and hooked his knife into the edge of the blob.

Ligiea felt a great weight dragging her. She beat her wings with all her strength. The edge of the jellyfish, impaled by the knife, began to fold over onto itself—toward its own center. Butes pulled as hard as he could, helping the Siren drag the ruffled edge of the monster into its mouth.

That mouth went into its blind senseless suck, drawing the edge of itself into its own intestines. Butes managed to pull his arm away just in time, and Ligiea flew off with the lad dangling from her claws.

Tighter and tighter curled the jellyfish as it gorged upon itself. It became one long scroll of slime, growing narrower and narrower until it had swallowed itself completely—all but its mouth, which became a brief whirlpool, a spool of bubbles, then vanished.

Butes nestled on the rock between the two Sirens. “Now,” he said, “sing to me. I’m the only one here who can listen, and be safe, listening. Sing me

to sleep, and do not wake me until I've finished my dream.”

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A Taste of Nectar

By this time, changeable Proteus had decided to change sides again. He left Athena's service and re-entered the employ of Poseidon. The sea god, who was very experienced in the ways of the world, viewed treachery as a natural form of self-interest, and was willing to accept Proteus's vows of renewed loyalty.

"Your first assignment," said Poseidon, "is to do something for the young man who's being so tormented by Athena. That vicious shrew turned the nymph he loved into some kind of sticky stinging bug. See if you can change her back. I'd like to do a good turn for so brave a lad. Besides, the quality of the nectar has fallen off terribly. The stuff we're being served on Olympus now doesn't compare to what we were getting before Athena cursed the nymphs."

Proteus swam off and returned shortly thereafter. "It's no use, master," he said to Poseidon. "Athena used a specially adhesive curse. I've tried my most powerful spells and still can't restore the bee to nymphhood."

"Well, think of something," said Poseidon. "The nectar's getting worse and worse. I think those stupid bees have been nibbling garlic. I'll have to stop dining at Olympus unless things improve."

Proteus swam away again and found Butes on the Sirens' isle. The bird-women were cooing over him gently. Proteus returned to Poseidon's cave and told the sea god that he had consulted with the youth—who, when told that Cora could never be a nymph again, had asked to be transformed into a bee himself.

"I obliged him," said Proteus. "I changed him into a handsome young drone, and he flew off to join the swarm."

Some weeks later, a beaming Poseidon informed Proteus that the quality of the nectar was indeed improved.

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Ulysses and the Sirens

A generation later, the fabulous voyager, Ulysses, was sailing away from Circe's island and heading westward. It is told that a bee flew aboard his vessel and surprised Ulysses by addressing him in fluent Greek.

"Disregard my appearance and heed my words, O captain," said the bee. "I was once a man like you, hunted by the gods over land and sea. Having long admired your career, I wish to help you now."

"What makes you think I need help?" asked Ulysses.

"Having escaped Circe's vile enchantments, you are now headed toward an even greater peril. Ignore my words and be shipwrecked, watch your crew drown, and be drowned yourself. But accept this gift and use it well, and you may be able to save yourselves."

"What gift?"

"This ball of wax. It is pure beeswax, drawn out of the finest combs in all the world."

"And how can this ball of wax do all the wonderful things you have promised?"

"Very soon," said the bee, "if you keep on this course, you will hear the sound of singing, borne by the wind. That sound is utter enchantment, irresistible. Whoever hears it must follow it. But if you follow it, if you steer your ship toward where the Sirens sing, you will hit a hidden reef that will tear your ship apart. Nor is there any use trying to steer clear, for when your men hear the song they will dive overboard and swim to their destruction. The Sirens' rock is white with the bones of sailors."

"You seem to know what you're about," said Ulysses. "Speak on."

Butes told him what to do, and flew away. Whereupon, Ulysses called his crew together and issued his commands. They grumbled, but no one on this ship ever disobeyed their captain.

Knowing this, Ulysses told the men to listen well for he was about to give them unusual instructions. “You must obey me,” he said, “until I am bound to the mast. Then, no matter what I do, no matter what signals I make for you to release me, you must ignore them, and keep me tied to the mast. For I shall have lost my senses, and shall be issuing crazed commands.”

He took the ball of wax that the bee had given him, broke off bits of it, and stuffed the ears of each man so that he could hear nothing but the pounding of his own blood. Then, as they had been instructed, two of the men bound Ulysses to the mast—bound him very tightly. For Ulysses did not dare deafen himself. In those days, sailing the high seas in such small ships, a captain had to hear the changing sounds of wind and sea, or he would endanger ship and crew.

The sailors finished lashing Ulysses to the mast just in time. For now he heard the sound of singing. The song was faint at first and Ulysses was able to keep his wits about him sufficiently to signal the men to drop the sail and unship the long oars. For the wind was off the reef now, and the small square sail of the vessel would not have allowed it to skirt the deadly reef.

The men could not hear the Sirens’ song, and bent strongly to their oars. But Ulysses heard the voices clearly now, and wished he had plugged his own ears with wax. Every drop of his blood surged toward the sound of those voices. Every pore and muscle ached with the song—yearned to reach it. He felt his hair trying to pull itself out of his head, felt his eyeballs trying to fly out of their sockets. Bound to the mast, it seemed to him that the sun was charring him where he stood—that he could actually *see* the Sirens’ voices, pouring in a crystal flood through the burning air.

Ulysses moaned and yelled and gibbered but the crew, obeying his orders, ignored him. The voices formed a silver noose that fell about his neck and began to pull at him. He knew that he would have to break loose from the mast or choke to death. His mighty muscles swelled. He burst the rawhide bonds and dashed toward the edge of the deck.

But two of his strongest men were standing guard, as he had instructed. They seized him before he could dive overboard. He struck them down, but they had stopped him long enough to give the crew time to leap out of their rowing seats, and seize him.

They crushed him under their weight, then dragged him back to the mast, and bound him with the huge hawser that was the anchor-line. Again,

Ulysses strained at his bonds, howling to be released. He knew he could not break the hawser, but he was trying nevertheless to force himself upward from bended legs, using all his furious strength to uproot the mast, rip it out of its hole.

The men heard the wood of the mast groaning under the strain. But it held. Ulysses could not uproot it. One of the sailors who had held Ulysses, however, had lost the wax out of his ears and been knocked to the deck unconscious. Now, as he came to, he heard the Sirens singing. He rushed to the rail and dived overboard.

Ulysses saw the sharp triangular fin of a shark cutting the water toward the swimmer—heard the man scream, saw him sink in a bloody froth. The other men, their ears still plugged, kept rowing.

The voices grew fainter and fainter, and finally died away. Ulysses felt the madness ebb slowly out of his body. He signalled to his men to unplug their ears and unbind him.

The captain stood at the stern, looking back toward the Sirens. They were too far away now. All he saw was what looked like two enormous birds in the distance.

Thousands of years have passed since then. But the Sirens have not quite gone. When the gods declared themselves immortal, what they meant was that nothing in nature really dies; it only changes form.

So it is that we can still hear the Sirens sometimes when we're out on the water—not in a motorboat, but in a sailboat or some other craft that slips silently through the chop. At times, we can hear the wind change pitch, bearing the sound of women singing.

We may hear them, but we do not see them. Nor do their voices linger long on the air. For they are smothered by the din of motorboats, rumbling barges, steam-whistles, helicopters, and low-flying airplanes.

“Sister, sister, take heart,” one whispers to the other. “Those who swarm so noisily must soon drive themselves off the earth. Their foul vapors will blow away, the waters will clear. A pure primal hush will fall again upon the sea—and we Sirens shall be heard once more. We shall again raise our voices to mingle with the wind, sending a crystal coolness to those who thirst for adventure.”

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THE SPHINX

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In that ancient lovely tongue, Dorothy means
gift of the Goddess. And I thank her.

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Characters

Monsters

The Sphinx Atrocious monster with lion's body, eagle's wings,
(SFINKS) and woman's head

Harpies Flying hags who police Hell

Giants Hundred-handed creatures who serve Zeus and
Hades

Cyclopes Gigantic one-eyed smiths
(SY kloh peez)

Cerberus Three-headed dog who guards the Gates of Hell
(SER beh ruhs)

Gods

Zeus King of the Gods

(ZOOS)

Hades Lord of Tartarus, the Land Beyond Death
(HAY deez)

Demeter Goddess of the Harvest
(DEM ih tuhr)

Persephone Demeter's daughter, the spring goddess
(per SEF uh nee)

Poseidon God of the Sea
(poh SY duhn)

Hermes The Messenger God, Usher of the Dead
(HUR meez)

Hera Wife to Zeus; Queen of the Gods
(HEE ruh)

Mortals

Thallo A poet

Charon Master boatman who ferries shades across the Styx

(KAH ron)

Oedipus King of Thebes
(ED ih puhs)

Others

Menthe Meadow nymph who serves Demeter
(MEN thee)

Griffin Winged lion that fathered the Sphinx

Lila Desert demon who bore the Sphinx

Serpents They prowl Tartarus

Fiends and Demons Employed by Hades to administer torments

Wingless Dragons Specially bred to serve in Hell

Thanatos Diplomatic demon, Hades' chief of staff
(THAN ah tohs)

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Enter the Sphinx

In a desert, long ago, dwelt a tribe of female demons who rode sandstorms and raided caravans. They lived in what is now north India, and had made themselves feared by everyone. Until, one night, their queen was stepped on by an elephant. Too tough to die, she was too squashed to rule, and passed the crown on to her daughter, the princess Lila. And Lila, made reckless by joy, gathered the tribe about her and said:

“Hear me now. We are grown false to ourselves through easy living. For some time now our only forays have been against caravanning merchants who are unable to put up a decent fight. So we scatter them, help ourselves to their gold and their jewelry, and roast their camels, and a few of the fattest merchants—and count our booty and sleep, and are visited by no dreams of glory. We are not meant for so soft a life, swift sisters. We are lean and mean and keen. Aye, we twirl the sand into whirling spouts and spin in the midst of them in a fine demon dance. And all who dwell in this dry land dread our name. So ... let us use our powers lest they wither and fall away. Let us raid a truly worthy foe.”

“Who ... who?” screeched the coven.

“Why, the Griffins.”

“No! No! Woe! Woe!” the witches shrieked in dismay. Although they were savage in battle, they had no stomach for fighting Griffins—and with good reason.

For these creatures were winged lions, but their heads were eagle heads. When hunting they darkened the sky, then dived like eagles falling upon a flock of sheep. But what they ate were elephants, hippos, camels, and gorillas. And there were strong rumors that they spent their time when not hunting in scratching gold out of the desert sand—and had heaped up a mountain of gold.

“Don’t say ‘no,’” said Lila. “Don’t say ‘woe.’ Anyone who denies my leadership must meet me in single combat.”

She stood to her full, towering height and stretched her powerful arms. And no one dared challenge her, much as they feared the Griffins. For she was the largest of them by far, and wrestled crocodiles for sport.

That night, under the indifferent gaze of the great low desert stars, they whirled in a demon dance. Raised cones and funnels of sand that enclosed each one in a fine, suffocating grip. Whirling, dancing, shrieking, they moved across the desert to where the Griffins dwelt.

All night they traveled, and through the morning hours, and then at noon, when the sand was as hot as iron filings, they struck. They fell upon the Griffins in a stifling rush. But the winged lions were swifter still. Beating their eagle vans, they rose into the air, then fell with bared claws.

What happened then exactly was hidden in spouts of sand and gouts of blood. And the story itself of that strange battle has blown away like desert dust. What we do know is this: A few witches managed to escape; the rest were torn to shreds. Except for Lila: she was taken captive by the Griffin chief. And when he released her she did not wish to go, but dwelt with him for many centuries.

She presented him with a daughter, it is said. And that daughter had a woman’s head, a lion’s body, and an eagle’s wings. They named her Sphinx, and she grew to Griffin size in a single day. She stayed with the Griffins for a week or so, then decided that she preferred to hunt alone. So she left her mother and father and the Griffin pack, and flew far away.

The Sphinx developed extreme tastes. She either craved or loathed, nothing between. She loved intense heat and hated the cold. The place she was fondest of was the very middle of the Egyptian desert where the sand under the midday sun grew hot as molten gold. And there is where she would have dwelt always had it not been so hard to find food.

For she had a very picky appetite. Her favorite meal was a kind of humpbacked whale that sang as it swam, and even sang on its way down her gullet, tickling her palate in a very pleasurable way. Among land animals she preferred a certain silvery ape. And these preferences made her bad temper worse. For the whales soon learned how much the Sphinx hated to be cold, and began to hide in the deepest gulches of the sea where the water was icy. By the time the Sphinx caught a whale, she would have to fly

off to the desert and burrow under the sand and stay there until she thawed. So, finally, she gave up on the singing whales and began to hunt giant octopi and two-ton sea turtles—which filled her belly but gave her no pleasure.

As for the silvery ape, it was considered a delicacy also by lions and tigers and leopards and such, and its numbers were shrinking fast. So the Sphinx had to eat gorillas and baboons—who were nourishing but flavorless.

She found herself feeding, therefore, less heavily than she liked, and felt always half-starved. And her temper grew worse and worse.

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An Unlikely Match

When Hecate announced that she meant to wed the lame little poet, Thallo, no one could understand why. But the assorted fiends and demons who staffed Hell had learned not to question the tigerishly beautiful Harpy queen no matter what she did. In the vast realm of the Land Beyond Death only Hades, its king, claimed authority over her, and he didn't trust himself to approach her. The idea that his chief aide should wish to leave his employ threw him into such a fury that he kept his distance. He knew that if he came close he would assault her—and even he didn't relish closing with that savage creature. For her great wings bore her more swiftly than an eagle, and her brass talons could rip an armored giant to shreds.

No one questioned her, therefore, when she quit Tartarus forever and flew off to Helicon to collect her unsuspecting man.

The rabble of poets who were wandering the slope of Parnassus, picking flowers and muttering bits of verse to themselves, scattered like quail when a huge, winged shadow fell upon them. Thallo alone did not flee, but sat on his rock, grinning, as Hecate alighted.

“A good day to you,” he said.

“A very good one,” she said. “My wedding day.”

“Oh, are you to be married?”

“Yes.”

“To whom?”

“To you, of course.”

“Me? Why me?”

“That's either a modest answer or an extremely rude one. And I hope for your sake that it's not rude.”

“Let's put it this way,” he drawled. “We've had a few sprightly conversations, and I'm aware of a kind of excitement between us, but a man

does expect to be courted, you know.”

“Everyone else is shocked by my choice,” she said. “So you may as well be too. While I make it a rule never to explain myself, I will say this: I have certain powers and have gained a certain measure of fame, but now I intend to devote myself entirely to you.”

“Thank you,” said Thallo. “You are the Arch Tormentress, are you not?”

“So I have been called,” she said modestly.

“And now you wish to focus these impressive talents upon me?”

“On you alone, sweetling.”

“Wish to quit public service and contrive a little private hell for me, is that it?”

“You have a way with words, gimpy one,” she murmured. “That’s how you won my heart.”

She unsheathed her brass claws and raked him tenderly. He shuddered with delight.

Her claws closed upon him; her wings beat the air; they arose. He dangled from her claws, laughing, still clutching the thick scroll on which was written the tale he had been working on for the past twenty years. He used it now to wave good-bye to his fellow poets, who were staring up in amazement.

The Ferryman

Thessaly is studded with mountains. For three months of the year they are clad in snow. But spring comes early there, and the melted snow cascades down to flood the rivers.

Of all these swift-flowing rivers the most perilous was Alpheus. Centuries before, an idle, mischievous river god by the same name fell in love with a nymph named Arethusa. He pursued her over the field and through the wood and was about to catch her when she gained the aid of Artemis, who changed her into a stream. Whereupon Alpheus changed himself into a river and sought to mingle his waters with the stream. But Artemis dammed him up and left him in thwarted flood. This curdled his disposition, which was not too good to begin with. He boiled with spiteful currents and tried to drown anyone crossing him. He also delighted in overflowing his banks, washing away towns and farms and drowning cattle.

Now, in the beginning of things man had not yet learned bridge building. The only way to cross a swift river was by boat, and this was dangerous also. To be a ferryman demanded great strength and courage. And the one who ferried folk across the treacherous Alpheus was the most experienced boatman in Thessaly, a gigantic grizzled old fellow named Abas. He had worked the river for more than fifty years, and seemed as powerful as ever. But he wasn't quite. Suddenly one fair summer day the river went into spate. Abas was swept overboard and drowned.

His place was immediately taken, to everyone's surprise, by his eighteen-year-old son, named Charon. Nobody objected, however, when the young man claimed his father's post. For he was a hulking youth, much too big for anyone to challenge.

In order to carry more passengers, Charon decided to use a raft instead of a boat. He made it himself, felling a massive oak, trimming it, chopping it

into logs, and binding them with vines. For an oar he used the trimmed trunk of a smaller tree. When he finished he had a huge, heavy, clumsy thing, more of a floating platform than a vessel. But he was so powerful that he sent it scudding across the river like a canoe.

The silent youth and his giant raft became very popular. After a month or so, more people were traveling with him than had ever crossed with his father.

One day, however, things were slow, and it was hours before a single passenger came to the dock. Charon eyed him closely, not liking what he saw—a big, burly fellow with a greasy beard. He wore a leather tunic and bore a heavy knobbed club. But he smiled at Charon and wished him good day.

Charon grunted, and said, “Get aboard.”

“I don’t want to cross,” said the man.

“What do you want then?”

“Just to talk to you.”

“Talk?”

“Is that so strange?”

“You’ll have to talk on board. There may be people on the far shore waiting to be picked up.”

The stranger stepped onto the raft. Charon dipped his oar and with a mighty thrust sent the clumsy craft scudding along.

“You handle this thing well,” said the stranger. “And I know. I’m a ferryman myself.”

Charon said nothing.

“In fact, I’m chief of the clan.”

“What clan?” Charon grunted.

“Ferryman.”

“That’s no clan; it’s an occupation.”

“Well, this is what I want to talk to you about. All the other ferryman have joined up. You’re the only one who isn’t a member.”

“And I don’t mean to be.”

“Why not?”

“Why yes?”

“We do each other a lot of good. Help each other.”

“How?”

“Fix fares.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, before we got together, people paid us anything they felt like. A small coin, a sack of apples, a sausage. And those who had nothing gave nothing.”

“So ...?”

“It’s no good. We had a meeting and decided to raise fares—and in such a way that our passengers couldn’t object; that’s the beauty part. What we do is simply stop the boat in the middle of the river and tell them to empty their pockets.”

“Suppose they don’t?”

“We reason with them for a minute or two, and if they’re still stubborn we hit them on the head with an oar and toss them overboard. Works like a charm. None of us had to drown more than one or two before people saw the light. Now, we’re doing very well.”

“If you’re doing so well, why are you bothering with me?”

“Because if even one ferryman does things in the old way it makes the rest of us look bad. In fact, we’ve noticed that people are going out of their way to cross over with you instead of using the river nearest them.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Charon.

“What it amounts to, brother, is that we’ll have to insist that you join up.”

“Insist how?”

“Well, if you don’t see reason and enroll yourself in the clan and start fleecing your riders like a good loyal member, then we’ll have to take drastic measures.”

“Drastic, eh?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Want my answer now?”

“Yes.”

Charon stopped rowing. Unshipped his oar, raised it high and smashed it down on the man’s head. He caught the slumping body, whisked it into the air, and pitched it into the river—where it sank immediately. He dipped his oar, and with a powerful stroke drove the raft toward the other shore.

Menthe

For some months now Alpheus had been fast asleep under the river that bore his name. Then in the first week of spring he awoke, hungry and irritable—in a mood for drowning people. But there were no fishermen on the banks, no swimmers on the rocks, and he knew that he would have to wait until someone boarded the ferry.

But no one came to the old wooden dock. The raft was moored, and Charon lounged on it, braiding a rope. Alpheus squatted underwater, watching the shadows that slid across the surface. He glared at the shadow of the raft. He disliked everyone, but had formed a special distaste for the big, raw youth who plied his river so boldly.

“I’d drown him now,” thought Alpheus, “but I want to wait until he has some passengers.”

Upon that early spring day Charon was in a strange mood also. The wind blowing off the mountain was heavy with fragrance. Odor of clover and hot meadow grass mingled with the cool smell of mountain trees—cedar and pine. And the warm wind was striped with a colder air—a whiff of the last snow clinging to the crags. It was a maddening incense. Charon drew great draughts of it into the bellows of his chest. Then it seemed that fragrance became song as the birds welcomed the day; meadowlark and blackbird and the silver-noted thristle.

Charon felt himself boiling with restlessness, the kind that could not be drained off by terrific labors. Using his muscles was not enough upon this day; he wanted to use more of himself. But what more was there? The question burned in him. To cool himself off he jumped into the river, and was seized by a strong undertow—something he had not known since he had begun working as a ferryman. It was sucking him under.

Snorting, he breached like a dolphin, arching up out of the water. When he fell back he was again clutched by the undertow, which had grown stronger. He was delighted to be fighting something. The thews of his back and upper arms writhed like serpents under his bronze skin as he cleaved the water with powerful strokes. He drew himself onto the wharf.

“Bravo!” said a thin voice. “You’re a marvelous swimmer.”

“Marvelous!” piped another voice. “A pleasure to watch you.”

Charon brushed the water from his eyes and saw two little people, very ancient, either twins or husband and wife who had grown to look exactly like each other—except for the long white beard worn by the man.

Charon pointed to the raft and across the river.

“Yes,” said the wife. “We’d like to cross, please.”

“What’s the fare?” asked the man.

Charon shrugged.

The woman unpinned a brooch from her tunic, her only ornament; it was made of bronze, with a tiny blue stone. Charon shook his head and motioned her to pin it back on. She smiled and fished into a small sack she was carrying. She took out a loaf of bread.

“New baked,” she said. “And delicious, if I say so myself.”

The man nodded and smiled greedily to show how good he knew it to be.

Charon took the bread, broke off half a loaf, and stuffed it into his mouth. He tore the rest of it in two and gave a piece to each of the old couple. They had no teeth but their gums seemed very tough, and they mumbled the bread hungrily as Charon helped them onto the raft and began rowing toward the far shore.

Then, Alpheus struck.

He hunched his mighty shoulders, twisting the river currents into a single taut sinew of water that slid under the raft and flipped it over. Alpheus chortled and spun about, churning the river into a gigantic whirlpool. The old folk were sucked under. Charon was swimming toward them as fast as he could when he saw them disappear.

Without hesitation, he dived after them. He was in a whirling funnel of water. He felt himself being spun violently, his head knocking against his knees. The brutal force behind the water made it seem solid, not liquid. Battered as Charon was, he kept churning his way toward where he saw the old man and old woman sinking, hands clasped. The thought that they loved

each other so much that they couldn't bear to be parted, even in death, filled him with a rage of pity—which turned into strength and allowed him to cleave the water toward them.

He reached them, tucked them under one arm, and kicked his way to the surface.

Alpheus couldn't believe he hadn't drowned them. He seized the three of them in a gigantic watery hand and swept them toward a rock. They were going with such speed that Charon knew that they would be crushed to a pulp against the boulder. Trying to slow himself, he sank under, drawing a huge breath before he submerged, holding one arm above the surface so that the old folk could cling to it.

He curled his legs as he went, and as soon as he felt his feet touch the rock, he uncoiled, exerting all his strength in one last desperate leap. He shot out of the water.

Still clutching the man and woman, he curved in the air and landed on the shore.

Alpheus hurled water after them, a heavy sheet of it, curling like an ocean breaker, but Charon jumped away, bearing the old couple far enough inland to be safe from the boiling river.

But when he set them gently on the grass, they felt like a bundle of wet rags, and he feared that, despite all his efforts, Alpheus had succeeded in drowning them.

Out of the rags sprouted a form. Charon gasped. It was not the old woman rising, but taller than her, taller than a young woman, taller than a man. A nymph. A meadow nymph with a mane of glossy chestnut hair and leaf-green eyes. She smiled at him and he felt the heat rising in his huge body, squeezing his windpipe, pressing his eyeballs.

He looked her up and down. Her bare feet spurned the rags. Her long, bronzed body gleamed with wetness. She cast a fragrance of sunshine and crushed mint. She seemed to be swaying closer without moving. For the first time in his life he felt himself trembling.

“Who are you?” he muttered.

“I am Menthe.”

“And the old woman?”

“What about her?”

“Who was she? Where is she?”

“Nowhere now. She was just a disguise.”

“And the old man?”

“Nowhere too. Part of the costume, you know.”

“I don’t know. Tell me: Why all this bother? Who were you trying to fool?”

“Enemies.”

“Who would try to harm you?”

“Those who try to harm my mistress. I serve a goddess who is feuding with someone even mightier than herself. She was afraid he would learn about my mission and send his creatures to catch me before I could get where I was going. Therefore did I travel as that feeble old couple you were so kind to.”

“And this form I see before me now—is this another disguise?”

“No. It is me, myself, as I am.”

“An improvement,” grunted Charon. “So have you gotten to where you’re going?”

“I have. Right here. It is you I have come to see.”

“But why?”

“My mistress needs your assistance.”

“Didn’t you say she was a goddess?”

“I did.”

“Which one?”

“Demeter. The Barley Mother. Lady of the Harvest. Mistress of Growing Things.”

“Why should such a one need the help of a mere ferryman?”

“I don’t know. But she says she does. It is not for me to question her.”

“But it’s for me if she wants me to do something for her.”

“Indeed, yes. But she will tell you herself. We must go to her.”

“Where is she?”

“Eleusis.”

“A long journey.”

She smiled at him. “We shall travel together.”

“I’m ready.”

The Barley Mother

They passed through an empty landscape. No one was working the fields. No one was visible about the occasional farm hut, save one chained dog howling miserably. Charon thought that the people must have flocked to the village upon this day for some celebration. But when they came to the village, it too was empty; not even a dog to be seen.

Then, as they passed through the village into the fields again, Charon heard a seething murmur that grew louder and louder as they walked. It sounded like the surf battering cliffs, but they were far from the sea.

And then he saw where the people had gone. They were thronging a huge plain; in the middle of this plain sat a low hill. The people did not stand. Men, women, and children were crouched upon the ground, some kneeling, as if in worship, or fear, or both.

Now Charon saw what had brought them there and was pressing them to the ground. On the hill towered something tall—so tall that at first he mistook it for a tree. But as he walked through the kneeling people and came closer to the hill, he saw that it was an enormous female figure clad in flowing robes. Upon her head was a braided crown of flowers. She was shaking her long white arms, now roaring at the crowd, now seeming to scold the skies.

“Hunger will stalk the land,” she cried. “No seed shall sprout, no furrow quicken. Barren shall be the fields, the orchards blasted and fruitless. And the cattle, unable to graze, shall starve, and the herdsmen and the plowmen, and their families also. For I, Demeter, Bestower of Crops, am angry, furiously angry, and my wrath is famine. Until high justice is done, until Zeus reverses his decision and declares in my favor, and bids the foul abductor return my daughter to her mother’s arms, then all the land shall share my grief.”

As the goddess was pronouncing these terrible words Charon and Menthe were threading their way toward her. Finally they could go no farther. The crowd was denser near the hill—a stiff, resistant hedge of crouched bodies. Charon saw that the green-clad one was beckoning to him and knew that he would have to go to her. To do so, though, he would have to brutally trample a path through the mob. His neck swelled with cruel energy—like that of a bull about to charge.

Menthe put her hand on his neck, and he felt a coolness wash through his hot, throbbing body. “Wait,” she murmured. She raised her arm.

A huge white goat appeared between them, and stood there like a pillar of white fire. Its horns were golden in the slant afternoon sun; its eyes were amber slits of light. Menthe floated onto the goat’s back and grasped its horns. Charon pulled himself up after her. The goat leaped. A gigantic leap. It soared over the crowd and landed on the hill—knelt to the goddess so that Menthe and Charon slid off and stood before her.

Charon was enveloped in her fragrance. She smelled like ploughed fields after a light rain. Her voice wrapped about him also; it was like the wind among trees.

“Thank you,” she said. “I have sent for you, and you have come.”

Charon heard himself speaking words he hadn’t thought of. “How may I serve you?”

“I need your help to save my daughter from her foul abductor.”

“He must be powerful as well as foul,” said Charon, “if someone like you needs help to reclaim her own.”

“He is Hades, Lord of the Underworld, my eldest brother, and brother to Zeus too, of course. You heard me pronounce his name to these poor starvelings, did you not?”

“I was too busy trying to get through the crowd to attend to what you were saying. But I understand now. Hades has taken your girl. I don’t know her name.”

“Persephone, the April Child, Maiden of the Changing Year. Just five days ago she was in the meadow with her paint box coloring the wildflowers, when the earth cracked and out charged a black chariot drawn by six black stallions. The charioteer was my accursed brother. He snatched her up from among her flowers, wrapped her in his cloak, drank her tears, and whipped the stallions back into the pit ... down into his damned realm

—into Tartarus itself. And there he keeps her, and defies me to take her back.”

“And you have sought justice from Zeus—is that what I heard you tell the multitude?”

“Aye, and you heard me say that justice was denied. Certainly I rushed up to Olympus, confronted Zeus in the Hall of Judgment. There he sat on his golden throne in his cloak patterned with stars, and listened silently as I poured out my tale. I expected him to react in rage and sorrow, fully expected that he would send messengers to Hades ordering him to release my daughter. But his face was as hard as that rock there. Not a glimmer of sympathy did he show. When I had finished my tale, he said simply that he would take the matter under advisement, and that he would let me know his decision later. Later! Later!” She pounded her chest. “That delicate flower of a child will wither away in dark Tartarus. She needs air, sunlight, birdsong. Not darkness and smoke and the screams of the tormented. I couldn’t believe how Zeus was acting, couldn’t accept what he was saying. Then I saw that he had a new scepter: a magnificent volt-blue zigzag thunderbolt. And I understood that he had been bribed. That Hades had his pit demons dig up the rarest of metals and fashion this thunderbolt as a gift to the judge. Yes, the king of heaven and earth has been bribed; he will do no justice. My daughter must languish down there unless I can summon strength to save her.”

“And how can I help you?” said Charon. “Your tale touches me, and I am prepared to make your enemies mine. But, although reasonably well grown, I am only a mortal, after all. What use can I be in a battle between gods?”

“You underestimate yourself,” said Demeter. “I have heard tales of you, and now that I see you I understand that the tales have not been exaggerated. You are mortal, true, but of heroic size and gigantic strength—which means that you have a spark of divinity in you. I don’t know your pedigree, but somewhere among your ancestors, I am sure, is a god or goddess who came down to earth long enough to love a mortal. Be that as it may, I have a specific use for you. I happen to know that you are the best and boldest ferryman in all the land. And I have learned that Hades is in dire need of a ferryman to transport the shades across the Styx. It is a treacherous, difficult job. All his ferrymen have been overcome by the sights they have seen and the sounds they have heard and have drowned

themselves in the black river. You must go down there and apply for the post. There is no question but that you will be accepted. And then, having won Hades' trust, you will be able to serve me."

"And am I to be condemned to dwell forever in Tartarus, forever to cross and recross the Styx with boatload after boatload of miserable wailing shades? Is that not damnation before I am dead?"

"Damnation?" said Demeter, almost crooning, and laying her heavy hand upon his shoulder. Immediately he felt a strange new energy surging through him, a green, sappy strength seeming to flow from the very center of the earth, up through the soles of his feet and coursing through his huge body—a wild need to do what he had never done before, a marvelous carelessness of consequence. "Damned? Do you say damned?" crooned Demeter. "Why, in serving me so nobly you will earn my eternal gratitude. And the gratitude of all these poor wretches whom you will have saved from famine by returning the Spring Maiden to the earth. I shall pour blessings upon you. You shall live where you wish, do as you wish, enjoy enormous wealth and prestige and the endless thanks of all who will know what you have done."

"How about what I want now?" he said. "How about her?" He grasped Menthe by the arm.

"She shall be your companion, of course," said Demeter. "She shall go with you to Tartarus, down to the banks of the Styx itself, and there you shall find her waiting for you each time you cross and recross that fatal stream. Will you do it? Will you serve me? Will you unlock the crops by saving my daughter?"

"I'm yours," he said to Demeter. "Through hell and high water."

He strode off with Menthe at his side, her long legs matching his stride for stride.

Infernal Plans

Hades' underground realm was laced with veins of raw gold and silver, and held great troves of diamonds, rubies, sapphires. Here also had come a working party of those gigantic one-eyed smiths called Cyclopes. Master artisans, cousins to the gods, they chose to dwell in Hell because they could use its hotter flames for forge fires, and draw upon its hoard of gems and precious metals. There in their smithy they wrought the marvelous jewelry that Hades used to bribe Zeus when he had broken the divine code and wished to evade the penalties.

But after a thousand years of buying his way over, under, and through the law, Hades had come to know the High Judge very well. And knew that while Zeus could be bribed, he didn't always stay bribed. Hades also understood his sister, Demeter—knew how hot tempered and stubborn she was, how fiercely she doted on her daughter. So he was very much aware that the Harvest queen would shake heaven and trouble earth as she sought to reclaim Persephone and punish her abductor.

In short, Hades knew that because he had kidnapped the Spring Maiden he would be attacked from every quarter. And he prepared to defend himself.

He summoned a trusted adviser, a suave devil named Thanatos, and received him, not in his vast throne room, but on a basalt ledge overlooking the Lake of Fire. Here swam those shades who had been condemned to special punishment. Desperately, they breasted the flames trying to reach a shore that shrank away as they came near.

“Greetings, my lord,” said Thanatos. “This is one of my favorite spots. It's so amusing to watch them swimming, burning, swimming, burning. The shore always recedes before them, but they never learn, do they?”

“Well, they’re in agony,” said Hades. “It doesn’t much matter what they do. This was Hecate’s favorite spot also, you know. She liked it because it’s so high. From here she could watch over the widest part of my realm, and with her matchless eyesight could spot anyone breaking any rule even in the remotest corner of Hell. From here she would launch herself on golden wings, fall upon the offender, seize him in her claws, swing her stingray whip, and flay him down to the pulsing pink core.”

“You miss her, don’t you, my lord?”

“Aye, that I do,” growled Hades. “But to think that she would trade the power and privilege of her office for life in a cave somewhere with her dribbling little scribbler... I can’t understand it.”

“Neither can I,” said Thanatos, who agreed with Hades on every possible occasion. “Can’t understand it at all.”

“What gripes me particularly,” said Hades, “is that there was no one like her for keeping order down here. All my fiends and demons, trained for brutality though they are, were frightened by her very shadow, and didn’t dare step out of line. Since she has been gone, though, they’ve been fighting among themselves, stealing from each other. Their pitchforks grow rusty, the roasting pits are cold, they neglect the shades who wander about, untormented. In general, things are going to heaven!”

Thanatos shuddered. Hades seldom cursed; when he did, it meant that he was in a foul mood indeed, and that meant that anyone in the neighborhood would very soon be made to suffer. Thanatos was relieved when Hades did not smash his head in with his ebony scepter, but said:

“Another reason I need her now is that we shall soon be under attack. My shrieking shrew of a sister is raging up and down the earth and climbing Olympus to batter at the portals of the cloud castle, demanding that my realm be invaded and that my bride be taken from me by force. I shall resist, of course—unleash all the legions of Hell to keep what is mine. But in such warfare, Hecate would be invaluable to me.”

“Invaluable,” murmured Thanatos. “Uniquely so.”

“We must replace her, don’t you agree?”

“Oh, I agree, I agree! No one could agree more heartily. Replace her with whom?”

“That’s where you come in, Thanatos.”

“Me? As you know, my lord, I am ready to serve you with every last atom of my strength—and beyond. But I must admit, I’m not much of a fighter. Behind-the-lines strategy is more my style.”

Hades almost smiled. “No, my chicken-livered hellion, I don’t expect you to take her place. Of course not. What I want you to do is visit the Upper World and use all your cunning to find a replacement for Hecate. There must be some clever, ambitious monster somewhere whom I can train to rule the Harpies.”

“Dark Majesty, I’m on my way!” cried Thanatos, hardly able to conceal his joy at being permitted to leave with his skull intact.

“Not so fast,” growled Hades. “You’re not going up there on a vacation, you know. Your orders are to put yourself in the way of the ablest monsters of earth and sea. Only by canvassing the entire roster of fearsome predators will you be able to find the one we want.”

“O Hades,” cried Thanatos, trying not to let his voice quaver, “in your service I shall make danger my business—and accomplish the task you have set me, or be devoured in the attempt.”

He bowed low, and hurried off. Hades looked after him. “A coward,” he thought. “But he fears me more than any monster imaginable, and such fear can be a spur. And his wits are as sharp as his heart is faint.”

Advice Underseas

Thanatos knew that the sea was a prime site for monsters, that most of them had been spawned there, even those who had climbed ashore. He also knew that Poseidon would welcome the feud between Hades and Demeter. The sea god liked the other gods to be at odds; it gave him a chance to raid their territories while they were fighting each other.

So Thanatos visited Poseidon in his great coral castle in the deepest part of the Ocean Stream. He gasped as he entered the enormous throne room, for it was as opulent as that of Hades, and much less gloomy. The silver and gold from the holds of sunken ships had been used to inlay floor and ceiling. The throne was of walrus-tusk ivory. Into the walls were cut great panes of crystal through which filtered the green light of undersea. Sharks and octopi glided past. Swordfish, balloon fish, and a shoal of lithe nereids pressed against the panes, smiling in.

And Poseidon was smiling as he sat on his throne. His crown was of gold and pearl, and pearls were braided into his green beard. His scepter was a trident.

“Welcome, Thanatos,” he rumbled. “Do you come on embassy from my brother?”

“Not exactly,” said Thanatos, “but I do come on his business. It’s a difficult matter, and I come to you, Moist Majesty, for counsel.”

“Speak.”

“As you may have heard, Hecate, Queen of the Harpies, has quit her post, and my master seeks a replacement. Now, your realm, so rich in so many ways, also abounds in monsters of all sizes, dispositions, and capacities.”

“Hordes of ’em,” said Poseidon. “We’ll have to narrow the field. If this creature is to rule the Harpies and patrol Hell as Hecate did, it’ll need wings, won’t it? That rules out Ceto and Echidna and Ladon and the rest of

the sea serpents. There are a pair of flying hags called Gorgons who are unpleasant enough to qualify as Harpies, but they've been exiled by their mother to the far northern wastes to guard their enchanted sister, Medusa. But that's another story. Anyway, they're not available. Besides, they're so ugly I don't think Hades could abide them for a second, no matter what service they could render. What else flies? Yes ... there's another thing with wings—a very terrible thing I know only by reputation. Oh, I caught a glimpse of it once, but was too far away to be able to tell anything except that it was very big and moved with terrific speed.... Why do I call it *it*? It's a she."

"Does she dwell in the sea?"

"Not in my sea, nor in any of the cliffs girdling it. But did her hunting here, and I bear her a grudge. There used to be a pod of charming whales who would gather in a great chorus and sing at sunrise and dusk. Marvelous voices! In the evening they would come right here beyond those windows and serenade me. But that creature I'm telling you about—who's called the Sphinx, incidentally—formed a taste for them. Hunted them ruthlessly, I'm told, diving out of the sky and raking them up in her claws like a gull after herring. So they quitted this part of the sea and migrated to northern waters. Some instinct told them that the Sphinx hated the cold, and that they could hide from her in the icy depths. So they're gone, and she's gone too."

"Any idea where?"

"Rumor says that she burrows into the hot desert sand, in Egypt most likely. I don't know how much truth there is in the rumor. Nereids gossip ceaselessly, and make up what they don't know. But I give it to you for what it's worth."

"I thank you, Moist Majesty."

Dream-Tinkering

Thanatos hovered invisibly, watching a tribe called the Amaleki working itself into a frenzy. These were huge, ferocious warriors of the North African hill country who came into the desert once a year to catch mounts out of the wild camel herds. Not ordinary camels, but white racing stock, purebred. Astride these swift beasts, the Amaleki were the finest cavalry in that part of the world.

Now, in the valley that was their encampment, they were leaping and dancing about a bonfire, stoking themselves into the battle frenzy that had carried them to victory after victory. But their intention did not suit the plan that Thanatos had been spinning. He changed himself into a stone figure, and in a voice that was like a rock slide rumbled, "No!"

The tribesmen stopped dancing and stared in amazement. At first they saw nothing. The long, wavering shadows cast by the fire confused their sight. Thanatos came forward into the firelight. Immediately, the savage, bearded warriors fell to the ground, prostrating themselves.

One raised his head and spoke. He was their leader, Momo. "Welcome," he cried. "A thousand welcomes, O Nameless One. Thank you for appearing to your children, O God of Rock, carved from the central bone of Mother Earth. Thank you, thank you! Fill our bellies with courage and our arms with strength, for we go into battle against a monster that is devouring our camels. Bless us, bless us!"

"I come with more than blessings," boomed Thanatos. "I come with a gift of life. Yes, I give you back those lives you were about to throw away. You are to retire into the hills with the camels that remain to you, and leave the monster undisturbed. For if you go against her, who is called the Sphinx, you will surely die. Go, I say. Mount your camels and ride back into the

hills—and think of new ways to praise me who has saved you from your own folly.”

He vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Hovered invisibly again, watching the tribesmen prod their camels awake, and gallop away.

Thanatos watched them until they had gone, then floated over the brown sands in search of the monster’s burrow.

“I have deprived my master of many fine corpses this day,” he said to himself. “But he will forgive me when he understands why I forbade the tribesmen to attack the Sphinx. He will understand that I had no wish to save their lives—far from it—but had to make sure that they did not disrupt her evening meal of camel and arouse her to fighting fury. I need her belly-full and deep asleep for my plan to work.”

A dry riverbed called a *wadi* served as a burrow for the Sphinx. Bones littered its banks—the long leg bones and sharp rib cages and oval skulls of the camels she had devoured. Jackals searched the bones, cracking them for their last crumbs of marrow. The place stank. And Thanatos was grateful for the small wind that had arisen when the sun fell.

He moved upwind of the wadi and peered over its silted bank, and gasped at what he saw. “So the tales are true,” he murmured. A lion’s body she had, but of a lion as big as an elephant. Her head was hidden under her wing, and he couldn’t see her face. Then she grunted and shifted, and in the bright moonlight he saw her face—that of a young woman—but her teeth were the fangs of a great cat. Her hair flowed cleanly back from her face and became a lion’s mane.

He looked up. The stars flared like torches in the vast desert sky, and the moon seemed to be climbing as he watched. He raised his arms and began to spin, muttering as he spun.

Now, it must be understood that Thanatos was half brother to Hypnos, God of Sleep, and shared the family talent for dream management. It was this talent he now began to use in the service of his master.

He turned toward the north, singing wordlessly. In his song were the mingled voices of cold beasts—polar bear growl, seal bark, howl of the white wolf, cry of the great Arctic owl. The wind strengthened and swerved, and blew now from the north. An icy puff of it traveled down his

outstretched arm and along his pointing finger—and blew down into the wadi, into the Sphinx’s sleep.

She saw herself on the desert, in bright sunlight, moving toward her burrow. But the desert had changed. A wind scythed down from the north, lifting the sand into spouts. One of them whirled about her. And she, daughter of the sandstorm princess, whirled exultantly within it. But the old frenzied heat did not seize her; she was cold, horribly cold. The whirling cone was not sand; it was snow, fine granulated snow where no snow had ever fallen. She beat her wings, scattering the spout, and rushed toward her burrow.

But the riverbed had become a river again, and was frozen. Sunlight, hitting the strange ice, splintered and mingled with the blowing snow. Icy needles of light seemed to be aiming themselves at her very marrow. She shuddered deeply, half-knowing that she was asleep, hoping she was. She tried to awake, but could not. She was locked in sleep, caged in her dream, imprisoned in weird frost.

When Thanatos heard her utter a shuddering moan and heard the loud chattering of her fangs, he turned to face the south. The wind shifted, and was striped with hot airs. Thanatos directed the wind down into the wadi where it blew into the Sphinx’s sleep and thawed her dream.

The snow was gone. She was in a different place, hotter than the desert, and more interesting. Almost too hot. But not quite. She stretched blissfully. She seemed to be perched on a basalt ledge overlooking a lake of fire. Steam arose, a great cloud of it. She couldn’t quite see the swimmers, but knew they were there, for she heard their screams. And these shrieks of agony seemed to belong to the heat. It was *diabolical* heat, suiting her completely.

She spread her wings and flew off the ledge to explore the place. She saw twisted, frothing demons wielding pitchforks, herding pale shades toward the open roasting pits. She floated low over the pits, feeling the heat of their fire. It was good, very good; she was where she wanted to be. But she wasn’t quite sure where that was.

Then, still half-knowing that she was asleep, but hoping now that she wasn’t, she saw someone prowling the margin of her dream. And the fiery landscape slowly began to close like the iris of an eye, focusing on the black-caped figure. And she knew that she must shake herself awake and

give herself to the instructions of this one who traveled freely over the frontiers of sleep, and who alone could tell her what her dream meant.

She found herself awake in her burrow under the pulsing stars. She lurched out of the wadi and stood among the grinning camel skulls. She looked up and saw the cloaked figure floating above her, black as a cutout against the moon.

“Who are you?” she croaked.

“I am Thanatos, who serves Hades, Lord of the Land Beyond Death.”

“Hell?”

“Some call it Hell.”

“Is that where my dream took me—that blissful, flaming realm?”

“It was.”

“Did you send the dream?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because my master may ask you to make your home there, and serve in a very important post.”

“What post?”

“Queen of the Harpies, who were formerly led by Hecate.”

“Yes, yes! Let’s go down there!”

“Not so fast. My master likes what he has heard about you, but his standards are very high. He will want to examine you first, and perhaps set you a task so that you may prove yourself.”

“I’m ready to meet him.”

“No, you are not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hecate was hellishly intelligent, you know. If you expect to replace her you will have to become as powerful in mind as you are in body. Before meeting Hades you must hone your wits and accumulate knowledge.”

“Oh, I don’t know. That’s not my line at all.”

“Make it your line.”

“But how?”

“That *how* is the first of your tasks.”

“Impossible! I can’t do it.”

“Before giving up, be aware that we have informed ourselves of your tastes and have stocked the Styx with singing whales.”

“Singing whales? Really?”

“Frisky beasts. Keep capsizing the ferry. We’ve lost some veteran boatmen and shoals of shades.”

“You’re making me hungry.”

“And the silvery apes. Oh, my dear monster, you have no idea of the amount of effort we spent rounding them up. They’re almost extinct, you know. We had to literally snatch the last of them out of a jungleful of ravening tigers and leopards. If you do join us, we’ll set up a breeding farm to raise a fine population of silvery apes.”

“Singing whales ... silvery apes. I must put myself among those toothsome creatures; I must, I must! I’m off, Thanatos—on my way to hone my wits and gain knowledge. Not that I know how.”

“Perhaps greed will teach you. Good hunting.”

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An Unwilling Bride

Hades was having a hard time with his flower maiden. Accustomed to being obeyed in all things, he was confused by her resistance. He went to great lengths to please her. In his kingdom lay the world's trove of gold and silver, of diamonds and rubies and sapphires. He heaped her with jewelry and had his slaves spin her gowns of silver and gold thread. He called out the nimblest of acrobats, the most graceful dancers, and the sweetest singers from among his shades to provide her with entertainment. Still she would not speak to him, would not look at him—nor would she eat.

And her resistance fueled his desire until it was a raging furnace. He didn't know what to do. He didn't dare use force; he knew it wouldn't work. Cold as an icicle now, this radiant slip of a goddess, he knew that if he tightened his grasp she would, like an icicle, change form and vanish. For all his vicious temper, though, the Lord of the Underworld had great control over himself. Boiling within, he let nothing show.

Still determined to please her, he sent instructions to the smithy. The Cyclopes hammered out a great sheet of gold leaf, shaped it into an enormous globe, and punched it full of holes. The globe was cunningly hinged so that it opened like a shell, allowing smiths to insert torches. And these fatwood torches were lighted by fire taken from the very center of the earth—the primal flame, hot as the sun.

Light streamed out of the golden shell, fiery light. And this he had done, Hades told Persephone, so that she might be warmed by artificial sun and feel more at home underground. But Persephone did not thank him, nor smile, nor say anything, but did look him in the face and hold his gaze for a moment. Then she turned and strolled toward the cypress grove. But, he noticed, she did stop before the tree line and lift her face into the new golden light.

And this was a bit of comfort to him, but not enough.

As Persephone basked in the jeweled light of the artificial sun, she saw someone approaching. The figure was so tall she thought it must be Hades coming after her. She tensed, preparing to dart into the grove and lose herself among the trees. But then she saw that it was not Hades, but a mortal. A massive youth in a torn tunic. He was followed by one of the nymphs who had attended her in the meadows of home. The youth approached. He had a thatch of red hair. His arms and legs were cables of strength; his neck one column of muscle. And to the scorched air he brought an aroma of the Upper World—of a river and real sunshine and free wind. His voice was slow and deep; he spoke as one who used words rarely.

“Are you the goddess Persephone?”

“I am. Who are you?”

“My name is Charon. I bear a message from your mother. Eat nothing.”

She widened her eyes. “Really?”

“Or perhaps you have already?”

“No, sir.” She smiled at him. “And I’m getting very hungry.”

“I’m sure you must be, missy. But I’m only telling you what your mother told me to say.”

“And very good of you, young sir, to bring me a message. Have you had a long journey?”

“From Eleusis.”

“Yes, a very long one. But you’re so big and strong you can probably do even harder things.”

He didn’t say anything. He was too busy staring. She was clad in the colors of spring flowers; her hair was yellow as forsythia, her eyes like wet violets, and she wore a tunic of lilac and rose. And when she had drawn cat faces on pansies it was after gazing at her own image in a pool.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Staring....”

“You’re so pretty, I guess.”

Persephone looked at the nymph who was standing behind Charon. She recognized her now; her name was Menthe. She had been one of those who had attended the April Maiden as she plied her paintbrush among the

wildflowers, and Persephone had always been fond of the big, vital wench, but now, suddenly, she disliked her.

“Menthe,” she said. “Why don’t you go off a bit—toward the castle, say—and warn us if anyone approaches. I wish to have a private conversation with my mother’s messenger.”

The nymph smiled a small smile, then curtsied so low it seemed almost like mockery—but arose and glided over the black grass toward the castle. Persephone looked after her, and said:

“D’you think she’s pretty, too?”

“Menthe?”

“Who else could I mean? Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Prettier than me?”

“No.”

“As?”

He shook his head slowly. “Nobody is, I guess.”

“That’s all right then,” said Persephone. “Now tell me exactly what my mother said.”

“Oh, she said a lot of things. I can’t remember all of it. She was very angry—screaming and hollering and throwing famines around. But what she told me to tell you was ‘Don’t eat—and your mother will save you.’”

“How long am I supposed to go on starving?”

“She didn’t say. But you won’t starve to death because you’re a goddess and can’t die.”

“How about you, large youth? I suppose now that you’ve delivered your message you’ll scoot back up with your hussy.... Well, when you and she are stuffing yourselves with roast lamb and lentils and cheese and olives and honey, just think of me down here, growing thinner and sadder, thinner and sadder. Even if goddesses can’t die, they can suffer, you know.”

“We’re not going anywhere, Princess. I’m to stay here and man a ferry across that ugly black river, and be ready to help you when the time comes. And Menthe will attend you, if you like.”

Instructing the Sphinx

The Sphinx finally sent word by Hermes, the messenger god, that she had prepared herself to meet Hades and would soon be there. Thanatos hastened to the throne room.

“She’s on her way, my lord,” he said, “but you won’t enjoy her company.”

“Eh?”

“To put it plainly, the Sphinx stinks.”

“We’re used to strange smells here—charred souls, basted sins, ashy tears. When did you get so finicky?”

“We’ve never experienced anything like her stench, O King. The lion-smell of sulphur, dung, and rotting meat, but multiplied a thousand times.”

“Oh well, I’ll make her keep her distance. Have someone carry my instructions to her. You, perhaps, Thanatos. I hereby appoint you special envoy to the creature. Don’t shudder; I’m only joking. We’ll get one of the Harpies to do it.”

“Thank you, Majesty.”

“Besides, I must tell you that my bride-to-be, the Flower Princess, will envelop me in such fragrance that no unpleasant odor will penetrate.”

“A very pretty sentiment, my lord. Shall I simply then take the Sphinx to you when she gets here?”

“Well,” said Hades, “why don’t you bring her by way of the Styx? Tell her it’s my wish that she swim across rather than fly over. That strong river should wash away some of the stench.”

Just past the black iron gates that are the portals of Hell stood a grove of trees—cypress and alder, and within that grove gushed a crystal fountain. Lethe’s spring it was, where the newly dead would stop to drink, and

immediately forget everything that happened while they were alive. Before the Sphinx arrived, Thanatos filled a bucket at this fountain and poured it into the Styx.

“A hideous smell,” he said to himself, “may after all be only the memory of corruption. Perhaps a bucketful of forgetfulness will wash the spoor of foul meals from the Sphinx’s body.”

It may be that his idea worked. For it is reported that Hades received the Sphinx without flinching, and listened courteously as she told him that she wished to take Hecate’s place as Queen of the Harpies.

“There is much to consider,” said Hades. “Hecate, you must realize, was not only a matchless fighter but also extremely intelligent. In fact, she was my chief aide, and often counseled me on matters of policy. Now, I must say, you look like you can handle yourself in a fight, but do you have it up here?” He tapped his head. “No offense, but Hecate was positively brilliant, and anyone who seeks to take her place—well, you understand.”

The Sphinx said: “I understood that before I came down, Your Majesty. And have tried to prepare myself for the job. Have been trying to add to my own stock of intelligence in a very direct way—by eating the cleverest people I could find.”

“Indeed? A novel approach. Tell me more.”

“Well, I had mixed results at first. Poets didn’t agree with me—too sweet. Political theorists gave me gas. But I kept trying, and found that mathematicians were the dish. They stick to the ribs. I ate a whole school of them and suffered no indigestion whatsoever. The only thing was I found myself getting passionate about puzzles—became positively addicted to riddles. But to sum it up, I do believe I’m brainy enough now to fill the post.”

“You found poets too sweet, eh?”

“Quite nauseating.”

“Well, I have a bitter one for you—who also happens to be of a different order of intelligence from all the others you have engorged. Hearken now, you’ll need more than logic; you’ll need imagination to lead the Harpies and impose my discipline upon the legions of Hell. You’ll need to balance your diet with this poet.”

“Who is he? Where do I find him?”

“His name is Thallo. You’ll find him somewhere on Crete.”

Hades didn't tell her that Thallo was wedded to Hecate. What he wanted, of course, was for Thallo to be killed so that Hecate, unattached, would return to Tartarus.

"They'll fight, no doubt," he said to himself, "this Sphinx creature and Hecate. And a splendid sight their battle should be. If Hecate wins, all the better. If this one wins, then I'll allow her to take Hecate's place. For no loser can queen it over the Harpies."

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Another Abduction

The Sphinx flew toward Crete, where Hecate dwelt now with her little husband. Their home was a cave halfway up the slope of Mount Ida, not far from that great cavern called earth's womb—so named because here was where Rhea had given birth to Zeus, shaking the mountain and starting an avalanche in her mighty labor.

As it happened, while the Sphinx was flying to Crete, Hecate was winging away from it, heading for Libya on some mysterious errand of her own. Now, it is not quite clear how word got out that the Sphinx had left Tartarus and was on her way to the Upper World to catch Thallo and eat him raw. It may have been Hades himself who passed the word so that Hecate might hear of it and prepare to fight. In any case, the news traveled faster than the Sphinx could fly, and reached Thallo by way of some gossipy dryads. He was in the forest dancing with them at the time—something he could do only when Hecate was elsewhere. It was hard for him to stop dancing; the dryads were beautiful and very playful. But with the monster en route, he knew he had to make plans very fast.

He thought and thought, but could think of no possible way he could escape the Sphinx if she caught sight of him. “So I must hide from her, but how? Not in my cave; she'll force someone to tell her where it is, then dig me out. And outside the cave I'm a goner too. An eagle, it is said, can spot a rabbit from a mile up, and this creature is supposed to be an even better hunter. So, no place to hide. I'll have to find another way. What way? Where's that wonderful imagination of mine when I really need it? Is it good only for word slinging and such trifles? Let's see now ... what do I know about her? She wants to eat me, I know that—a dreadful piece of knowledge. Is there some way I can make her not want to? Is there anything that she'd refuse to eat? Aha, there may be. Beef! She is cousin to the beast

gods of Egypt, and the most potent of them is Hathor of the Horned Moon, the great cow goddess, whose milk is rain. And Hathor's flesh is sacred, and cows and bulls partake of this holiness, and are not to be harmed.

"Can I be sure of this? Well, the eldest tales say so. And as a poet I have to believe them. Let's hope this monster shares my belief. If not, I'm in deep trouble, and Hecate will have to find another husband when she comes home from Libya. There are many bigger, stronger, handsomer men than I—and almost anyone is braver. But I seem to be the only one who can make her laugh. So I'll have to try to keep alive for her sake, not to mention my own. Bulls ho!"

And he scampered down the mountain and headed for Knossos, where a herd of magnificent bulls was kept for the sport called bull dancing. This was a weekly entertainment demanded by the king. It was welcomed by the populace also—for the king's other sport was torturing his subjects.

"I'll hide myself among the herd," said Thallo to himself. "If my theory's correct, the Sphinx will refuse to hunt me there for fear of harming one of the creatures sacred to Hathor. Of course, there's another danger attached to this plan. Hecate has warned me in the harshest possible terms to keep my distance from the lithe and lovely girls who somersault through the bulls' horns in the fourth turn of the dance. If she catches me anywhere near the ring, she promises, she'll turn me over her knee and blister my bottom in full view of the dancers. But what's a spanking by my dear wife, even a shameful public one, compared to being eaten raw by the Sphinx?"

Thus ran his thoughts as he trotted along the shore of the shining sea toward Knossos. But this set him thinking of something else: How Hecate, in moments of violent affection, would swoop upon him, clutch him in her claws, and lift him into the air, kissing and caressing him in midflight. Then he thought: "But the Sphinx, they say, falls like a thunderbolt from a clear sky as she swoops upon her prey. Suppose she falls upon me suddenly and snatches me up as an eagle does a lamb. I'll feel myself lifted into the air, feel her mouth upon me, and think for a moment, perhaps, that it is Hecate—but then realize that the mouth is not kissing my neck but throttling it. One last glimpse of the sun as I struggle in her claws, then the mountain spinning beneath me—then the breath will be crushed out of me. Everything will go black, fade into nothingness...."

And, in his poet's way, the thought in his head became realer than reality, and he frightened himself into a deep swoon. And was lying there unconscious when the Sphinx spotted him, and dived.

She stood over him, considering. "Shall I eat him here? I've just had a flock of sheep and am not very hungry. And if I should eat him now, how do I know that this weird wit of his that Hades described will really enter my own thinking? Poets have always given me indigestion. This one's supposed to be bitter rather than sweet, but who knows? Poetry is poetry, and I loathe it. And I must say, this bard looks particularly scrawny and unappetizing. Besides, if I should eat him and his so-called imagination doesn't take, then when I go back to Tartarus, Hades will simply think I'm lying, that I didn't catch him at all, and will be furious with me. I know: I'll take him back to Tartarus, to the castle in Erebus, into the throne room itself, and there devour him as Hades watches. That way there will be no misunderstanding."

She seized the unconscious Thallo and bore him off like a gull taking a fish.

When Thallo came out of his swoon he found himself clutched in an enormous clawed paw, and saw jagged peaks sliding beneath him. Looking up, he saw huge wings blotting the sun. Slung between them was the underbelly of a gigantic lioness. But she wore a woman's face, quite young; her mouth gleamed with a lion's fangs.

Too much. Utter terror. He tried to swoon again. He could not; his heart was beating too hard. The wind was cooled by snow as it whistled past the peaks—was then warmed by the noonday sun and spurted into updrafts. The Sphinx rode those updrafts like a sea bird bobbing on the surf.

With quickening interest, Thallo realized that he recognized these mountains. They belonged to the Saronic range near Mycenae, and he had wandered them as a youth, climbing them to see the wonder of snow and to dance with oreads. One slope, however, no youth dared climb; even the goatherds shunned it. For in one of its clefts had nestled a lake called Avernus. This, according to ancient legend, Hades had chosen as his entrance to the Underworld. Had emptied the lake of its blue waters, and broken through its bed, making a chasm that led down, down, through a chain of interlocking caves, to the shore of the Styx.

And now, Thallo realized, the Sphinx had begun to coast in a slant dive toward that very chasm. “Avernus?” he thought. “Is she really going there? Is it possible she’s taking me to Tartarus, where only the dead may enter? She knows I’m still alive, of course. And, of course, intends to render me defunct before reaching the Styx. She won’t have to bother; I’m about to die of fear.”

Nevertheless, he knew he wouldn’t. For some reason he felt throbbingly alive. “How wonderful,” he thought, “if I could actually get into the place with all my me-ness intact.”

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Demeter Strikes

The Garden of the Gods lay on the sunny southern slope of Olympus, and was the pleasantest spot in the entire world. Botanus, the hundred-handed giant who was head gardener, had ransacked the earth for the most gorgeous, most fragrant blooms and had transplanted them here. For this place, too, Demeter in happier days had decreed an eternal June, so that no plant withered, no bush died, and the birds sang always.

Upon this day, however, Hera, entering the garden, was horrified at what she saw. She turned and charged up the slope and into the cloud castle, searching for her husband.

“Zeus!” she screamed. “Make her stop!”

“Make *who* stop *what*?”

“Our sister! Demeter! She’s in the garden, uprooting all our plants, and swears she won’t let them grow again until her daughter is returned.”

“That damned old shrew!” growled Zeus. “She’s caused me a lot of trouble lately. Been withholding her crops down there ... and the complaints of the hungry are beginning to deafen the statues in all my temples.”

“Well, why don’t you make Hades send back her stupid daughter?”

“A matter of policy, my dear, high policy,” mumbled Zeus, who had accepted a bribe from Hades, and was beginning to regret it. “Go down to the garden and tell her to leave immediately or feel the full weight of my wrath.”

“Won’t work, my lord. She’s even angrier than you are, and is demanding justice.”

“I dislike injustice,” said Zeus. “And dislike its victims even more. Make tremendous pests of themselves; ever notice.... Very well, tell her to come

here and I'll discuss things with her. And tell her she'd better bloody well replant everything she's pulled up or I'll throw her off the mountain."

The conversation was held, and Demeter was all smiles as she left the cloud castle. She hurried to Hermes and cried, "Go to Zeus! He has an errand for you, a most urgent one! You are to go to Tartarus and in the master's name demand the release of my daughter. Will you ride with me to the Gates of Hell? I have the swiftest horse in the world, given me by Poseidon."

"Thank you, Aunt," said Hermes. "But I believe that my winged sandals are even faster."

We have seen how Hades hung an artificial sun to please his bride. But he was even prouder of the night he had contrived. The roots of mountains are the rafters of Hell, and to these black beams he had fastened diamonds to imitate stars. Among them, he hung a moon of purest silver. He stood with Persephone in the courtyard of his jet and ruby palace, inviting her to admire his jeweled sky.

"Those are diamonds," he said, pointing up.

She didn't answer.

"They could be emeralds or sapphires if you'd like a bit more color."

She shrugged.

"You like diamonds, eh? Well, choose the ones you want and my Cyclopes will unpin them from the sky and make a necklace for you. Unless you'd prefer a bracelet. You needn't choose; you can have both."

This time she didn't even shrug but turned from him and looked into the distance. She was expecting Charon this evening and was trying to hide her excitement. She knew that her secret would be fatal to the young boatman if Hades guessed.

Just then Hades heard a ringing herald shout, and knew that Hermes had come. He was not pleased. Hermes traveled to the Underworld each day, leading the unbodied spirits there. But he left them on the far shore of the Styx and never entered Tartarus itself if he could help it. When he did it was to bring some message from Zeus, usually an unwelcome one. Displeased though he was, Hades received his nephew graciously.

"Welcome, Hermes. To what do we owe the pleasure of so rare a visit?"

"Official business, I'm afraid," said Hermes. "I come at the order of Father Zeus."

“Ah,” said Hades. “He wishes to congratulate me on my betrothal, no doubt. And you wish to add your good wishes to his.”

“Not quite,” said Hermes. “It is his command that you release Persephone into my custody so that I may conduct her to the Upper World and return her to her mother.”

“Nonsense,” said Hades. “There must be some mistake. The last time I saw Zeus, he agreed that I might keep her for my own.”

“Things have changed,” said Hermes. “Demeter has persuaded him otherwise. The only way you can hold her here is if she has signified her consent by eating something. Has she?”

Hades knew that she hadn’t, but said: “I don’t know.”

“Where is she, by the way?”

“Somewhere about. She was just here.”

Indeed, Persephone was quite close, but out of sight. When she heard Hermes shouting she had slid behind a myrtle tree, and stood there listening to every word. She didn’t know why she had hidden herself; she had done it by reflex. Having so bossy a mother had taught her to be secretive. Now she felt a pang of joy as she saw Charon’s red head blazing in the artificial moonlight. She sprang out, seized his hand, and drew him behind the myrtle.

“Charon, Charon,” she whispered. “We’re leaving!”

He stared at her in amazement.

“Yes, yes, it’s true! That’s why Hermes is here—to take me home. You’ll be coming too, of course.”

She moved away, startled, as rage twisted his face. His huge hands were closing and unclosing, as if seeking someone to throttle.

“What’s wrong?” she cried.

“I can’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“I just vowed to serve Hades for a thousand years.”

“Why? Why?”

“Only way I could get permission to stay. I thought you were staying. I didn’t think he’d ever let you go. In fact, I don’t see how he can bear to.”

“That’s very sweet to say.” She took his hand again. “What does it matter what you promised? Just break it.”

He shook his head. "It's a sacred vow—unbreakable. But if you go to the Upper World I'll manage to get away every few months and come see you."

"Not good enough. I want to see you every day."

"All right," he muttered. "I'll break the damned vow."

She studied his face for a moment, then lifted her slender hand and stroked it, smiling her first grown-up smile. "No, my darling," she said. "You're all one piece, a splendid one, but inflexible. If you break your vow you'll break your heart. And if yours breaks, so will mine."

"What shall we do then?"

"I'll do what you did, stay because you can't go."

"You here in this gloomy place, forever?"

"Together we'll light up our own space. Besides, I am what I am, wherever I am. And will bring a bit of April to this accursed place."

"But if you stay, he'll make you his bride."

"Ah, but you and I will know different, won't we? And it's what we know that counts. Anyway, this gives me an excuse to break my stupid fast. Let's go into the orchard and pick some fruit."

As they left, they heard Hades saying: "I need five days, old chap. Just five. I'm about to stage a monstrous battle between Hecate and the Sphinx. It will be a magnificent spectacle. I'm inviting all the gods to attend. I'm sure I'll be able to get Zeus to see things my way while he's down here. Just five days."

"I don't have the authority, Uncle," said Hermes. "My orders were clear."

Hades was still trying to persuade him when he saw Persephone strolling out of the orchard, and he was overjoyed to see her holding a split pomegranate. Her mouth was stained with its red juice. So pleased was he that he neglected to scowl at Charon, whose boatmanship he valued but whose too frequent presence was beginning to irk him.

Hermes took in the situation at a glance. "Congratulations, Uncle!" he cried, and flew off, ankle wings whirring.

Chaining a Poet

Certain boulders on a rubbled plain of Tartarus wear iron rings. These are the punishment rocks used by the Harpies who keep discipline among Hell's staff. Here are chained those fiends and demons who have broken some rule or other and need flogging. And it was to one of these rocks that the Sphinx shackled Thallo when she brought him to Tartarus.

She left him there and went off to present herself to Hades. Thallo did not act like a captive. He had expected to be finished off long before this, and was delighted to find himself uneaten. He lounged against his rock and stared across the dismal plain. Figures fledged themselves out of the mist, hardly thicker than fog. These were the shades; they were what was left of those who had died. Thallo studied them keenly, for whatever they had become, he knew, he would become too—probably very soon.

He was disappointed in them. He had expected shades, *souls*, to be purer, more concentrated, now that they had shed their flesh. But these vaporous things seemed very cold, indifferent to everything except themselves. They didn't even glance his way, but drifted past, twittering.

Hades did not wish to meet the Sphinx indoors, even in so vast a hall as his throne room. He received her then upon the Plain of Pain, halfway between the Gutwinder and the Marrow Log.

"I caught Thallo," said the Sphinx. "And brought him here so that you might watch me eat him, and see how strictly I follow your suggestions."

"Where is he?"

"In that field yonder, chained to a rock."

"Let's keep him alive for a bit," said Hades. "Hecate will be coming to claim him, which will give you the chance you've been waiting for—to fight her in single combat for the queenship of the Harpies."

"Is that the chance I've been waiting for?"

“Why, certainly! I should hope so. How can you really prove yourself fit for the post except by challenging the one who held it?”

“I see,” said the Sphinx. “I guess I didn’t quite understand. Doesn’t matter. I’m ready to fight her, or anyone else. No one—bird, beast, fish, hero or monster—has lasted more than a few minutes against me.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Hades. “She’s undefeated too. Should be a good match. I’ve invited the entire Pantheon to view it. Incidentally, I said ‘single combat,’ and that’s how it’ll probably end, but you’ll both have allies.”

“Indeed? What for?”

“To serve me the way I require, my Harpy queen must show generalship, you know. I don’t just want to see how well you fight, but how well you lead troops. So you’ll have troops. And to make it fair, she’ll have some too.”

“Who’ll be on my side?”

“I have a unique bestiary down here. And giants and dragons, and a staff of assorted fiends and demons. You can have first choice.”

“Very well,” said the Sphinx. “I choose the Harpies, the hundred-handed giants, the dragons, and the First Torture Team.”

“That leaves only Cerberus, the Manglers, the serpents, and the Cyclopes. And the Cyclopes are doubtful. They prefer to fight only in their own interests. They may simply lean on their mallets and watch.”

“All the better,” said the Sphinx. “Who wants to be fair in a fight?”

“You lack experience,” said Hades, “but seem to have the right hellish instincts. Good enough, then. Go meet your troops. Hecate should be here by tomorrow.”

Chained to his rock, peering through the mist, Thallo was too interested to be unhappy. He was alive, alive among the dead, something he had felt before when wandering the slopes of Helicon with his fellow bards, whose verse was so much feebler than his own.

Elated by strangeness, filling with a sense of unfamiliar power, he found himself watching a weird carnival—the Hell tales told him by Hecate fledging themselves out in the dreamy mist. He saw the swooping Harpies she had led; the bat-winged Furies who were even worse; the drifting, twittering shades driven by pitchfork demons and roasted by turnspit demons; the gigantic, gliding serpents she had admired because they had no cruelty, only blind strength. And here he was set down in this taboo place

among such fabled creatures—himself, wildly curious, furiously observant, alive among the dead.

Now a flock of ghosts shuddered past, driven by a pair of demons. As they wielded their pitchforks, driving the shades along, the demons chatted about the great battle that was to be staged between Hecate and the Sphinx. Thallo tried desperately to hear what they were saying. He ran toward them until his chain jerked him back. Their slurred infernal accent was hard to understand. He strained his ears so hard that his eyes bulged. He finally understood most of what they said. He slumped back against the rock, thinking hard. Hecate was coming for him; that much was clear, but she would not be allowed to leave before fighting the Sphinx—and an array of fearsome allies.

He saw a huge figure shouldering through the mist, and felt a warm thrill of recognition. Even at this distance he knew that whoever was coming toward him was a living mortal.

“Greetings!” he shouted.

The figure approached, loomed before him, and Thallo knew who it was from the tales he had heard.

“What are you doing here?” said the youth. “You’re no shade.”

“Indeed I’m not. At least not quite yet. Neither are you. You’re the wild young ferryman from the Alpheus, here on a mission from Demeter.”

“How the hell do you know so much about me?”

“People tell me things. And I’m delighted to meet you, Charon. You and I are the only warm bodies in this dank place. Why don’t you loose me from this rock like a good fellow?”

Charon took the chain between his hands and snapped it as if it were twine.

“Thank you,” said Thallo. “You’re wonderfully strong. Whom will you be helping in the great fight—Hecate or the Sphinx?”

“Neither. I’m strictly neutral. Won’t even be on this side of the Styx. I’ll moor my boat on the far shore and watch things from there. Farewell.”

He turned and strode off.

“Wait!” called Thallo. “May I come visit you on the ferry?”

Charon didn’t answer, but walked away into the mist.

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Before the Battle

The great chasm of Avernus is not the only way into Death's realm. There is also a secret passage—a rocky shaft leading from the bottom of a burned-out volcano and entering Tartarus from the south. Hecate took this back way and came into Hell before she was expected.

A friendly fiend told her where to find her husband. She clove the murky air like an arrow, and spotted him sitting on a rock from which dangled a broken chain. He was scribbling on a bit of parchment. She swooped, scooped him up, hugging him until his ribs almost cracked, kissing his face. Alighting on the rock, she held him on her lap, enfolded in her wings. Rocked him back and forth, crooning:

“Oh pettikins ... I was afraid she'd eaten you.”

“Not yet. Soon, she thinks.”

“I'll give her something to chew on that'll break her damned jaws,” snarled Hecate. Then she sighed. “It won't be easy, though. She's very big. And has a host of wicked fighters on her side.”

“Like to hear some of my ideas?”

“I love your ideas, poopsie, but what do you know about fighting?”

“I know things about the Sphinx. When I learned that she was hungering for my acquaintance I tried to learn everything I could. Picked up a few facts and even more rumors. Then, of course, she gave me more time than I wanted to observe her closely.”

“Tell me what you know. But whisper, baby. Spies simply swarm down here. Hades actually has a flock of flying ears—look like fleshy bats. And detachable eyes that skitter about on their lashes like water bugs.”

He pulled down her head and pushed aside her hair to whisper into her ear. She listened intently and smiled at him when he finished. But it was a grim smile.

“What do you think?” he whispered.

“I don’t know, sweetling. You’re quite a little strategist. But ...”

“But what?”

“It’s a desperate gamble. Disaster if it doesn’t work.”

“Well, I mean it only as a last resort.”

“It’ll be last all right—for her or me. But worth trying if everything else fails.”

He tried to slide out of her arms.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Charon. He’s the key to it.”

“Stay a minute.”

He knew what she meant but could not say—that these were probably their last minutes together. Choking back a sob, he rushed off. She spread her wings and rose into the air.

Using a giant’s rusty helmet as a bucket, Charon was dipping water from the Styx and sloshing it over the lower deck. Thallo sat cross-legged on the upper deck, watching.

“Can’t really clean this cruddy old barge,” said Charon. “And it’ll be carrying a lot of important passengers—the whole bloody Pantheon and a mob of minor gods—to see the fight, you know.”

“Which takes us back to what we were talking about,” said Thallo.

“No use going back,” said Charon. “I’ve told you a dozen times I’m staying out of that fight. There’s no reason for me to help your spooky wife against that other weirdo with wings.”

“There is a reason. Hecate left Hell because she cared for someone. You entered Hell because you cared for someone. You and she have the only two loving hearts in this place of death. You should support each other.”

“Sounds pretty,” said Charon. “But it’s not a good enough reason for me to get into that mess. I’m in enough trouble down here.”

“Yes. And your trouble is another reason you should help Hecate. I warn you—if the Sphinx wins this fight and becomes Queen of the Harpies, she will be used by Lord Hades to keep strict watch on you and Persephone. You’ll never be able to meet.”

Charon poured a helmetful of water over his head to help him think more clearly. “Stop,” he growled. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

A sound came to them; it was like a huge collective sigh. They saw Hermes herding the day's draft of shades. They weren't used to being dead yet; they moaned and chattered, shrank back from the black waters. Thallo watched, fascinated. He had no idea why Hermes was waving some of the shades forward with his snake-entwined staff, and held others back. The ones who came forward climbed aboard the ferry. The others were driven to the river by Hermes. They shuddered into the water and were carried by a sideways current toward the shore where loomed the Gates of Hell. Vultures dived because some of the swimmers still wore rags of flesh.

Thallo jumped ashore as Charon unmoored the ferry. He had to find out why some shades rode while others swam. He looked up at Hermes who, balancing on ankle wings, stood on air—so youthful and radiant that Thallo fell to his knees before him.

“O Bright God,” he cried. “Tell me, please, why do you divide the shades upon this shore? What is your principle of selection?”

“A universal principle,” said Hermes. “One affecting gods and mortals. They ride who can pay the fare; others swim. That is why those who can afford it cover corpses' eyes with gold pieces; those who can't curse their poverty but please the gods by praying more fervently than those who are able to send their relatives off in style.”

“Thank you,” said Thallo. “I understand perfectly.”

“Now a word for you, Thallo. You are alive, and on the far shore of the Styx. You are free to leave, if you wish, and I shall conduct you back to the Upper World.”

“I thank you again, but I must stay. My wife, Hecate, as you may know is about to engage in deadly combat with the Sphinx.”

“That's a reason for you to leave, not to stay. If your wife loses, the Sphinx will simply drag you before Hades' throne and eat you raw. If Hecate wins, she will be invited to resume the queenship of the Harpies.”

“Yes, I know,” said Thallo. “I've considered all that, and have made my choice. I haven't always been a good husband, but she seems somehow to have sunk her talons into the very center of my being. And I would have no interest in keeping alive if she weren't with me. So, if she is destroyed by the Sphinx, or if she chooses to stay here and queen it over those flying hags again, then I'll simply shed my empty life as a snake moults its skin. I'll become a shade and abide with her forever.”

“Nobly spoken,” said Hermes. “Impractical as hell, but that seems to go with talent. Well, I’ll be here for the great fight. We’re supposed to be neutral, you know, but I’ll be silently cheering for Hecate. Good luck to you both.”

And he flew away.

Charon had brought the ferry back, and leaped onto the shore. “I didn’t expect to find you here,” he said to Thallo. “I left you on this shore so you could escape, and stop nagging me. Why didn’t you go?”

“For the same reason you don’t. Love.”

“Oh, hell,” growled Charon. “All right. How do you think I can help?”

“Hearken now,” said Thallo. “This Styx of yours is bottomless. Its waters grow colder and colder as they deepen, and, finally, toward earth’s center, become ice. But a special kind, young sir! Black ice! A thousand times colder than the ordinary kind, and used to sheathe earth from its central fire—which, of course, is a broken-off piece of the sun.”

“How do you know?” grunted Charon.

“Read it somewhere. I try to read everything written. Pick up a lot of useless knowledge that way—which sometimes comes in handy. Like now. Believe me, your river is bottomless, and grows colder as it deepens.”

“Even if true, so what?”

“This is the crux of my plan, so I’ll have to whisper now.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been warned; there are spies everywhere. Flying ears, crawling eyes. Bend down, please, so you can hear me.”

Charon leaned down; Thallo whispered. He went on for a long time as Charon listened, scowling. Thallo ended by saying:

“The serpents will uncoil when they’re directly over the river. You’ll be able to grasp their tails, and pull her down into the icy depths, deeper and deeper until she freezes stiff.”

“I’ll be farther down. I’ll freeze stiffer.”

“No, Charon. You will have kissed Persephone first. You’ll be warmed by the green fire of that springtide kiss. You won’t freeze.”

The Battle, and After

The three-headed dog, Cerberus, guarded well the Gates of Hell, but it was a gloomy chore, and he quivered with eagerness now at the idea of quitting his post and fighting again. He had enrolled himself on Hecate's side. Before the coming of Charon, she had been the only one of Hades' staff to come sometimes and keep him company on his lonely vigil. Now he had become friendly with Charon also, and the ferryman had declared for Hecate, so the dog had no trouble making up his three minds about whose side he would fight on.

It was time to go. There was no one to bark at. Charon was ferrying boatload after boatload of guests across the river, and they were allowed to pass freely through the black iron gates. So the three heads of Cerberus sparred briefly with each other, warming up for the fight, then the great beast turned and trotted into Tartarus.

Preparing for his horde of guests, Hades had ordered that a vast viewing stand be erected on the Elysian Field. Here, the gods and goddesses and minor deities were to be placed according to rank. The highest seats were reserved for Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades himself. Tactfully, he had arranged for Zeus to be seated between his brothers, and that his seat be somewhat higher.

When the guests had thronged onto the field, Thanatos, black caped and very suave, ushered them to their seats. It was a festive horde, smiling, laughing, shouting to one another. All except Hera. She didn't allow herself to frown as she moved toward her place with stately step; neither did she smile. She was furious. For she saw that a separate podium had been set aside for Zeus's beautiful daughters—his but not hers—the Muses, the Graces, and the Hours. Seated together, these radiant daughters were like a bank of flowers, and the air was murmurous with their joy.

When everyone was seated, Hades arose. Silence fell. Everyone expected him to announce the beginning of the fight. But he nodded courteously to Zeus, who arose, thanked Hades with a gracious nod, and gestured to his herald, Hermes. The herald god stood, lifted his snake-entwined staff, and called out in a silvery voice:

“Let it begin!”

The Sphinx appeared first, stalking onto the field. She was so big that one expected her to lumber like an elephant; instead she prowled like a lion. And the crowd gasped as she lifted her huge wings, tossed her mane, smiled to show her fangs, and bared her claws, batting at her own shadow. The gasping grew to cries of wonder as she spread her wings, and the huge mustard body rose into the air and hovered midway between the audience and the raftered sky.

Posed there in midair, she could be seen wholly for what she was—a winged lion larger than an elephant with claws like ivory daggers and a face too cruel to belong to any animal but the human kind—a woman’s face whose black hair became a lion’s mane, and whose mouth gleamed with a lion’s fangs. She looked so utterly savage that Hermes, who alone among the gods had bet on Hecate, counted his wager as lost. “No one,” he thought, “can possibly survive a fight with this monster of monsters.”

Then, Hecate flashed into view, coming not upon the field, but floating down from the rafters, and standing on air above the artificial sun. Half-hidden as she was, she glittered among the shadows. In a nuptial verse, Thallo had described her this way:

“Her mother was a nymph of the Falcon clan, her father an eastern panther god. She looks like a cheetah partially transformed into a woman—long legged, long armed, with blazing yellow eyes. Her hands and feet are tipped with ripping claws, but, when she draws them in, her touch is as soft as velvet. Her wings are ribbed and made of membranous leather, tinged gold, wherein has arisen the report that she wears brass wings. Her followers, the Harpies, do have brass wings and brass claws and are true hags with hideous, ravaged faces. But she, their queen, is beautiful as a cheetah in midleap.”

But to those gazing up at her now, she looked pathetically small compared to the Sphinx, and no one thought she had any chance at all.

Over the high seats where sat Zeus and his two brothers was stretched a canopy, and this showed foresight on the part of Hades. Soon after the fight started, it began to rain blood.

Now, the Sphinx was confident of victory, but wanted to give herself every advantage. She had strong allies and meant to use them. The strategy was to force Hecate out of the air, for she flew much faster than the Sphinx.

The Harpies were the first to attack. They had opted for the Sphinx. They expected her to become their queen in Hecate's place, and were trying to curry favor. They flew toward Hecate, separating so that they might attack from three sides. They unfurled their stingray whips as they flew. Hecate uttered a fluting call.

The audience saw things dropping out of the shadows. They were giant snakes, friendly to Hecate. They had wound their tails about the mountain roots that were the rafters of Hell and dangled there like leather stalactites, their blunt heads weaving about Hecate.

As the Harpies flew in, shrieking, lashing, the serpents snapped their long bodies and drove their heads into the hags, smashing wings, breaking shoulder blades, knocking the Harpies out of the sky.

Drops of blood began to fall. Zeus was shielded by the canopy. The others didn't care; they were too excited by the fight to let a little blood bother them.

A pair of hundred-handed giants rushed onto the field, bearing a huge boulder in each of their two hundred hands. They hurled their rocks at Hecate. The serpents recoiled themselves and hid among the rafters. Hecate dodged the hurtling boulders, but was forced to fly lower and lower.

A squadron of dragons trotted onto the field. Wingless blue dragons, standing on their hind legs. Bred specially for the uses of Hell, they hopped swiftly, using their spiked tails for balance, and spat accurate jets of blue flame. As Hecate descended, they hopped beneath her, spitting flame, trying to incinerate her as she flew.

Then it was that Cerberus charged. He had been crouched at the end of the field, awaiting his moment. He sped for the giants, whirling about them, snarling his triple snarl. Teeth flashed, gashing a leg of each giant. But he did not stay. He flashed among the dragons. Each pair of jaws grasped a giant lizard and shook it like a rabbit. Their heads snapped; spines cracked. The broken dragons fell to the ground, spat ash, and died.

There were five dragons left, spitting flame at Cerberus. With a mighty leap he left them, landed on the grass, and stood between the dragons and the giants who were limping toward him, bellowing, and hurling boulders. Now Cerberus showed his matchless speed—dodging, weaving, leaping, charging now at the giants and slashing them until blood poured from their wounds, now leaping among the dragons and savaging them, and leaping away again.

The wounded giants kept throwing rocks, but their aim was poor now. The dragons kept spitting fire. But their flame hit the giants, and the poorly thrown rocks smashed into the dragons. The giants became lumps of charred flesh, and the dragons lay squashed—like geckos stoned by cruel boys.

Cerberus was in a battle fury; he didn't want to stop. He wrinkled three bloody maws and leaped toward the Sphinx, barking furiously. But she was too high to reach. He turned and trotted off, looking for some demons to chew on.

The crowd's attention was wrenched away from Cerberus, for Hecate and the Sphinx were closing at last. Hecate had attacked. The Sphinx was roaring; her voice rumbled like thunder as the blood drizzled down. But the blood was hers now. Hecate was darting in and out like a wasp, lashing with her stingray whip, flicking off a patch of lion hide with each blow. And the Sphinx bled. Hades watched in wonder. He had seen Hecate in action before, and had admired her, but never before had she moved as fast as she did now, and attacked with such delicate savagery. She seemed to be breaking into a swarm of hornets, each one stinging a bloody place on the beast.

But a hundred wounds didn't even begin to tap the Sphinx's enormous strength. She suffered, but she waited. Was so quiet as she hovered that she seemed almost stupefied by Hecate's attack. Again Hecate swooped, coming very close, right toward her enemy's face, trying to flick out her eyes. Too close. One great barbed paw shot out, raking Hecate from shoulder to hip.

Thallo, hiding among a fringe of myrtles at the field's edge, attached to the battle with every fiber of his being, saw his wife's tunic rip, saw claws raking bloody furrows into her flesh. Wounded, bleeding, losing strength,

she was still swift. Thallo saw her rise, fly toward the rafters, the Sphinx rising in pursuit.

Up, up, flew Hecate, up to where the serpents lay coiled among the rafters. There were four serpents. She hissed at them. They obeyed instantly, two by two, twining themselves about each other. Hecate lurked in Hell's rafters, grasping a pair of braided serpents in each hand. The Sphinx hovered beneath, waiting for her to reappear.

Thallo, watching from below, watching her vanish among the shadows, knew that she had reached her last resource—which was his own plan, desperate though it was. Now he had to move. He cawed like a crow, which was his signal to Persephone, who was also hiding among the trees, keeping out of Hades' sight.

“Go!” he cried. “Run to the river as fast as you can. Kiss him once, then jump off the boat. And watch from the shore, for that's where the action will be.”

She darted off, running so swiftly, so lightly, no blade of grass bent beneath her feet. Charon's ferry was moored to the near shore. He was on deck, listening to the far-off shouts of the crowd, trying to read their meaning. He saw Persephone flash through the gates, coming so fast that she was on board before he could leap ashore to greet her.

“Just time for one kiss,” she whispered. “Then do what you must.”

She kissed him and jumped lightly off the boat. With a mighty stroke of his oar, Charon sent the ferry to the middle of the river, and waited. He didn't have long to wait. Hecate was flying directly overhead. From each hand dangled a pair of braided snakes. The river darkened under the shadow of great wings as the Sphinx flew over.

Roaring, claws bared, she came right toward the hovering Hecate—who sank below the Sphinx and flung her snakes. They looped through the air headfirst toward the Sphinx. Four jaws clamped onto one front paw, four onto the other. They whipped their tails, trying to pull her toward the river.

They pulled her down until their tails dangled within reach of Charon. He stretched his arms full length and barely managed to grasp a pair of braided tails in each huge hand. He pulled. The Sphinx beat her wings and kept aloft. Charon pulled; the serpents pulled. The monster was too strong; she would not be pulled down.

Then Hecate, bleeding badly, used the very last of her strength. She forced herself to climb in the air until she was far above the Sphinx, then folded her wings like a stooping falcon and dropped with dead weight, landing on the Sphinx's broad back, between her wings.

The force of her fall combined with a final mighty yank by Charon and forced the Sphinx down, down. The monster beat her wings furiously; their downdraft capsized the ferry. Charon was thrown into the water. Quick-wittedly, he managed to clamp the ferry's anchor between his legs so that he would sink faster. Held on to the snakes as he sank, and they gripped the Sphinx. Down, down he sank, growing colder and colder. But he had kissed Persephone, drunk deeply of her springtide—and, warmed by her green fire, remembering Thallo's words, then, for love and beauty and honor and justice, he kept clenching the heavy fluke between his legs, and was dragged down, farther and farther into the freezing depths, dragging the Sphinx after him.

He felt the living cables that were the braided serpents pull out of his hands, and he knew that the Sphinx must be sinking of her own weight. He turned in the water and began to swim up—and passed the great frozen body as it sank toward the bottom.

When he surfaced, he saw that the river shore was thronged with gods and goddesses, shouting, cheering. He was disappointed. Shuddering with cold, he wanted one more kiss from Persephone to warm him again. But she was standing demurely beside Hades, and he knew that he would have to wait.

That night the guests banqueted in Hades' palace in Erebus. They reveled until dawn, then departed, thanking him for his hospitality. But the final words of Zeus were, "We're going to have to compromise, you know. Demeter is withholding her crops, and making too many people suffer, and I am being pestered by their complaints. Your bride will have to spend half a year with her mother. And that's final."

Hades had to agree, and was further dismayed when Hecate refused to serve him. She returned to Crete bearing Thallo, who dangled from her claws as they went, scribbling happily.

Nor was the Sphinx left frozen in the depth of the Styx. "Remove her," said Hades to the Cyclopes. "Take her up to the desert and deposit her in its hottest sands. It will be infernally interesting to see what happens when she

thaws out in ten thousand years or so and enters a world that no longer believes in gods or monsters.”

But we can't be sure that the Sphinx still languishes in the hot sands of the desert, for another legend holds that she was not frozen in the great battle but managed to escape from Tartarus and find employment with Zeus. He used her on special assignments—to punish those mortals who dared imitate the gods.

One such mortal was a young prince named Oedipus, who believed that he was an orphan. He came to Thebes, and in a series of accidents, killed the king—who, unbeknownst to him, happened to be his father—and married the widow—his mother—and took the Theban throne.

This angered Zeus, who did not believe in accidents and did not approve of mortals marrying their close relatives. “For,” he stated, “this is a privilege reserved for the gods who must marry within the family. Take me for example: Whom could I have married without lowering myself—only my own sister.”

So Zeus was displeased with Oedipus for breaking this taboo, and sent the Sphinx to kill him. Lurking in ambush beyond the city's walls, she trapped the king's chariot in a valley. She snatched up the charioteer and devoured him, armor and all, as Oedipus watched, horrified. He drew his sword to defend himself. But the Sphinx was in no hurry; she wanted to have a little fun before killing him.

“I'll give you a chance to save your life,” she said. “If you can answer this riddle, which no one has ever been able to guess, I'll let you go—or at least save you for later.”

“Ask your riddle!” shouted the king.

“Very well.... What has sometimes two legs, sometimes three, sometimes four, and goes least when it has the most?”

“This is the answer,” said Oedipus. “It is man—who walks on two legs in his prime. On three—that is, two legs and a cane—when old. And on four when a babe who can only crawl, and then goes slowest.”

Now, this legend says, the Sphinx was stricken with shame at having her riddle guessed so easily—leaped off the cliff and dashed herself to pieces on the rocks below. Whereupon Zeus, still determined on punishment, sent a plague upon Thebes. And Oedipus, consulting an oracle, was told that he

had brought the plague upon the city by killing his father and marrying his mother.

Then, one version of the story says, Oedipus killed himself. Another says he blinded himself. And still another that he went into exile, accompanied by his youngest daughter, who would also have been his half sister.

However, while the other tales of the Sphinx are a matter of solid record, there is very little evidence to support the Oedipus story. The account of the monster killing herself, for example, seems far out of character. Monsters value themselves too highly to commit suicide, especially this monster.

Now, Persephone did spend half of each year with her mother in the Upper World, and that time became spring and summer. Half a year she spent underground as Hades' queen. And that time, Demeter decreed, was winter, and no crops grew. As for Charon, he served as ferryman while Persephone was underground—and that was the busy season, for more old folk die in winter. And it is said that Hades by then did not care how much time Persephone spent on the ferry. For he had become interested in Menthe.

And when it was time for Persephone to visit her mother, Charon went too. He was not idle in the Upper World; he always found work as a ferryman. That he and Persephone met often then is proved by the way the most beautiful wildflowers grow on riverbanks.

We should be aware that we may not yet be finished with the Sphinx, nor she with us. There are those who say that the figure still crouching in the Egyptian desert—the figure of a monster with a lion's body, an eagle's wings, and a woman's face—is not carved out of stone but is the actual living body of the Sphinx, so deeply frozen that ninety centuries of desert sun have only begun to thaw her out. But the thawing has begun, as Hades predicted; the Sphinx is being unlocked from her frozen sleep, and will wake up hungry.

THE
ADVENTURES
OF ULYSSES



BERNARD EVSLIN

OceanofPDF.com

The Adventures of Ulysses

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for Hirsh W. Stalberg, voyager on other seas.

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Prologue

THE ADVENTURES OF ULYSSES begin many years before the opening of this book. He was the master strategist of the Greek forces in their war against Troy, the war that started with an apple, ended with a horse, and was fought by a thousand kings for the love of a single woman. It left an ancient city in flames that still burn in man's imagination after three thousand years.

The war started when Peleus, mightiest hero of his time, was married to Thetis, the most beautiful naiad that ever sported among the waves or fled the embrace of Poseidon. It was a magnificent wedding, attended by all the gods on Olympus. Unfortunately, however, Thetis had neglected to send an invitation to Eris, Lady of Discord and sister to the God of War. It was an omission that was to cost a river of blood. For Eris came without invitation and threw upon the banquet table a golden apple inscribed "To The Fairest." Mischievous words! The apple was claimed immediately by Hera (Queen of the Gods), Athene (Goddess of Wisdom), and Aphrodite (Goddess of Love).

The feud between the three goddesses waxed so bitter that no god dared attempt mediation but passed judgment on to Paris, a shepherd boy of Troy, the son of King Priam, whose royal birth had been kept secret. Paris was said to be the most beautiful of all the lads of the Inner Sea.

Bribes came his way immediately. Hera offered him power, promising to make him the mightiest king the world had ever seen. Athene offered him wisdom. All the lore of heaven and earth, and all the lore beyond death, too—all that has been written and spoken, and also that too secret to be uttered, would be his. Aphrodite said little. She came close to him and whispered in his ear. When she had finished whispering, he gave her the apple. She smiled and kissed him. Hera and Athene flew off, screaming their rage.

What the Goddess Aphrodite had whispered to Paris was a promise—that he should have any woman he looked upon with desire. She then recommended the most desirable, a Spartan queen named Helen, who the goddess said was the mortal most resembling herself. In fact, Helen was by way of being a relative, for she had been born of Leda, who had been loved by Zeus disguised as a swan, and so she herself had the radiant stature of the gods, a swan's soft muscularity, and her mother's eyes. Paris straightaway gave up being a shepherd and resumed his rank as Prince of Troy. He demanded of his doting father a treasure ship and a piratical crew. Thereupon he sailed to Sparta on a diplomatic mission to King Menelaus, Helen's husband. Paris and Helen met at a state banquet. By dawn she was aboard his ship and it was sailing for Troy.

Now, Helen had been courted by all the kings and princes of the Greek islands. Her father had hesitated long before allowing her

to accept any suitor. He was afraid that the rejected suitors would band together to destroy the successful one—and himself and his kingdom in the bargain. So Helen flirted with them all, encouraged them all, and accepted none. Finally, Ulysses, who was one of the suitors, offered a plan. All Helen's admirers would swear a mighty oath to refrain from murdering the successful suitor and would join to defend Helen and her husband—whoever he might be—against any attack.

Thereupon Helen chose Menelaus, King of Sparta, most powerful of the Greek chieftains. Thus it was that when Paris made off with Helen, a thousand kings were summoned to keep their oath. They assembled a huge fleet and sailed for Troy.

The Greeks camped outside the walls of Troy, and for ten years tried to fight their way into the city. But the walls were strong and the Trojans brave. The defenders were led by King Priam's fifty warrior sons. The great Hector was their chief. And even after Hector was killed by the Greek hero, Achilles, the Trojans refused to be defeated—until they were tricked into defeating themselves.

The author of that fatal trick was Ulysses, sharpest tactician among the invaders. The Greeks pretended to lift their siege. They struck their tents, boarded their ships, and sailed around a headland out of sight, where they anchored and waited until nightfall. Behind them on the beach they had left a giant wooden horse. The Trojans reacted just as Ulysses had calculated. They began to celebrate and quickly lost their wits. They thought the wooden horse an offering

to Poseidon, God of the Sea, and dragged it through the gates into the city, so as to anger Poseidon against the Greeks and spoil the voyage home. But the wooden horse was hollow, and so artfully made that Ulysses and a company of armed warriors were able to hide inside and remain undetected as the horse was rolled into the city. That night, as Troy slept, the Greeks crawled out of their hiding place, killed the Trojan sentries, and opened the gates to the Greek army, which had sailed back in the darkness.

It was a complete surprise. Troy was taken, its fighting men slaughtered, its women and children enslaved. Then Ulysses sailed for home, his three ships loaded with booty. But victory never comes cheap. Poseidon's anger had indeed been kindled. He roused the winds and tides against Ulysses and sent word to island ogres and monsters of the deep.

And for ten long years the great voyager had to battle his way through the worst perils that the imagination of an offended god could devise.

This is the story of that voyage.

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Ships and Men

AFTER TROY WAS BURNED, Ulysses sailed for home with three ships holding fifty men each.

Three thousand years ago ships were very different; through the years they have changed much more than the men who sail them.

These beaked warships used by the pirate kingdoms of the Middle Sea were like no vessels you have ever seen. Imagine a very long narrow rowboat with twenty oars on each side. The timbers of the bow curve sharply to a prow, and this prow grows longer and sharper, becomes in fact a long, polished shaft tipped by a knife-edged brass spearhead. This was called the ram, the chief weapon of ancient warships.

In battle, the opposing ships spun about each other, swooping forward, twirling on their beams, darting backward, their narrow hulls allowing them to backwater very swiftly. The object was to ram the enemy before he rammed you. And to ram first was the only defense, for the brass beak of the ramming ship sheared easily through the timbers of its victim, knocking a huge hole in the hull and sinking it before its men could jump overboard.

These warships were also equipped with sail and mast—used only for voyaging, never in battle—a square sail, and a short mast, held fast by oxhide stays. The sail was raised only for a fair wind,

or could be tilted slightly for a quartering wind, but was useless against headwinds.

This meant that these ships were almost always at the mercy of the weather and were often blown off course. Another thing that made them unfit for long voyages was the lack of cargo space. Only a few days' supply of food and water could be carried, leaving space for no other cargo. That is why these fighting ships tried to hug the coast and avoid the open sea.

Ulysses' problem was made worse by victory. When Troy was sacked, he and his men captured a huge booty—gold and jewels, silks, furs—and after ten years of war, the men refused to leave any loot behind. This meant that each of his ships could carry food and water for a very few days.

This greed for treasure caused many of his troubles at first. But then troubles came so thick and fast that no one could tell what caused them; hardships were simply called bad luck, or the anger of the gods.

But bad luck makes good stories.

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The Ciconians

THE VOYAGE BEGAN PEACEFULLY. A fair northeast wind blew, filling the sails of the little fleet and pushing it steadily homeward. The wind freshened at night, and the three ships scudded along joyfully under a fat moon.

On the morning of the second day Ulysses saw a blue haze of smoke and a glint of white stone. He put in toward shore and saw a beautiful little town. The men stared in amazement at this city without walls, rich with green parks and grazing cattle, its people strolling about in white tunics. Ten years of war had made Ulysses' men as savage as wolves. Everyone not a shipmate was an enemy. To meet was to fight; property belonged to the winner.

Ulysses stood in the bow, shading his eyes with his hand, gazing at the city. A tough, crafty old warrior named Eurylochus stood beside him.

"We attack, do we not?" he asked. "The city lies there defenseless. We can take it without losing a man."

"Yes, it looks tempting," said Ulysses. "But the wind blows fair, and good fortune attends us. Perhaps it will spoil our luck to stop."

"But this fat little city has been thrown into our laps by the gods, too," said Eurylochus, "and they grow angry when men refuse their gifts. It would be bad luck *not* to attack."

Ulysses heard the fierce murmur of his men behind him and felt their greed burning in his veins. He hailed the other ships and gave orders, and the three black-hulled vessels swerved toward shore and nosed into the harbor, swooping down upon the white city like wolves upon a sheepfold.

They landed on the beach. The townsfolk fled before them into the hills. Ulysses did not allow his men to pursue them, for there was no room on the ship for slaves. From house to house the armed men went, helping themselves to whatever they wanted. Afterward they piled the booty in great heaps upon the beach.

Then Ulysses had them round up a herd of the plump, swaying, crook-horned cattle, and offer ten bulls in sacrifice to the gods. Later they built huge bonfires on the beach, roasted the cattle, and had a great feast.

But while the looting and feasting was going on, the men of the city had withdrawn into the hills and called together their kinsmen of the villages, the Ciconians, and began preparing for battle. They were skillful fighters, these men of the hills. They drove brass war chariots that had long blades attached to the wheels, and these blades whirled swiftly as the wheels turned, scything down the foe.

They gathered by the thousands, an overwhelming force, and stormed down out of the hills onto the beach. Ulysses' men were full of food and wine, unready to fight, but he had posted sentries, who raised a shout when they saw the Ciconians coming down

from the hills in the moonlight. Ulysses raged among his men, slapping them with the flat of his sword, driving the fumes of wine out of their heads. His great racketing battle cry roused those he could not whip with his sword.

The men closed ranks and met the Ciconians at spearpoint. The Hellenes retreated slowly, leaving their treasure where it was heaped upon the beach and, keeping their line unbroken, made for their ships.

Ulysses chose two of his strongest men and bade them lift a thick timber upon their shoulders. He sat astride this timber, high enough to shoot his arrows over the heads of his men. He was the most skillful archer since Heracles. He aimed only at the chariot horses, and aimed not to kill, but to cripple, so that the horses fell in their traces, and their furious flailing and kicking broke the enemy's advance.

Thus the Hellenes were able to reach their ships, roll them into the water, leap into the rowers' benches, and row away. But eighteen men were left dead on the beach—six from each ship—and there was scarcely a man unwounded.

Eurylochus threw himself on his knees before Ulysses and said:

“I advised you badly, O Chief. We have angered the gods. Perhaps, if you kill me, they will be appeased.”

“Eighteen dead are enough for one night,” said Ulysses. “Our luck has changed, but what has changed can change again. Rise and

go about your duties.”

The ships had been handled roughly in the swift retreat from the Ciconian beach. Their hulls had been battered by axes and flung spears, and they had sprung small leaks. The wind had faded to a whisper, and the men were forced to row with water sloshing around their ankles. Ulysses saw that his ships were foundering and that he would have to empty the holds. Food could not be spared, nor water; the only thing that could go was the treasure taken from Troy. The men groaned and tore at their beards as they saw the gold and jewels and bales of fur and silk being dropped overboard. But Ulysses cast over his own share of the treasure first—and his was the largest share—so the men had to bite back their rage and keep on rowing.

As the necklaces, bracelets, rings, and brooches sank slowly, winking their jewels like drowned fires, a strange thing happened. A shoal of naiads—beautiful water nymphs—were drawn by the flash of the jewels. They dived after the bright baubles and swam alongside the ships, calling to the men, singing, tweaking the oars out of their hands, for they were sleek, mischievous creatures who loved jewels and strangers. Some of them came riding dolphins, and in the splashing silver veils of spray the men thought they saw beautiful girls with fishtails. This is probably how the first report of mermaids arose.

Poseidon, God of the Sea, was wakened from sleep by the sound of this laughter. When he saw what was happening, his green

beard bristled with rage, and he said to himself:

“Can it be? Are these the warriors whom I helped in their siege of Troy? Is this their gratitude, trying to steal my naiads from me? I’ll teach them manners.”

He whistled across the horizon to his son, Aeolus, keeper of the winds, who twirled his staff and sent a northeast gale skipping across the sea. It pounced upon the little fleet and scattered the ships like twigs. Ulysses clung to the helm, trying to hold the kicking tiller, trying to shout over the wind. There was nothing to do but ship the mast and let the wind take them.

And the wind, in one huge gust of fury, drove them around Cythera, the southernmost of their home islands, into the open waters of the southwest quarter of the Middle Sea, toward the hump of Africa called Libya.

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The Lotus-Eaters

NOW, AT THIS TIME, the shore of Libya was known as “The land where Morpheus plays.” Who was Morpheus? He was a young god, son of Hypnos, God of Sleep, and nephew of Hades. It was his task to fly around the world, from nightfall to dawn, scattering sleep. His father, Hypnos, mixed the colors of sleep for him, making them dark and thick and sad.

“For,” he said, “it is a little death you lay upon man each night, my son, to prepare him for the kingdom of death.”

But his aunt, Persephone, sewed him a secret pocket, full of bright things, and said:

“It is not death you scatter, but repose. Hang the walls of sleep with bright pictures, so that man may not know death before he dies.”

These bright pictures were called dreams. And Morpheus became fascinated by the way a little corner of man’s mind remained awake in sleep, and played with the colors he had hung, mixing them, pulling them apart, making new pictures. It seemed to him that these fantastic colored shadows the sleepers painted were the most beautiful, most puzzling things he had ever seen. And he wanted to know more about how they came to be.

He went to Persephone and said, “I need a flower that makes sleep. It must be purple and black. But there should be one petal

streaked with fire-red, the petal to make dreams.”

Persephone smiled and moved her long white hand in the air. Between her fingers a flower blossomed. She gave it to him.

“Here it is, Morpheus. Black and purple like sleep, with one petal of fire-red for dreams. We will call it lotus.”

Morpheus took the flower and planted it in Libya, where it is always summer. The flower grew in clusters, smelling deliciously of honey. The people ate nothing else. They slept all the time, except when they were gathering flowers. Morpheus watched over them, reading their dreams.

It was toward Lotusland that Ulysses and his men were blown by the gale. The wind fell while they were still offshore. The sky cleared, the sea calmed, a hot sun beat down. To Ulysses, dizzy with fatigue, weak with hunger, the sky and the water and the air between seemed to flow together in one hot blueness.

He shook his head, trying to shake away the hot blue haze, and growled to his men to unship the oars and row toward land. The exhausted men bent to the oars, and the ships crawled over the fire-blue water. With their last strength they pulled the ships up on the beach, past the high-tide mark, and then lay down and went to sleep.

As they slept, the Lotus-eaters came out of the forest. Their arms were heaped with flowers, which they piled about the sleeping men in great blue and purple bouquets, so that they might

have flowers to eat when they awoke, for these people were very gentle and hospitable.

The men awoke and smelled the warm, honey smell of the flowers and ate them in great handfuls—like honeycomb—and fell asleep again. Morpheus hovered over the sleeping men and read their dreams.

“These men have done terrible things,” the god whispered to himself. “Their dreams are full of gold and blood and fire. Such sleep will not rest them.”

And he mixed them some cool green and silver dreams of home. The nightmares faded. Wounded Trojans stopped screaming, Troy stopped burning; they saw their wives smile, heard their children laugh, saw the green wheat growing in their own fields. They dreamed of home, awoke and were hungry, ate the honeyed lotus flowers, and fell into a deeper sleep.

Then Morpheus came to Ulysses, who was stretched on the sand, a little apart from the rest. He studied his face—the wide, grooved brow, the sunken eyes, the red hair, the jutting chin. And he said to himself: “*This* man is a hero. Terrible are his needs, sudden his deeds, and his dreams must be his own. I cannot help him.”

So Morpheus mixed no colors for Ulysses’ sleep but let him dream his own dreams and read them as they came. He hovered above the sleeping king and could not leave.

“What monsters he makes,” he said to himself. “Look at that giant with the single eye in the middle of his forehead. And that terrible spider-woman with all those legs ... Ah, the things he dreams, this angry sleeper. What bloody mouths, what masts falling, sails ripping, what rocks and reefs, what shipwrecks ... How many deaths?”

Ulysses awoke, choking, out of a terrible nightmare. It seemed to him that in his sleep he had seen the whole voyage laid out before him, had seen his ships sinking, his men drowning. Monsters had crowded about him, clutching, writhing. He sat up and looked about. His men lay asleep among heaped flowers. As he watched, one opened his eyes, raised himself on an elbow, took a handful of flowers, stuffed them into his mouth, and immediately fell asleep again.

Ulysses smelled the honey sweetness and felt an overpowering hunger. He took some of the flowers and raised them to his mouth. As their fragrance grew stronger, he felt his eyelids drooping, his arms growing heavy, and he thought: “It is these flowers that are making us sleep. Their scent alone brings sleep. I must not eat them.”

But he could not put them down; his hand would not obey him. Exerting all the bleak force of his will, he grasped his right hand with his left—as if it belonged to someone else—and one by one forced open his fingers and let the flowers fall.

Then he dragged himself to his feet and walked slowly into the sea. He went under and arose snorting. His head had cleared. But when he went up on the beach, the sweet fragrance rose like an ether and made him dizzy again.

“I must work swiftly,” he said.

One by one he carried the sleeping men to the ships and propped them on their benches. His strength was going. The honey smell was invading him, making him droop with sleep. He took his knife and, cutting sharp splinters of wood to prop open his eyelids, staggered back among the men. He worked furiously now, lifting them on his shoulders, carrying them two at a time, throwing them into the ships.

Finally, the beach was cleared. The men lolled sleeping upon the benches. Then, all by himself, using his last strength, he pushed the ships into the water. When the ships were afloat in the shallow water, he lashed one to another with rawhide line, his own ship in front. Then he raised his sail and took the helm.

The wind was blowing from the southwest. It filled his sail. The line grew taut; the file of ships moved away from Lotusland.

The men began to awake from their dreams of home and found themselves upon the empty sea again. But the long sleep had rested them, and they took up their tasks with new strength.

Ulysses kept the helm, grim and unsmiling. For he knew that what he had seen painted on the walls of his sleep was meant to come true and that he was sailing straight into a nightmare.

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The Cyclops' Cave

AFTER HE HAD RESCUED his crew from Lotusland, Ulysses found that he was running from one trouble into another. They were still at sea, and there was no food for the fleet. The men were hungry and getting dangerous. Ulysses heard them grumbling: "He should have left us there in Lotusland. At least when you're asleep you don't know you're hungry. Why did he have to come and wake us up?" He knew that unless he found food for them very soon he would be facing a mutiny.

That part of the Aegean Sea was dotted with islands. On every one of them was a different kind of enemy. The last thing Ulysses wanted to do was to go ashore, but there was no other way of getting food. He made a landfall on a small, mountainous island. He was very careful; he had the ships of the fleet moor offshore and selected twelve of his bravest men as a landing party.

They beached their skirl and struck inland. It was a wild, hilly place, full of boulders, with very few trees. It seemed deserted. Then Ulysses glimpsed something moving across the valley, on the slope of a hill. He was too far off to see what they were, but he thought they must be goats since the hill was so steep. And if they were goats they had to be caught. So the men headed downhill, meaning to cross the valley and climb the slope.

Ulysses had no way of knowing it, but in the entire sea this was the very worst island on which the small party could have landed. For here lived the Cyclopes, huge savage creatures, tall as trees, each with one eye in the middle of his forehead. Once, long ago, they had lived in the bowels of Olympus, forging thunderbolts for Zeus. But he had punished them for some fault, exiling them to this island where they had forgotten all their smithcraft and did nothing but fight with each other for the herds of wild goats, trying to find enough food to fill their huge bellies. Best of all, they liked storms; storms meant shipwrecks. Shipwrecks meant sailors struggling in the sea, who could be plucked out and eaten raw; and the thing they loved best in the world was human flesh. The largest and the fiercest and the hungriest of all the Cyclopes on the island was one named Polyphemus. He kept constant vigil on his mountain, in fair weather or foul. If he spotted a ship, and there was no storm to help, he would dive into the sea and swim underwater, coming up underneath the ship and overturning it. Then he would swim off with his pockets full of sailors.

On this day he could not believe his luck when he saw a boat actually landing on the beach and thirteen meaty-looking sailors disembark and begin to march toward his cave. But there they were, climbing out of the valley now, up the slope of the hill, right toward the cave. He realized they must be hunting his goats.

The door of the cave was an enormous slab of stone. He shoved this aside so that the cave stood invitingly open, casting a

faint glow of firelight upon the dusk. Over the fire, on a great spit, eight goats were turning and roasting. The delicious savors of the cooking drifted from the cave. Polyphemus lay down behind a huge boulder and waited.

The men were halfway up the slope of the hill when they smelled the meat roasting. They broke into a run. Ulysses tried to restrain them, but they paid no heed—they were too hungry. They raced to the mouth of the cave and dashed in. Ulysses drew his sword and hurried after them. When he saw the huge fireplace and the eight goats spitted like sparrows, his heart sank because he knew that they had come into reach of something much larger than themselves. However, the men were giving no thought to anything but food; they flung themselves on the spit and tore into the goat meat, smearing their hands and faces with sizzling fat, too hungry to feel pain as they crammed the hot meat into their mouths.

There was a loud rumbling sound; the cave darkened. Ulysses whirled around. He saw that the door had been closed. The far end of the cavern was too dark to see anything, but then—amazed, aghast—he saw what looked like a huge red lantern far above, coming closer. Then he saw the great shadow of a nose under it and the gleam of teeth. He realized that the lantern was a great flaming eye. Then he saw the whole giant, tall as a tree, with huge fingers reaching out of the shadows, fingers bigger than baling hooks. They closed around two sailors and hauled them screaming into the air.

As Ulysses and his horrified men watched, the great hand bore the struggling little men to the giant's mouth. He ate them, still wriggling, the way a cat eats a grasshopper; he ate them clothes and all, growling over their raw bones.

The men had fallen to their knees and were whimpering like terrified children, but Ulysses stood there, sword in hand, his agile brain working more swiftly than it ever had before.

"Greetings," he called. "May I know to whom we are indebted for such hospitality?"

The giant belched and spat out buttons. "I am Polyphemus," he growled. "This is my cave, my mountain, and everything that comes here is mine. I do hope you can all stay to dinner. There are just enough of you to make a meal. Ho, ho ..." And he laughed a great, choking, phlegmy laugh, swiftly lunged, and caught another sailor, whom he lifted into the air and held before his face.

"Wait!" cried Ulysses.

"What for?"

"You won't enjoy him that way. He is from Attica, where the olives grow. He was raised on olives and has a very delicate, oily flavor. But to appreciate it, you must taste the wine of the country."

"Wine? What is wine?"

"It is a drink. Made from pressed grapes. Have you never drunk it?"

"We drink nothing but ox blood and buttermilk here."

“Ah, you do not know what you have missed, gentle Polyphemus. Meat-eaters, in particular, love wine. Here, try it for yourself.”

Ulysses unslung from his belt a full flask of unwatered wine. He gave it to the giant, who put it to his lips and gulped. He coughed violently and stuck the sailor in a little niche high up in the cave wall, then leaned his great slab of a face toward Ulysses and said:

“What did you say this drink was?”

“Wine. A gift of the gods to man, to make women look better and food taste better. And now it is my gift to you.”

“It’s good, very good.” He put the flask to his lips and swallowed again. “You are very polite. What’s your name?”

“My name? Why I am—nobody.”

“Nobody ... Well, Nobody, I like you. You’re a good fellow. And do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to save you till last. Yes, I’ll eat all your friends first, and give you extra time, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Ulysses looked up into the great eye and saw that it was redder than ever. It was all a swimming redness. He had given the monster, who had never drunk spirits before, undiluted wine. Surely it must make him sleepy. But was a gallon enough for that great gullet? Enough to put him to sleep—or would he want to eat again first? “Eat ’em all up, Nobody—save you till later. Sleep a little first. Shall I? Won’t try to ran away, will you? No—you can’t,

can't open the door—too heavy, ha, ha.... You take a nap, too, Nobody. I'll wake you for breakfast. Breakfast ...”

The great body crashed full-length on the cave floor, making the very walls of the mountain shake. Polyphemus lay on his back, snoring like a powersaw. The sailors were still on the floor, almost dead from fear.

“Up!” cried Ulysses. “Stand up like men! Do what must be done! Or you will be devoured like chickens.”

He got them to their feet and drew them about him as he explained his plan.

“Listen now, and listen well, for we have no time. I made him drunk, but we cannot tell how long it will last.”

Ulysses thrust his sword into the fire; they saw it glow white-hot.

“There are ten of us,” he said. “Two of us have been eaten, and one of our friends is still unconscious up there on his shelf of rock. You four get on one side of his head, and the rest on the other side. When I give the word, lay hold of the ear on your side, each of you. And hang on, no matter how he thrashes, for I am going to put out his eye. And if I am to be sure of my stroke, you must hold his head still. One stroke is all I will be allowed.”

Then Ulysses rolled a boulder next to the giant's head and climbed on it, so that he was looking down into the eye. It was lidless and misted with sleep—big as a furnace door and glowing softly like a banked fire. Ulysses looked at his men. They had done

what he said, broken into two parties, one group at each ear. He lifted his white-hot sword.

“Now!” he cried.

Driving down with both hands and all the strength of his back and shoulders and all his rage and all his fear, Ulysses stabbed the glowing spike into the giant’s eye.

His sword jerked out of his hand as the head flailed upward; men pelted to the ground as they lost their hold. A huge screeching, curdling bellow split the air.

“This way!” shouted Ulysses.

He motioned to his men, and they crawled on their bellies toward the far end of the cave where the herd of goats was tethered. They slipped into the herd and lay among the goats as the giant stomped about the cave, slapping the walls with great blows of his hands, picking up boulders and cracking them together in agony, splitting them to cinders, clutching his eye, a scorched hole now, from which the brown blood jelled. He moaned and gibbered and bellowed in frightful pain; his groping hand found the sailor in the wall, and he tore him to pieces between his fingers. Ulysses could not even hear the man scream because the giant was bellowing so.

Now Ulysses saw that the Cyclops’ wild stampeding was giving place to a plan. For now he was stamping on the floor in a regular pattern, trying to find and crush them beneath his feet. He stopped moaning and listened. The sudden silence dazed the men with fear. They held their breath and tried to muffle the sound of

their beating hearts; all the giant heard was the breathing of the goats. Then Ulysses saw him go to the mouth of the cave and swing the great slab aside and stand there. He realized just in time that the goats would rush outside, which is what the giant wanted, for then he could search the whole cave.

Ulysses whispered: “Quickly, swing under the bellies of the rams. Hurry, hurry!”

Luckily, they were giant goats and thus able to carry the men who had swung themselves under their bellies and were clinging to the wiry wool. Ulysses himself chose the largest ram. They moved toward the mouth of the cave and crowded through. The Cyclops’ hands came down and brushed across the goats’ backs feeling for the men, but the animals were huddled too closely together for him to reach between and search under their bellies. So he let them pass through.

Now the Cyclops rushed to the corner where the goats had been tethered and stamped, searched, and roared through the whole cave again, bellowing with fury when he did not find them. The herd grazed on the slope of the hill beneath the cave. There was a full moon; it was almost bright as day.

“Stay where you are,” Ulysses whispered.

He heard a crashing, peered out, and saw great shadowy figures converging on the cave. He knew that the other Cyclopes of the island must have heard the noise and had come to see. He heard the giant bellow.

The others called to him: “Who has done it? Who has blinded you?”

“Nobody. Nobody did it. Nobody blinded me.”

“Ah, you have done it yourself. What a tragic accident.”

And they went back to their own caves.

“Now!” said Ulysses. “Follow me!”

He swung himself out from under the belly of the ram and raced down the hill. The others raced after him. They were halfway across the valley when they heard great footsteps rushing after them, and Polyphemus bellowing nearer and nearer.

“He’s coming!” cried Ulysses. “Run for your lives!”

They ran as they had never run before, but the giant could cover fifty yards at a stride. It was only because he could not see and kept bumping into trees and rocks that they were able to reach the skiff and push out on the silver water before Polyphemus burst out of the grove of trees and rushed onto the beach. They bent to the oars, and the boat scudded toward the fleet.

Polyphemus heard the dip of the oars and the groaning of the oarlocks and, aiming at the sound, hurled huge boulders after them. They fell all around the ship but did not hit. The skiff reached Ulysses’ ship, and the sailors climbed aboard.

“Haul anchor, and away!” cried Ulysses. And then called to the Cyclops: “Poor fool! Poor blinded, drunken, gluttonous fool—if anyone else asks you, it is not Nobody, but Ulysses who has done this to you.”

But he was to regret this final taunt. The gods honor courage but punish pride.

Polyphemus, wild with rage, waded out chest-deep and hurled a last boulder, which hit mid-deck, almost sunk the ship, and killed most of the crew—among them seven of the nine men who had just escaped.

And Polyphemus prayed to Poseidon: “God of the Sea, I beg you, punish Ulysses for this. Visit him with storm and shipwreck and sorceries. Let him wander many years before he reaches home, and when he gets there let him find himself forgotten, unwanted, a stranger.”

Poseidon heard this prayer and made it all happen just that way.

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Keeper of the Winds

NOW THE BLACK SHIPS beat their way northward from the land of the Cyclopes. And Ulysses, ignorant of the mighty curse that the blind giant had fastened upon him, was beginning to hope that they might have fair sailing the rest of the way home. So impatient was he that he took the helm himself and kept it night and day although his sailors pleaded with him to take some rest. But he was wild with eagerness to get home to his wife Penelope, to his young son Telemachus, and to the dear land of Ithaca that he had not seen for more than ten years now.

At the end of the third night, just as the first light was staining the sky, he saw something very strange—a wall of bronze, tall and wide, floating on the sea and blocking their way. At first he thought it was a trick of the light, and he rubbed his eyes and looked again. But there it was, a towering, bright wall of beaten bronze.

“Well,” he thought to himself, “it cannot stretch across the sea. There must be a way to get around it.”

He began to sail along the wall as though it were the shore of an island, trying to find his way around. Finally, he came to a huge gate, and even as he gazed upon it in amazement, the gate swung open and the wind changed abruptly. The shrouds snapped, the sails bulged, the masts groaned, and all three ships of the fleet were blown through the gate, which immediately clanged shut behind

them. Once within the wall, the wind fell off and Ulysses found his ship drifting toward a beautiful, hilly island. Suddenly there was a great howling of wind. The sun was blown out like a candle. Darkness fell upon the waters. Ulysses felt the deck leap beneath him as the ship was lifted halfway out of the water by the ferocious gust and hurled through the blackness. He tried to shout, but the breath was torn from his mouth, and he lost consciousness.

Ulysses had no way of knowing this, but the mischievous Poseidon had guided his ships to the island fortress of Aeolus, Keeper of the Winds. Ages before, when the world was very new, the gods had become fearful of the terrible strength of the winds and had decided to tame them. So Zeus and Poseidon, working together, had floated an island upon the sea and girdled it about with a mighty bronze wall. Then they set a mountain upon the island and hollowed out that mountain until it was a huge stone dungeon. Into this hollow mountain they stuffed the struggling winds and appointed Aeolus as their jailer. And there the winds were held captive. Whenever the gods wanted to stir up a storm and needed a particular wind, they sent a message to Aeolus, who would draw his sword and stab the side of the mountain, making a hole big enough for the wind to fly through. If the north wind were wanted, he stabbed the north side of the mountain, its east slope for the east wind, and so on. When the storm was done, he would whistle the wind home, and the huge brawling gale, broken by its imprisonment, would crawl back whimpering to its hole.

Aeolus was an enormously fat demigod with a long wind-tangled beard and a red and wind-beaten face. He loved to eat and drink, and fight, play games, and hear stories. Twelve children he had, six boys and six girls. He sent them out one by one, riding the back of the wind around the world, managing the weather for each month.

And it was in the great castle of Aeolus that Ulysses and his men found themselves when they awoke from their enchanted sleep. Invisible hands held torches for them, guided them to the baths, anointed them with oil, and gave them fresh clothing. Then the floating torches led them to the dining hall, where they were greeted by Aeolus and his twelve handsome children. A mighty banquet was laid before them, and they ate like starved men.

Then Aeolus said: “Strangers, you are my guests—uninvited—but guests all the same. By the look of you, you have had adventures and should have fine stories to tell. Yes, I love a tale full of fighting and blood and tricks, and if you have such to tell, then I shall entertain you royally. But if you are such men as sit dumb, glowering, unwilling to please, using your mouths only to stuff food into—then—well, then you are apt to find things less pleasant. You, Captain!” he roared, pointing at Ulysses. “You, sir—I take you for the leader of this somewhat motley crew. Do you have a story to tell?”

“For those who know how to listen, I have a tale to tell,” said Ulysses.

“Your name?”

“Ulysses—of Ithaca.”

“Mmm—yes,” said Aeolus. I seem to recognize that name—believe I heard it on Olympus while my uncles and aunts up there were quarreling about some little skirmish they had interested themselves in. Near Troy I think it was ... Yes-s-s ... Were you there?”

I was there,” said Ulysses. “I was there for ten years, dear host, and indeed took part in some of that petty skirmishing that will be spoken of by men who love courage when this bronze wall and this island, and you and yours, have vanished under the sea and have been forgotten for a thousand years. I am Ulysses. My companions before Troy were Achilles, Menelaus, Agamemnon, mighty heroes all, and, in modesty, I was not least among them.”

“Yes-s-s ...” said Aeolus. “You are bold enough. Too bold for your own good, perhaps. But you have caught my attention, Captain. I am listening. Tell on....”

Then Ulysses told of the Trojan War; of the abduction of Helen, and the chase, and the great battles; the attacks, the retreats, the separate duels. He spoke of Achilles fighting Hector and killing him with a spear thrust, of Paris ambushing Achilles; and, finally, how he himself had made a great hollow wooden horse and had the Greek armies pretend to leave, only to sneak back and hide in the belly of the horse. He told how the Trojans had dragged the horse

within their gates, and how the Greek warriors had crept out at night and taken the city and slaughtered their enemies.

Aeolus shouted with laughter. His face blazed and his belly shook. “Ah, that’s a trick after my own heart!” he cried. “You’re a sharp one, you are ... I knew you had a foxy look about you. Wooden horse—ho ho! Tell more! Tell more!”

Then Ulysses told of his wanderings after the fall of Troy, of his adventure in Lotusland, and what had happened in the Cyclops’ cave. And when Aeolus heard how he had outwitted Polyphemus and blinded his single eye, he struck the table with a mighty blow of his fist and snouted, “Marvelous! A master stroke! By the gods, you are the bravest, craftiest warrior that has ever drunk my wine.” He was especially pleased because he had always hated Polyphemus. He had no way of knowing, of course, that the blinded Cyclops had prayed to his father and had laid a curse on Ulysses, and that he, Aeolus, was being made the instrument of that curse. He did not know this, for the gods move in mysterious ways. And so he roared with laughter and shouted, “You have pleased me, Ulysses. You have told me a brave tale, a tale full of blood and tricks. And now I shall grant you any favor within my power. Speak out, Ulysses. Ask what you will.”

“But one thing I seek, generous Aeolus,” said Ulysses, “your help. I need your help in getting home. For it has been a long, weary time since we saw our homes and our families. Our hearts thirst for the sight of Ithaca.”

“No one can help you better than I,” said Aeolus. “You sail on ships, and I am Keeper of the Winds. Come with me.”

He led Ulysses out into the night. A hot orange moon rode low in the sky, and they could see without torches. Aeolus led him to the mountain, carrying his sword in one hand and a great leather bag in the other. He stabbed the side of the mountain. There was a rushing, sobbing sound; he clapped his leather bag over the hole, and Ulysses, amazed, saw the great bag flutter and fill. Aeolus held its neck closed, strode to the east face of the mountain, and stabbed again. As the east wind rushed out, he caught it in his sack. Then he stomped to the south slope and stabbed again, and caught the south wind in the sack. Now, very carefully, he wound a silver wire about the neck of the sack. It was full now, swollen, tugging at his arm like a huge leather balloon, trying to fly away.

He said, “In this bag are the north wind, the south wind, and the east wind. You must keep them prisoner. But if you wish to change course—if a pirate should chase you, say, or a sea monster, or if an adventure beckons, then you open the bag very carefully—you and you alone, Captain—and whistle up the wind you wish, let just a breath of it out, close the bag quickly again, and tie it tight. For winds grow swiftly—that is their secret—and so they must be carefully guarded.”

“I shall not change course,” said Ulysses. “No matter what enemy threatens or what adventure beckons, I sail straight for Ithaca. I shall not open your bag of winds.”

“Good,” said Aeolus. Then bind it to your mast, and guard it yourself, sword in hand; let none of your men approach, lest they open it unwittingly. In the meantime, I will send the gentle west wind to follow your ship and fill your sails and take you home.”

“Thank you, great Aeolus, thank you, kindly keeper of the winds. I know now that the gods have answered my prayers, and I shall be able to cease this weary, heartbreaking drifting over the face of the sea, having my men killed and eaten, my ships destroyed, and my hopes shattered. I will never cease thanking you, Aeolus, till the day I die.”

“May that sad occasion be far off,” said Aeolus politely. “Now, sir, much as I like your company, you had better gather your men and be off. I shall be uneasy now until my winds return to me and I can shut them in the mountain again.”

Ulysses returned to the castle and called together his men. Gladly they trooped down to the ships and went aboard. Ulysses bound the great leather sack to the mast and warned his crew that no man must touch it on pain of death. Then he himself stood with naked sword under the mast, guarding the sack. “Up anchor!” he cried. The west wind rolled off the mountain and filled their sails. The black ships slipped out of the harbor. Away from the island they sailed, away from the mountain and the castle toward the wall of bronze. When they reached the wall, the great gate swung open and they sailed westward over water oily with moonlight. Westward they sailed for nine days and nine nights. In perfect

weather they skimmed along, the west wind hovering behind them, keeping their sails full, pushing them steadily home.

And for nine nights and nine days, Ulysses did not sleep; he did not close his eyes or sheath his sword. He kept his station under the mast—food and drink were brought to him there—and never for an instant stopped guarding the sack.

Then, finally, on the morning of the ninth day, he heard the lookout cry, “Land Ho!” and strained his eyes to see. What he saw made his heart swell. Tears coursed down his face, but they were tears of joy. For he saw the dear familiar hills of home. He saw the brown fields of Ithaca, the twisted olive trees, and, as he watched, he saw them even more clearly, saw the white marble columns of his own castle on the cliff. And his men, watching, saw the smoke rising from their own chimneys.

When Ulysses saw the white columns of his palace, he knew that unless the west wind failed, they would be home in an hour, but the friendly wind blew steadily as ever. Ulysses heaved a great sigh. The terrible tension that had kept him awake for nine days and nights eased its grip. He raised his arms and yawned. Then he leaned against the mast and closed his eyes, just for a minute.

Two of the men, standing in the bow, saw him slump at the foot of the mast, fast asleep. Their eyes traveled up the mast to the great leather bag, plump as a balloon, straining against its bonds as the impatient winds wrestled inside. Then Poseidon, swimming

invisibly alongside, clinked his golden armlets. The men heard the clinking and thought it came from the bag.

One man said to the other: “Do you hear that? Those are coins, heavy golden coins, clinking against each other. There must be a fortune in that sack.”

The other man said, “Yes, a fortune that should belong to all of us by rights. We shared the danger and should share the loot.”

“It is true,” said the first, “that he has always been generous. He shared the spoils of Troy.”

“Yes, but that was then. Why does he not divide this great sack of treasure? Aeolus gave it to him, and we know how rich he is. Aeolus gave it to him as a guest gift, and he should share it with us.”

“He never will. Whatever is in that bag, he does not mean for us to see it. Did you not observe how he has been guarding it all these nights and all these days, standing there always, eating and drinking where he stands, never sheathing his sword?”

“It is in his sheath now,” said the second sailor. “And his eyes are closed. Look—he sleeps like a babe. I doubt that anything would wake him.”

“What are you doing? What are you going to do with that knife? Are you out of your mind?”

“Yes—out of my mind with curiosity, out of my mind with gold fever, if you must know. Ulysses lies asleep. His sword sleeps in its sheath. And I mean to see what is in that bag.”

“Wait, I’ll help you. But you must give me half.”

“Come then....”

Swiftly and silently the two barefooted sailors padded to the mast, slashed the rope that bound the bag to the spar, and bore it away.

“Hurry—open it!”

“I can’t. This wire’s twisted in a strange knot. Perhaps a magic knot. It won’t come out.”

“Then we’ll do it this way!” cried the sailor with the knife, and struck at the leather bag, slashing it open. He was immediately lifted off his feet and blown like a leaf off the deck and into the sea as the winds rushed howling out of the bag and began to chase each other around the ship. The winds screamed and jeered and laughed, growing, leaping, reveling in their freedom, roaring and squabbling, screeching around and around the ship. They fell on their gentle brother, the west wind, and cuffed him mercilessly until he fled; then they chased each other around the ship again, spinning it like a cork in a whirlpool.

Then, as they heard the far, summoning whistle of the keeper of the winds—far, far to the west on the Aeolian Island—they snarled with rage and roared boisterously homeward, snatching the ships along with them, ripping their sails to shreds, snapping their masts like twigs, and hurling the splintered hulls westward over the boiling sea.

Ulysses awoke from his sleep to find the blue sky black with clouds and his home island dropping far astern, out of sight. He saw his crew flung about the deck like dolls, and the tattered sails and the broken spars, and he did not know whether he was awake or asleep—whether this was some nightmare of loss, or whether he was awake now and had slept before, dreaming a fair dream of home. Whichever it was, he began to understand that he was being made the plaything of great powers.

With the unleashed winds screaming behind him at gale force, the trip back to where they had started took them only two days. And once again the black ships were hurled onto the island of the winds. Ulysses left his crew on the beach and went to the castle. He found Aeolus in his throne room and stood before him, bruised, bloody, clothes torn, eyes like ashes.

“What happened?” cried Aeolus. “Why have you come back?”

I was betrayed,” said Ulysses. “Betrayed by sleep—the most cruel sleep of my life—and then by a wicked, foolish, greedy crew who released the winds from the sack and let us be snatched back from happiness even as we saw the smoke rising from our own chimneys.”

“I warned you,” said Aeolus. “I warned you not to let anyone touch that bag.”

“And you were right, a thousand times right!” cried Ulysses. “Be generous once again. You can heal my woes, you alone. Renew

your gift. Lend me the west wind to bear me home again, and I swear to you that this time I shall do everything you bid.”

“I can’t help you,” said Aeolus. “No one can help he whom the gods detest. And they detest you, man—they hate you. What you call bad luck is their hatred, turning gifts into punishment, fair hopes into nightmares. And bad luck is very catching. So please go. Get on your ship and sail away from this island and never return.”

“Farewell,” said Ulysses, and he strode away.

He gathered his weary men and made them board the ships again. The winds were pent in their mountain. The sea was sluggish. A heavy calm lay over the harbor. They had to row on their broken stumps of oars, crawling like beetles over the gray water. They rowed away from the island, through the bronze gate, and out upon the sullen sea.

And Ulysses, heartbroken, almost dead of grief, tried to hide his feelings from the men; he stood on deck, barking orders, making them mend sail, patch hull, rig new spars, and keep rowing. He took the helm himself and swung the tiller, pointing the bow westward toward home, which, once again, lay at the other end of the sea.

Cannibal Beach

ULYSSES WISHED TO PUT as much open water as possible between him and the Islands of the Winds, but after six days he realized he would have to put into harbor. His ships were in very poor trim. Their hulls were gashed and splintered, the sails tattered, and the men themselves cut and bruised and half dead with fatigue. It was a terrible punishment his fleet had taken from the brawling winds.

As dusk was thickening they made a landfall. The sight of the island pleased Ulysses; it seemed perfect for his purpose. It had a natural basin of tideless water cupped by a smoothly curved outcropping of rock. And as they sailed through the narrow throat of rock into the harbor they saw a marvelous sight. The purple sky deepened to inky blue, to black, then swiftly paled. Orange bars of fire stood in the sky, then a great flooding of golden light, which purpled again and went dark. Ulysses searched the sky; he had never seen anything like this before. For night followed day upon this island like a hound hunting a deer. The sun chased the moon across the bowl of the sky, and the beach darkened and went light again, moved from bright day to blackest night in the time that it takes to eat a meal.

“This is a wonder,” said Ulysses to himself. “And truly, all my life I have sought wonders. But just now I would wish for a more

ordinary course of events. All strangeness holds danger now, and we have had our bellyful of adventure for the time. What I pray for now is a space of days without surprise or wild encounter—to have a fair wind and a calm sea and a swift voyage home. Alas, I fear it is not yet to be. I fear this Island of the Racing Sun. And yet I must land here and mend my ships and rest my crew.”

The Greek warriors beached their ships and dragged them onto the shore. But according to his prudent custom, Ulysses beached only two ships, keeping one moored in the harbor in the event of attack. Ulysses spoke his orders; the men broke into groups and began to work. Some built fires and began to cook food, others mended sail, some caulked hulls, and sentries kept watch.

“Climb that tail tree there,” Ulysses said to one of his men. “Climb to the top and look about, then come down and tell me what you see.”

It’s too dark to see,” said the sailor.

“You forget where we are,” said Ulysses. “Here night chases day, and day pursues night. There will be light enough by the time you reach the top.”

The man went off to climb the tree. Ulysses stalked about inspecting the work being done on the ships. The sky paled; dawn bloomed. But the sailor had not returned.

“Odd,” said Ulysses. “He must be asleep up there.” And he dispatched another sailor to climb the tree to see what happened to

the first one.

The shadows were lengthening. The sky shed its gold; shadows yawned and swallowed the light. It was night, and the second sailor had not returned. Ulysses frowned and sent a third man to climb the tree. Then he kept guard there on the beach, in the firelight, eyes narrowed, beard bristling, like a great cat waiting.

The sun minted itself again in the sky; morning flashed. The third sailor had not returned. Ulysses decided to climb the tree himself. It was a good half-mile from where he stood, a huge solitary tree stretching up, up. When he reached it he saw that its bark was wrinkled in a most curious way; it fell in soft brown folds unlike any bark he had ever seen. And when he grasped the tree to climb it, the bark felt like a heavy cloth beneath his hands. But it made climbing easy. Up and up he went; up, up in the thickening darkness, climbing with the ease of a man of the Middle Sea who had begun to climb masts as soon as he could walk.

He climbed and climbed, rested, and climbed again. Suddenly he heard a mumbling, chuckling sound as if some beast were crouching in the branches above. He stopped climbing and peered upward. He could see no branches. Reaching up he felt a hairy foliage grazing his fingers. He clung there to the branch, right where he was, not moving, until the blackness thinned, and he began to see.

He had been climbing through darkness; now he saw against the paler sky toward what he had been climbing. The hairy foliage

was a beard. A huge bushy beard, hanging some forty feet above the ground. Above that beard was a grinning of enormous teeth; above the teeth the muddy gleam of eyes as large as portholes. Ulysses' head swam with fear. Fear pried at his legs and arms, and he had to clutch the trunk with all his strength to keep from falling. But it was no trunk. He had been climbing no tree. It was a giant's leg he had been climbing, and the clothlike bark was cloth indeed, the stuff of its garment. And he realized then that the three sailors he had sent aloft had climbed to a mumbling death.

Ulysses thanked the gods then that he had begun his climb in darkness, for he understood that the giant slept standing, like a horse, and that his eyes were not yet adjusted to the new light. That is why the huge slab of hand he saw swinging there now had not trapped him like a fly. He loosened his grasp and slid down so swiftly that he tore the skin off his hands. But he was mindless of pain. He hit the ground and raised a great shout. "To the ships!" he cried. "To the ships!"

But it was too late. The sun was burning in the sky and there was too much light. A brutal bellowing yell shattered the air, and the men, paralyzed with fear, whimpering like puppies, saw a mob of giants, tall as trees, trooping toward them over the hills. And before Ulysses could rally his terrified men, the giants were upon them, trampling the ships like twigs, scooping the men up and popping them into their mouths like children eating berries.

Ulysses did not lose his wits. Fear turned to anger in him, and anger became an icy flame that quickened him. His sword was scything the air; he hacked away at the giant hands that came at him like a flock of huge meaty gulls. He whipped his blade at their fingers, hacking them off at the knuckle joints. His sword smoked with blood.

Inspired by the sight of him fencing with the giant fingers, a small group of his men gathered around and made a hedge of steel. They hacked their way through the great grasping hands to the edge of the sea, then followed Ulysses into the water and swam to the single ship that they had left moored in the harbor. Luckily the swift night was falling again, and they were shielded by darkness. They heard the huge snuffling noise of the giants feasting upon their shipmates, but there was nothing they could do except try to save themselves. The night had brought an offshore wind. Swiftly they raised sail and darted through the throat of rock out into the open sea.

Of the three ships that had gone in, only one sailed away. Of the three crews but one was left. The others had gone down the gullets of the giants who lived on that strange island where night hounds the golden stag of the day across the indifferent sky.

Circe

NOW, AFTER BATTLING THE giant cannibals on the Island of the Racing Sun, Ulysses found himself with only forty-five men left from his crew of one hundred. He was determined to bring these men home safely or die himself.

They were sailing northward again, and on the third day came in sight of land, low-lying, heavily wooded, with a good sheltering harbor. Although they had met terrible treatment everywhere they had landed since leaving Troy, they were out of food, water was running low, and once again they would have to risk the perils of the land.

Ulysses was very cautious. He moored the ship offshore and said to the crew:

“I shall go ashore myself—alone—to see what there is to see and make sure there are no terrible hosts, giants, man-eating ogres, or secret sorceries. If I am not back by nightfall, Eurylochus will act as captain. Then he will decide whether to seek food and water here or sail onward. Farewell.”

He lowered a small boat and rowed toward the island, all alone. He beached his skiff and struck inland. The first thing he wanted to do was find out whether he was on an island, or the spur of a mainland. He climbed a low hill, then climbed to the top of a tree that grew on the hill. He was high enough now for a clear

view, and he turned slowly, marking the flash of the sea on all sides. He knew that once again they had landed on an island and that the ship was their only means of escape if danger should strike.

Something caught his eye. He squinted thoughtfully at what looked like a feather of smoke rising from a grove of trees. The trees were too thick for him to see through. He climbed down and picked his way carefully toward the smoke, trying to make as little noise as possible. He came to a stand of mighty trees—oak trees, thick and tall with glossy leaves. Glimmering through the trees he saw what looked like a small castle made of polished gray stone. He did not dare go near, for he heard strange howling sounds, a pack of dogs, perhaps, but different from any dogs he had ever heard. So he left the grove and made his way back toward the beach, thinking hard, trying to decide whether to sail away immediately or take a chance on the inhabitants being friendly. He did not like the sound of that howling. There was something in it that froze his marrow. He decided that he would not risk his men on the island but that he would return to the ship, raise anchor, and sail away to seek food elsewhere.

Just then a tall white deer with mighty antlers stepped across his path. The great stag had a bearing proud as a king and did not deign to run but walked on haughtily as if he knew no one would dare to attack him. Unfortunately for the stag, however, Ulysses was too hungry to be impressed by any animal's own opinion of himself. The warrior raised his bronze spear and flung it with all

the power of his knotted arm. It sang through the air, pierced the stag's body, and nailed him to a tree. The stag died standing up, still in his pride. He was a huge animal, so large that Ulysses feared he could not carry him back to the ship unaided. But then he remembered how hungry his men were, and he decided to try. He picked weeds and wove a rope, which he twisted and twisted again until it was as strong as a ship's line. Then he bound the stag's legs together, swung the great carcass up onto his back, and staggered off using his spear as a cane.

He was at the end of his strength when he reached the beach and let the deer slip to the sand. He signaled to his men, who left the ship moored and came ashore on five small boats. They raised a mighty shout of joy when they saw the dead stag. All hands fell to. In a twinkling the deer was skinned and cut up. Fires were lighted, and the delicious smell of roasting meat drew the gulls to the beach, screaming and dipping, begging for scraps.

The men gorged themselves, then lay on the sand to sleep. Ulysses, himself, kept guard. All that night he stood watch, leaning on his spear, looking at the moon, which hung in the sky like an orange and paled as it climbed. As he watched, he turned things over in his mind, trying to decide what to do. While he was still bothered by the eerie howling of the mysterious animals at the castle, still, with his belly full, he felt less gloomy. The more he thought about it the wiser it seemed to explore the island thoroughly and try to determine whether it was a friendly place or

not. For never before had he seen a deer so large. If there was one, there must be more; and with game like that the ship could be provisioned in a few days. Also the island was full of streams from which they could fill their dry casks with pure water.

“Yes,” he said to himself, “perhaps our luck has changed. Perhaps the god that was playing with us so spitefully has found other amusements. Yes, we will explore this island and see what there is to see.”

Next morning he awakened his men and divided them into two groups, one led by himself, the other by Eurylochus. He said to Eurylochus: “There is a castle on this island. We must find out who lives there. If he be friendly, or not too strong a foe, we will stay here and hunt and lay in water until the hold be full; then we will depart. Now choose, Eurylochus. Would you rather stay here with your men and guard the ship while I visit the castle—or would you rather I keep the beach? Choose.”

“O Ulysses,” Eurylochus said. “I am sick of the sight of the sea. Even as my belly hungers for food, so do my eyes hunger for leaves and trees which might recall our dear Ithaca. And my foot longs to tread something more solid than a deck—a floor that does not pitch and toss and roll. Pray, gentle Ulysses, let me and my men try the castle.”

“Go,” said Ulysses, “May the gods go with you.”

So Eurylochus and twenty-two men set out, while Ulysses guarded the ship. As the band of warriors approached the castle,

they too heard a strange howling. Some of them drew their swords. Others notched arrows to their bowstrings. They pressed on, preparing to fight. They passed through the grove of oak trees and came to where the trees thinned. Here the howling grew louder and wilder. Then, as they passed the last screen of trees and came to the courtyard of the shining gray castle, they saw an extraordinary sight—a pack of wolves and lions running together like dogs—racing about the courtyard, howling.

When they caught sight of the men, the animals turned and flung themselves upon the strangers, so swiftly that no man had time to use his weapon. The great beasts stood on their hind legs and put their forepaws on the men's shoulders, and fawned on them and licked their faces. They voiced low, muttering, growling whines. Eurylochus, who stood half-embracing a huge tawny lion, said, "Men, it is most strange. For these fearsome beasts greet us as though we were lost friends. They seem to be trying to speak to us. And look—look—at their eyes! How intelligently they gleam, how sadly they gaze. Not like beasts' eyes at all."

"It is true," said one of the men. "But perhaps there is nothing to fear. Perhaps there is reason to take heart. For if wild beasts are so tame and friendly, then perhaps the master of the castle, whoever he is or whatever he is, will be friendly too, and welcome us, and give us good cheer."

"Come," said Eurylochus. When they reached the castle gate, they stopped and listened. For they heard a woman singing in a

lovely, deep, full-throated voice, so that without seeing the woman they knew she was beautiful. Eurylochus said, “Men, you go into the castle and see what is to be seen. I will stay here and make sure you are not surprised.”

“What do you mean? You come with us. Listen to that. There can be no danger where there is such song.”

“Yes, everything seems peaceful,” said Eurylochus. “The wild animals are friendly. Instead of the clank of weapons, we hear a woman singing. And it may be peaceful. But something says to me, be careful, take heed. Go you, then. I stay on guard. If I am attacked, and you are unharmed, come to my aid. If anything happens to you, then I shall take word back to Ulysses.”

So Eurylochus stood watch at the castle gate—sword in one hand, dagger in the other, bow slung across his back—and the rest of the men entered the castle. They followed the sound of singing through the rooms and out onto a sunny terrace. There sat a woman weaving. She sat at a huge loom, larger than they had ever seen, and wove a gorgeous tapestry. As she wove, she sang. The bright flax leaped through her fingers as if it were dancing to the music in her voice. The men stood and stared. The sun seemed to be trapped in her hair, so bright it was; she wore it long, falling to her waist. Her dress was as blue as the summer sky, matching her eyes. Her long white arms were bare to the shoulders. She stood up and greeted them. She was very tall. And the men, looking at her and

listening to her speak, began to believe that they were in the presence of a goddess.

She seemed to read thoughts, too, for she said, “No, I am not a goddess. But I am descended from the Immortals. I am Circe, granddaughter of Helios, a sun-god, who married Perse, daughter of Oceanus. So what am I—wood nymph, sea nymph, something of both? Or something more? I can do simple magic and prophesy, weave certain homely enchantments, and read dreams. But let us not speak of me, but of you, strangers. You are adventurers, I see, men of the sword, men of the black-prowed ships, the hawks of the sea. And you have come through sore, sad times and seek a haven here on this western isle. So be it I welcome you. For the sweetest spell Circe weaves is one called hospitality. I will have baths drawn for you, clean garments laid out. And when you are refreshed, you shall come and dine. For I love brave men and the tales they tell.”

When the men had bathed and changed, Circe gave them each a red bowl. And into each bowl she put yellow food—a kind of porridge made of cheese, barley, honey, and wine plus a few secret things known only to herself. The odor that rose from the red bowls was more delicious than anything they had ever smelled before. And as each man ate, he felt himself sinking into his hunger, *becoming* his hunger—lapping, panting, grunting, snuffling. Circe passed among them, smiling, filling the bowls again and again. And the men, waiting for their bowls to be filled, looking about, seeing

each other's faces smeared with food, thought, "How strange. We're eating like pigs."

Even as the thought came, it became more true. For as Circe passed among them now she touched each one on the shoulder with a wand, saying: "Glut and swink, eat and drink, gobble food and guzzle wine. Too rude, I think, for humankind, quite right, I think, for *swine!*"

As she said these words in her lovely, laughing voice, the men dwindled. Their noses grew wide and long, became snouts. Their hair hardened into bristles; their hands and feet became hooves, and they ran about on all fours, sobbing and snuffling, searching the floor for bones and crumbs. But all the time they cried real tears from their little red eyes, for they were pigs only in form; their minds remained unchanged, and they knew what was happening to them.

Circe kicked them away from the table. "To the sties!" she cried. She struck them with her wand, herding them out of the castle into a large sty. And there she flung them acorns and chestnuts and red berries and watched them grubbing in the mud for the food she threw. She laughed a wild, bright laugh and went back into the castle.

While all this was happening, Eurylochus was waiting at the gate. When the men did not return he crept up to a bow slit in the castle wall and looked in. It was dark now. He saw the glimmer of torchlight and the dim shape of a woman at a loom, weaving. He

heard a voice singing, the same enchanting voice he had heard before. But of his men he saw nothing. Nor did he hear their voices. A great fear seized him. He raced off as fast as he could, hoping against hope that the beasts would not howl. The wolves and lions stood like statues, walked like shadows. Their eyes glittered with cold moonlight, but none of them uttered a sound.

He ran until the breath strangled in his throat, until his heart tried to crack out of his ribs, but he kept running, stumbling over roots, slipping on stones. He ran and ran until he reached the beach and fell swooning in Ulysses' arms. Then with his last breath he gasped out the story, told Ulysses of the lions and the wolves, of the woman singing in the castle, and how the men had gone in and not come out. And then he slipped into blackness.

Ulysses said to his men: "You hear the story Eurylochus tells. I must go to the castle and see what has happened to your companions. But there is no need for you to risk yourselves. You stay here. And if I do not return by sunfall tomorrow, then you must board the ship and sail away, for you will know that I am dead."

The men wept and pleaded with him not to go, but he said: "I have sworn an oath that I will never leave another man behind if there is any way I can prevent it. Farewell, dear friends."

It was dawn by the time he found himself among the oak trees near the castle. He heard the first faint howling of the animals in the courtyard. And as he walked through the rose and gray light, a figure started up before him—a slender youth in golden

breastplates and a golden hat with wings on it, holding a golden staff. Ulysses fell to his knees.

“Why do you kneel, venerable sir?” said the youth. “You are older than I, and a mighty warrior. You should not kneel.”

“Ah, pardon,” cried Ulysses. “I have sharp eyes for some things. Behind your youth—so fair—I see time itself stretching to the beginning of things. Behind your slenderness I sense the power of a god. Sweet youth, beautiful lad, I know you. You are Hermes, the swift one, the messenger god. I pray you have come with good tidings for me, because I fear that I have offended the gods, or one of them anyway, and he has vowed vengeance upon me.”

“It is true,” said Hermes. “Somebody up there doesn’t like you. Can’t say who, not ethical, you know. But if you *should* suspect that he may have something to do with the management of sea matters, well, you’re a good guesser, that’s all.”

“Poseidon ... I have offended Poseidon,” muttered Ulysses, “the terrible one, the earth shaker.”

“Well,” said Hermes, “what do you expect? That unpleasant Cyclops whom you first blinded, then taunted, is Poseidon’s son, you know. Not a son to be proud of, but blood is thicker than water, as they say, even in the god of the sea. So Polyphemus tattled to his father and asked him to do dreadful things to you, which, I’m afraid, he’s been doing. Now, this castle you’re going to is Circe’s and she is a very dangerous person to meet—a sorceress, a doer of magical mischief. And she is waiting for you, Ulysses. She sits at

her loom, weaving, waiting. For you. She has already entertained your shipmates. Fed them. Watched them making pigs of themselves. And, finally, she helped them on their way a bit. In brief, they are now in a sty, being fattened. And one day they will make a most excellent meal for someone not too fussy. Among Circe's guests are many peculiar feeders."

"Thunder and lightning!" cried Ulysses. "What can I do!"

"Listen and learn," said Hermes. "I have come to help you. Poseidon's wrath does not please all of us, you know. We gods have our moods, and they're not always kind, but somehow or other we must keep things balanced. And so I have come to help you. You must do exactly as I say, or nothing can help you. Now listen closely. First, take this."

He snapped his fingers and a flower appeared between them. It was white and heavily scented, with a black and yellow root. He gave it to Ulysses.

"It is called *moly*," he said. "It is magical. So long as you carry it, Circe's drugs will not work. You will go to the castle. She will greet you and feed you. You will eat the food which, to her amazement, will leave you unharmed. Then you will draw your sword and advance upon her as though you meant to kill her. Then she will see that you have certain powers and will begin to plead with you. She will unveil enchantments more powerful than any she has yet used. Resist them you cannot, nor can any man, nor any god. Nor is there any counterspell that will work against such

beauty. But if you wish to see your home again, if you wish to rescue your shipmates from the sty, you must resist her long enough to make her swear the great oath of the immortals—that she will not do you any harm as long as you are her guest. That is all I can do for you. From now on, it is up to you. We shall be watching you with interest. Farewell.” The golden youth disappeared just as a ray of sunlight does when a cloud crosses the face of the sun. Ulysses shook his head, wondering whether he had really seen the god or imagined him, but then he saw that he was still holding the curious flower, and he knew that Hermes had indeed been there. So he marched on toward the castle, through the pack of lions and wolves, who leaped about him, fawning, looking at him with their great intelligent eyes and trying to warn him in their snarling, growling voices. He stroked their heads, passed among them, and went into the castle.

And here, he found Circe, sitting at her loom, weaving and singing. She wore a white tunic now and a flame-colored scarf and was as beautiful as the dawn. She stood up and greeted him, saying:

“Welcome, stranger. I live here alone and seldom see anyone and almost never have guests. So you are triply welcome, great sea-stained warrior, for I know that you have seen battle and adventure and have tales to tell.”

She drew him a warm, perfumed bath, and her servants bathed and anointed him and gave him clean garments to wear. When he

came to her, she gave him a red bowl full of yellow food and said, “Eat.” The food smelled delicious; its fragrance was intoxicating. Ulysses felt that he wanted to plunge his face into it and grub it up like a pig, but he held the flower tightly, kept control of himself, and ate slowly. He did not quite finish the food. “Delicious,” he said. “Your own recipe?”

“Yes,” she said. “Will you not finish?”

“I am not quite so hungry as I thought”

“Then drink. Here’s wine.” She turned her back to him as she poured the wine, and he knew that she was casting a powder in it. He smiled to himself and drank off the wine, then said: “Delicious. Your own grapes?”

“You look weary, stranger,” she said. “Sit and talk with me.”

“Gladly,” said Ulysses. “We have much to speak of, you and I. I’m something of a farmer myself. I breed cattle on my own little island of Ithaca, where I’m king—when I’m home. Won’t you show me your livestock?”

“Livestock? I keep no cattle here.”

“Oh, do you not? I fancied I heard pigs squealing out there. Must have been mistaken.”

“Yes,” said Circe. “Badly mistaken.”

“But you do have interesting animals. I was much struck by the wolves and lions who course in a pack like dogs—very friendly for such savage beasts.”

“I have taught them to be friendly,” said Circe. “I am friendly myself, you see, and I like all the members of my household to share my goodwill.”

“Their eyes,” said Ulysses. “I was struck by their eyes—so big and sad and clever. You know, as I think of it, they looked like ... human eyes.”

“Did they?” said Circe. “Well—the eyes go last.”

She came to him swiftly, raised her wand, touched him on the shoulder, and said: “Change, change, change! Turn, turn, turn!”

Nothing happened. Her eyes widened when she saw him sitting there, unchanged, sniffing at the flower he had taken from his tunic. He took the wand from her gently and snapped it in two. Then drawing his sword, he seized her by her long golden hair and forced her to her knees, pulling her head until her white throat was offered the blade of the sword. Then he said: “You have not asked me my name. It is Ulysses. I am an unlucky man but not altogether helpless. You have changed my men into pigs. Now I will change you into a corpse.”

She did not flinch before the blade. Her great blue eyes looked into his. She took the sharp blade in her hand, stroked it gently, and said:

“It is almost worth dying to be overcome by so mighty a warrior. But I think living might be interesting, too, now that I have met you.”

He felt her fingers burning the cold metal of the sword as if the blade had become part of his body. He tried to turn his head but sank deeper into the blueness of her eyes.

“Yes, I am a sorceress,” she murmured, “a wicked woman. But you are a sorcerer, too, are you not? Changing me more than I have changed your men, for I changed only their bodies and you have changed my soul. It is no longer a wicked plotting soul but soft and tender and womanly, full of love for you.”

Her voice throbbed. She stroked the sword blade. He raised her to her feet and said:

“You are beautiful enough to turn any man into an animal. I will love you. But even before I am a man, I am a leader. My men are my responsibility. Before we can love each other I must ask you to swear the great oath that you will not harm me when I am defenseless, that you will not wound me and suck away my blood as witches do, but will treat me honestly, and that, first of all, you will restore my men to their own forms and let me take them with me when I am ready to leave.”

“I will try to see that you are never ready,” said Circe softly.

Circe kept her promise. The next morning she took Ulysses out to the sty and called the pigs. They came trotting up, snuffing and grunting. As they streamed past her, rushing to Ulysses, she touched each one on the shoulder with her wand. As she did so, each pig stood up, his hind legs grew longer, his front hooves became hands, his eyes grew, his nose shrank, his quills softened

into hair, and he was his human self once more, only grown taller and younger.

The men crowded around Ulysses, shouting and laughing. He said to them: “Welcome, my friends. You have gone a short but ugly voyage to the animal state. And while you have returned—looking very well—it is clear that we are in a place of sorceries and must conduct ourselves with great care. Our enchanting hostess, Circe, has become so fond of our company that she insists we stay awhile. This, indeed, is the price of your release from hogdom. So you will now go down to your shipmates on the beach and tell them what has happened. Ask them to secure the ship and then return here with you to the castle. It is another delay in our journey, but it is far better than what might have been. Go, then.”

The men trooped happily down to the harbor and told the others what had happened. At first, Eurylochus protested. “How do I know,” he said, “That you are not still under enchantment? How do I know that this is not some new trick of the sorceress to get us all into her power, turn us all to pigs, and keep us in the sty forever?”

But the other men paid no heed to his warning. They were eager to see the castle and the beautiful witch, to taste the delicious food, and enjoy all the luxuries their friends had described. So they obeyed Ulysses’ commands. They dragged the ship up on the beach, beyond reach of the tide, unstepped its mast, then marched

off laughing and singing toward the castle, carrying mast and oars and folded sail. Eurylochus followed, but he was afraid.

For some time, things went well. Ulysses and Circe lived as husband and wife. The men were treated as welcome guests. They feasted for hours each night in the great dining hall. And as they ate, they were entertained by minstrels singing, by acrobats, dancing bears, and dancing girls. During the day they swam in the ocean, hunted wild boar, threw the discus, had archery and spear-throwing contests, raced, jumped, and wrestled. Then as dusk drew in they returned to the castle for their warm, perfumed baths and bowls of hot wine before the feasting began again.

As for Ulysses, he found himself falling deeper under Circe's spell every day. Thoughts of home were dim now. He barely remembered his wife's face. Sometimes he would think of days gone by and wonder when he could shake off this enchantment and resume his voyage. Then she would look at him. And her eyes, like blue flame, burned these pictures out of his head. Then he could not rest until he was within the scent of her hair, the touch of her hand. And he would whimper impatiently like a dog dreaming, shake his head, and go to her.

"It is most curious," she said. "But I love you more than all my other husbands."

"In the name of heaven, how many have you had?" he cried.

"Ah, don't say it like that. Not so many, when you consider. I have been a frequent widow, it is true. But, please understand, I am

god-descended on both sides. I am immortal and cannot die. I have lived since the beginning of things.”

“Yes. How many husbands have you had?”

“Please, my dear, be fair. Gods have loved me, and satyrs and fauns and centaurs, and other creatures who do not die. But I, I have always had a taste for humankind. My favorite husbands have been men, human men. They, you see, grow old so quickly, and I am alone again. And time grows heavy and breeds mischief.”

“How many husbands have you buried, dear widow?”

“Buried? Why, none.”

“I see. You cremate them.”

“I do not let them die. I cannot bear dead things. Especially if they are things I have loved. Of all nature’s transformations, death seems to me the most stupid. No, I do not let them die. I change them into animals, and they roam this beautiful island forevermore. And I see them every day and feed them with my own hand.”

“That explains those wolves and lions in the courtyard, I suppose.”

“Ah, they are only the best, the cream, the mightiest warriors of ages gone. But I have had lesser husbands. They are now rabbits, squirrels, boars, cats, spiders, frogs, and monkeys. That little fellow there”—she pointed to a silvery little ape who was prancing and gibbering on top of the bedpost—“he who pelts you with walnut shells every night. He was very jealous, very busy and jealous, and

still is. I picked their forms, you see, to match their dispositions. Is it not thoughtful of me?"

"Tell me," said Ulysses, "when I am used up, will I be good enough to join your select band of wolves and lions, or will I be something less? A toad, perhaps, or a snail?"

"A fox, undoubtedly," she said. "With your swiftness and your cunning ways—oh, yes, a fox. A king of foxes." She stroked his beard. "But you are the only man who ever withstood my spells," she said. "You are my conqueror, a unique hero. It is not your fate to stay with me. It is not my happy fate to arrange your last hours."

"Is it not?" said Ulysses.

"No," she said. "Unless you can wipe out of your mind all thoughts of home. Unless you can erase all dreams of battle and voyage, unless you can forget your men and release me from my oath and let them become animals, contented animals, then and then only, can you remain with me as husband forever. And I will give you of my immortality. Yes, that can be arranged. I know how. You will share my immortality and live days of sport and idleness and nights of love. And we will live together always, knowing no other, and we will never grow old."

"Can such a thing be?"

"Yes. But the decision is yours. I have sworn an oath and cannot keep you against your will. If you choose, you can remain here with me and make this island a paradise of pleasure. If not, you must resume your voyage and encounter dangers more

dreadful than any you have seen yet. You will watch friends dying before your eyes, have your own life imperiled a hundred times, be battered, bruised, torn, wave-tossed, all this, if you leave me. But it is for you to decide.”

Ulysses stood up and strode to the edge of the terrace. From where he stood he could see the light dancing in a million hot little needles on the blue water. In the courtyard he saw the wolves and the lions. Beyond the courtyard, at the edge of the wood, he saw his men, happy-looking, healthy, tanned; some were wrestling, some flinging spears, others drawing the bow. Circe had crossed to her loom and was weaving, weaving and singing. He remembered his wife. She also, at home in Ithaca, would sit and weave. But how different she looked. Her hair was no fleece of burning gold, but black. She was much smaller than Circe, and she did not sing. “I have decided,” he said. “I must go.”

“Must you?”

“Yes.”

“First let me tell you what the gods have decreed. If you sail away from this island, you cannot head for home. First you must go to the Land of the Dead.”

“The Land of the Dead?” cried Ulysses. “No! No! It cannot be!”

“To the Land of the Dead. To Tartarus. This is the decree. You must go there with all your men. And there you must consult certain ghosts, of whom you will be told, and they will prophesy

for you and plan your homeward journey. And theirs is the route you must follow if you wish to see Ithaca again.”

“The Land of the Dead, dark Tartarus, the realm of torment from which no mortal returns. Must I go there?”

“Unless you stay with me here, in peace, in luxury, in every pleasure but that of adventure.”

“It cannot be,” said Ulysses. “As you, beautiful sorceress, choose a form for your lovers that matches their natures and which they must wear when they are no longer men, so the Fates, with their shears, have cut out my destiny. It is danger, toil, battle, uncertainty. And, though I stop and refresh myself now and again, still must I resume my voyage, for that is my nature. And to fit my nature has fate cut the pattern of my days.”

“Go quickly,” said Circe. “Call your men and depart. For if you stay here any longer, I shall forget all duty. I shall break my oath and keep you here by force and never let you go. Quickly then, brave one, quickly!”

Ulysses summoned his men and led them down to the beach. They stepped the mast, rigged the sails, and sailed away. They caught a northwest puff. The sails filled and the black ship ran out of the harbor. Ulysses’ face was wet with Circe’s last tears and his heart was very heavy. But then spray dashed into his face with the old remembered bright shock, and he laughed.

The last sound the men heard as the ship threaded through the mouth of the harbor and ran for the open sea was the howling of

the lions and wolves who had followed them down to the beach. They stood now breast-deep in the surf, gazing after the white sail, crying their loneliness.

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The Land of the Dead

IN THOSE DAYS MEN knew that the Ocean Stream was a huge river girdling the earth. Hades' kingdom, dark Tartarus, was presumed to be on the farther shore, over the edge of the visible world. But no one could be certain, for those who went there did not return.

Now it had been foretold by Circe that Ulysses would have to visit the Land of the Dead and be advised by wise ghosts before he could resume his journey and find his way back to Ithaca. So he turned his bow westward; and a strong east wind caught his white sails and sent the ship skimming toward waters no ship had sailed before.

Night tumbled from the sky and set its blackness on the sea and would not lift. The ship sailed blindly. The men were clamped in a nameless grief. They could hardly bear the sound of their own voices but spoke to each other in whispers. The night wore on and did not give way to dawn. There were no stars, no moon. They sailed westward and waited for dawn, but no crack of light appeared in the sky. The darkness would not lift.

Once again Ulysses lashed himself to the tiller and stuck splinters of wood in his eye sockets to prop the weary lids. And, finally, after a week of night, a feeble light did curdle the sky—not a regular dawn, no joyous burst of sun, but a grudging milky

grayness that floated down and thickened into fog. Still Ulysses did not dare to sleep, for day was no better than night; no man could see in the dense woolly folds of fog.

Still the east wind blew, pushing them westward through the curdling mist, and still Ulysses did not dare give over the helm. For he had heard that the westward rim of the world was always fog-girt, and was studded by murderously rocky islets, where dwelt the Cimmerians, who waited quietly in the fog for ships to crack upon their shores and deliver to them their natural food, shipwrecked sailors. Finally, Ulysses knew he could not keep awake any longer; yet he knew too that to give over the helm to anyone else meant almost certain death for them all. So he sent a sailor named Elpenor to climb the mast and try to see some distance ahead. No sooner had Elpenor reached the top of the mast than the ship yawed sharply. Ulysses lost his footing and stumbled against the mast.

No one saw Elpenor fall. The fog was too thick. But they heard his terrible scream turned into a choking gurgle. And they knew that he had been shaken from the mast and had fallen into the sea and been drowned. No sooner had his voice gone still than the fog thinned. They could see from one end of the ship to the other—the wet sails, the shining spar, each other's wasted faces. A white gull rose screaming and flew ahead of them.

“Follow that gull,” said Ulysses. “He will lead us where we must go.”

Then he stretched himself on the deck and went to sleep. Whereupon the crew began to whisper among themselves that the gull was the spirit of their shipmate, Elpenor, and that Ulysses had shaken him from the mast purposely, as one shakes fruit from a tree, so that he might fall in the water and be drowned, giving them the white flight of his spirit to follow to Tartarus.

“He has murdered our shipmate,” they whispered to each other, “as he will murder us all to gain his ends.”

But they did not dare say it loud enough to awaken Ulysses.

All day they sailed, following the white flash of the gull, and when night came there were no stars and no moon, nothing but choking blackness. Ulysses took the helm again. But now the bow tipped forward and the stern arose, and the ship slipped through the water with a rushing, rustling speed as if it were sailing downhill. The men clung to the shrouds and wept, groaned, and pleaded with Ulysses to change course. But he answered them not at all. He planted his feet and gripped the tiller with all his strength, as the deck tilted and the ship slipped down, down....

“Who has ever heard of the sea sloping?” he said to himself. Truly this must be the waterway to the underworld, and we are the first keel to cut these fathoms. May the gods grant we cross them again going the other way.”

There was a roaring of waters. The deck leveled. They sailed out of darkness as through a curtain and found themselves in a strange place. The sea had narrowed to a river, the water was black,

and the sky was black, curving downward like the inside of a bowl; the light was gray. Tall trees grew along the bank of the river—black poplars and white birches. And Ulysses knew that the black river was the Styx, and that he had sailed his ship into the Kingdom of the Dead.

There was no wind, but the sails remained strangely taut, and the ship floated easily into harbor, as if some invisible hand had taken the helm.

Ulysses bade his men disembark. He led them past a fringe of trees to a great meadow where black goats cropped black grass. He drew his sword and scraped out a shallow trench, then had his men cut the throats of two black goats and hold them over the trench until it was filled with blood. For it was ghosts he had come to counsel with, and ghosts, he knew, came only where they could find fresh blood to drink, hoping always to fill their dry veins.

The meadow was still. No birds sang. There was no shrill of insects; the goats did not bleat. The men were too frightened to breathe. Ulysses waited, leaning on his sword, gloomily watching the trench of blood. Then he heard a rustling and saw the air thicken into spouts of steam. Steamy shapes separated, heads and shoulders of mist leaning over the trench to drink, growing more solid as they drank.

One raised its head and looked at him. He shuddered. It was his mother, Anticleia.

“Greetings, Mother. How do you fare?”

“Poorly, son. I am dead, dead, dead. I kept telling you I would die one day, but you never believed me. Now you see. But do you see? Say you see.”

A thin tittering arose from the ghosts, and they spoke in steamy whispers.

“What are you doing here, man? You’re still alive. Go and die properly and come back, and we will welcome you.”

“Silence!” cried Ulysses. “I come for better counsel than this. I must find my way back to Ithaca past the mighty wrath of a god who reaches his strong hand and swirls the sea as a child does a mud puddle, dashing my poor twig of a ship from peril to grim peril. I need good counsel to get home. Where is the sage, Teiresias? Why is he not here to greet me?”

“Coming—coming—He is blind but he smells blood as far as any.”

“Do not drink it all. Save some for him.”

And Ulysses smote the ghosts with his sword, driving them back, whimpering, from the trench of blood.

But then, striding across the meadow, came certain ghosts in armor. Ulysses bowed low.

“Welcome, O Fox of War,” cried the ghost of Achilles. “Tell me, do men remember me in Arcadia?”

“The gods have not allowed me to set foot upon our dear islands,” said Ulysses. “But on whatever savage shore I am thrown there are those who know the name of great Achilles. Your fame

outshines all warriors who have ever handled weapons. And your son, Neoptolemus, is a hero, too.”

“Thank you, Ulysses,” said the ghost of Achilles. “Your words are fair and courteous, as always. Now, heed this: When you leave this place, you will sail past an island where you will hear the voices of maidens singing. And the sound of their singing will be sweeter than memories of home, and when your men hear them, their wits will be scattered, and they will wish to dive overboard and swim to shore. If they do, they will perish. For these maidens are a band of witch sisters—music-mad sisters—who lure sailors to the rocks so that they may flay them and make drums of their skin and flutes of their bones. They are the Siren sisters. When you pass their shore, steer clear, steer clear.”

“Thank you, great Achilles.”

Next to Achilles stood a huge ghost staring at Ulysses out of empty eye sockets. He was a giant skeleton. He wore a cloak of stiffened blood and a red plume upon his skull. His spear and sword were made of bone, too. He was Ajax.

“You tricked me, Ulysses,” he said. “When great Achilles here fell on the field of battle, you claimed his golden armor by craft, when I should have had it, I ... I ... You took the golden armor that my heart desired and drove me mad with rage, so that I butchered cattle and captives, and then killed myself. I hate you, sly one, and have this bad news for you: If you ever do reach Ithaca, you will find your wife being courted by other men, your son a captive in

your own castle, your substance devoured. This is my word to you, Ulysses. So you had simply better fall on your sword now where you stand and save another trip to Hades.”

“Thank you, great Ajax,” said Ulysses, “I will remember what you have told me.”

“I knew that Penelope was being wooed by other men in your absence,” said Ulysses’ mother. I knew it well, but I would not speak evil of your wife, not I, not I....”

“Thank you, Mother,” said Ulysses.

Then came a ghost so new that his flesh had not quite turned to mist but quivered on his bones like a pale jelly. He was Elpenor, who had fallen from the mast and had led them to Tartarus. When Ulysses saw who it was, he was taken by a great dread and cried, “I did not push you, Elpenor. You fell. It was an accident, I swear.”

“Nevertheless,” said Elpenor, “my ghost will trouble you until you make my grave.”

“How will I do that?”

“The first land you come to, build me a barrow and set thereon my oar. If you forget, I shall scratch at your windows and howl down your chimney and dance in your sleep.”

“I will build your grave with my own hands,” said Ulysses. “Have you any counsel for me?”

“Yes. Death has cleared my eyes, and I see things I would not have known. I see your ship now sailing in a narrow place between two huge rocks. Beneath the starboard rock is a cave, and in that

cave squats Scylla, an unpleasant lady with twelve legs and six heads who cries with the voice of a newborn puppy. If you sail too near that rock, she will seize six sailors to feed her six mouths—”

“Then I will steer away from Scylla—toward the other rock.”

“Ah, but under the other rock lurks a strange, thirsty monster named Charybdis, whose habit it is to drink up a whole tide of water in one gulp, and then spit it out again, making a whirlpool of such terrible sucking force that any ship within its swirl must be destroyed.”

“Monster to the right and monster to the left,” cried Ulysses. “What can I do then?”

“You must keep to the middle way. But if you cannot—and indeed it will be very difficult, for you will be tacking against headwinds—then choose the right-hand rock where hungry Scylla squats. For it is better to lose six men than your ship and your entire crew.”

“Thank you, courteous Eipenor,” said Ulysses. “I will heed your words.”

Then the air grew vaporous as the mob of ghosts shifted and swayed, making way for one who cleaved forward toward the trench of blood, and Ulysses recognized the one he was most eager to see, the blind woman-shaped ghost of Teiresias, sage of Thebes, expert at disasters, master of prophecy.

“Hail, venerable Teiresias,” he cried, “all honor to you. I have journeyed far to make your acquaintance.”

Teiresias came silently to the trench, knelt, and drank. He drank until the trench was empty and the misty bladder of his body was faintly pink.

“You honor me by your visit, Ulysses,” he said. “Many men sought my counsel when I was alive, but you are the first client to make his way down here. You have heard these others tell you of certain petty dangers that you will do well to avoid, but I have a mighty thing to tell.”

“Tell.”

“Your next landfall will be a large island that men shall one day call Sicily. Here the Sun-Titan, Hyperion, pastures his herds of golden cattle. Your stores will have been eaten when you reach this place, and your men will be savage with hunger. But no matter how desperate for food they are, you must prevent them from stealing even one beef. If they do, they shall never see home again.”

“I myself will guard the herds of the Sun-Titan,” said Ulysses, “and not one beef shall be taken. Thank you, wise Teiresias.”

“Go now. Take your men aboard the ship and go. Sail up the black river toward the upper air.”

“But now that I am here and have come such a long and weary way to get here, may I not see some of the famous sights? May I not see Orion hunting, Minos judging? May I not dance with the heroes in the Fields of Asphodel? May I not see Tantalus thirsting, or my own grandfather, Sisyphus, rolling his eternal stone up the hill?”

“No,” said Teiresias. “It is better that you go. You have been here too long already, I fear; too long exposed to these bone-bleaching airs. You may already be tainted with death, you and your men, making your fates too heavy for any ship to hold. Embark then. Sail up the black river. Do not look back. Remember our advice and forget our reproaches, and do not return until you are properly dead.”

Ulysses ordered his men aboard. He put down the helm. There was still no wind. But the sails stretched taut, and the ship pushed upriver. Heeding the last words of the old sage, he did not look back, but he heard the voice of his mother calling, “Good-bye ... good-bye ...” until it grew faint as his own breath.

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The Wandering Rocks

THEY SAILED OUT OF darkness into light, and their hearts danced with joy to see blue water and blue sky again. A fair west wind plumped their sails and sped them toward home. “If this wind keeps blowing,” said Ulysses to himself, “perhaps we can skirt the dangerous islands they spoke of; sail right around these Sirens and these tide-drinking, man-eating monsters and find our way home without further mishap. True, it was foretold differently, but what of that? How reliable are such prophecies, after all? Ajax and Achilles were always better at fighting than thinking—why should they be wiser dead than alive? And Elpenor—my most inept hand? Must I take his word for what is going to happen? Why, that fall from the mast must have scattered the few wits he had. Besides, they were all ghosts down there, advising me, and ghosts are gloomy by nature, as everyone knows. They like to frighten people; it’s the way they’ve been trained. No! By the gods, I will not accept all this evil as inevitable but will stretch my sails to the following wind and speed for Ithaca.”

At that very moment he heard a strange sound, not a sound the wind makes, nor the water, nor the voice of man or gull. He looked about, searched sky and water. He saw nothing. Then he turned over the helm to one of the sailors and climbed the mast. There he could see for miles over the dancing water. And far to the south he

saw tiny black things floating, so small he could not tell whether he was imagining them or not. But they grew larger even as he watched. And as they came near, the strange, moaning, grinding sound grew louder and louder.

“What are they?” he said to himself. “They look like rocks, but rocks don’t float. Can they be dolphins? Not whales, surely—whales spout. And all fish are voiceless. What is it then that comes and cries upon the silence of the seas? Another evil spawned by the stubborn god who pursues me? But what?”

By now the objects were close enough to see, and he saw that they were indeed rocks. A floating reef of rocks. Jagged boulders bobbing on the waves like corks. Rubbing against each other and making that moaning, grinding sound. And coming fast, driving purposefully toward the ship.

“Port the helm!” roared Ulysses.

The ship swung northward as the rocks pressed from the south.

“Floating rocks,” said Ulysses. “Who has seen their like? This is a wonder unreported by any traveler. We see a new thing today, and I should like to see the last of it. Are they following us? Are they driven by some intelligence? Or are we caught in a trick of tide that moves them so? I shall soon see.”

He took the helm himself then and sailed the ship in a circle to give the rocks a chance to pass by. But to his horror he saw the rocks begin to circle also, keeping always between him and the

open sea to the south. They held the same distance now. He sheared off northward; they followed, keeping the same distance. But when he turned and headed south, they held their place. He saw them loom before his bow, jagged and towering, ready to crush his hull like a walnut. And he had to swing off again and dart away northward, as the crew raised a shout of terror.

So he set his course north by northwest, thinking sadly: I see that I can avoid nothing that was foretold. I cannot bear southward around the Isle of the Sun where lurk the demons and monsters I have been warned against but must speed toward them as swiftly as toward a rendezvous with loved ones. These rocks shepherd me; they herd this vessel as a stray sheep is herded by the shepherd's dog, driving me toward that which the vengeful gods have ordained. So be it then. If I cannot flee, then I must dare. Heroes are made, I see, when retreat is cut off. So be it."

He set his course for the Isle of the Sun-Titan, which men called Thrinacia, and which we know now as Sicily.

All through the night they sailed. In the darkness they lost sight of the rocks. But they could hear them clashing and moaning, keeping pace with the ship.

The Sirens

IN THE FIRST LIGHT of morning Ulysses awoke and called his crew about him.

“Men,” he said. “Listen well, for your lives today hang upon what I am about to tell you. That large island to the west is Thrinacia, where we must make a landfall, for our provisions run low. But to get to the island we must pass through a narrow strait. And at the head of this strait is a rocky islet where dwell two sisters called Sirens, whose voices you must not hear. Now I shall guard you against their singing, which would lure you to shipwreck, but first you must bind me to the mast. Tie me tightly, as though I were a dangerous captive. And no matter how I struggle, no matter what signals I make to you, *do not release me*, lest I follow their voices to destruction, taking you with me.”

Thereupon Ulysses took a large lump of the beeswax that was used by the sail mender to slick his heavy thread and kneaded it in his powerful hands until it became soft. Then he went to each man of the crew and plugged his ears with soft wax; he caulked their ears so tightly that they could hear nothing but the thin pulsing of their own blood.

Then he stood himself against the mast and the men bound him about with rawhide, winding it tightly around his body, lashing him to the thick mast.

They had lowered the sail because ships cannot sail through a narrow strait unless there is a following wind, and now each man of the crew took his place at the great oars. The polished blades whipped the sea into a froth of white water and the ship nosed toward the strait.

Ulysses had left his own ears unplugged because he had to remain in command of the ship and had need of his hearing. Every sound means something upon the sea. But when they drew near the rocky islet and he heard the first faint strains of the Sirens' singing, then he wished he, too, had stopped his own ears with wax. All his strength suddenly surged toward the sound of those magical voices. The very hair of his head seemed to be tugging at his scalp, trying to fly away. His eyeballs started out of his head.

For in those voices were the sounds that men love:

Happy sounds like bird railing, sleet hailing, milk pailing....

Sad sounds like rain leaking, tree creaking, wind seeking....

Autumn sounds like leaf tapping, fire snapping, river lapping....

Quiet sounds like snow flaking, spider waking, heart breaking....

It seemed to him then that the sun was burning him to a cinder as he stood. And the voices of the Sirens purred in a cool crystal pool upon their rock past the blue-hot flatness of the sea and its lacings of white-hot spume. It seemed to him he could actually see

their voices deepening into a silvery, cool pool and must plunge into that pool or die a flaming death.

He was filled with such a fury of desire that he swelled his mighty muscles, burst the rawhide bonds like thread, and dashed for the rail.

But he had warned two of his strongest men—Perimedes and Eurylochus—to guard him close. They seized him before he could plunge into the water. He swept them aside as if they had been children. But they had held him long enough to give the crew time to swarm about him. He was overpowered—crushed by their numbers—and dragged back to the mast. This time he was bound with the mighty hawser that held the anchor.

The men returned to their rowing seats, unable to hear the voices because of the wax corking their ears. The ship swung about and headed for the strait again.

Louder now, and clearer, the tormenting voices came to Ulysses. Again he was aflame with a fury of desire. But try as he might he could not break the thick anchor line. He strained against it until he bled, but the line held.

The men bent to their oars and rowed more swiftly, for they saw the mast bending like a tall tree in a heavy wind, and they feared that Ulysses, in his fury, might snap it off short and dive, mast and all, into the water to get at the Sirens.

Now they were passing the rock, and Ulysses could see the singers. There were two of them. They sat on a heap of white bones

—the bones of shipwrecked sailors—and sang more beautifully than senses could bear. But their appearance did not match their voices, for they were shaped like birds, huge birds, larger than eagles. They had feathers instead of hair, and their hands and feet were claws. But their faces were the faces of young girls.

When Ulysses saw them he was able to forget the sweetness of their voices because their look was so fearsome. He closed his eyes against the terrible sight of these bird-women perched on their heap of bones. But when he closed his eyes and could not see their ugliness, then their voices maddened him once again, and he felt himself straining against the bloody ropes. He forced himself to open his eyes and look upon the monsters, so that the terror of their bodies would blot the beauty of their voices.

But the men, who could only see, not hear the Sirens, were so appalled by their aspect that they swept their oars faster and faster, and the black ship scuttled past the rock. The Sirens' voices sounded fainter and fainter and finally died away.

When Perimedes and Eurylochus saw their captain's face lose its madness, they unbound him, and he signaled to the men to unstop their ears. For now he heard the whistling gurgle of a whirlpool, and he knew that they were approaching the narrowest part of the strait, and must pass between Scylla and Charybdis.

Scylla and Charybdis

ULYSSES HAD BEEN TOLD in Tartarus of these two monsters that guard the narrow waterway leading to Thrinacia. Each of them hid beneath its own huge rock, which stood side by side and were separated only by the width of the strait at its narrowest point

Charybdis dwelt in a cave beneath the left-hand rock. Once she had been a superbly beautiful naiad, daughter of Poseidon, and very loyal to her father in his endless feud with Zeus, Lord of Earth and Sky. She it was who rode the hungry tides after Poseidon had stirred up a storm and led them onto the beaches, gobbling up whole villages, submerging fields, drowning forests, claiming them for the sea. She won so much land for her father's kingdom that Zeus became enraged and changed her into a monster, a huge bladder of a creature whose face was all mouth and whose arms and legs were flippers. And he penned her in the cave beneath the rock, saying:

“Your hunger shall become thirst. As you once devoured land belonging to me, now you shall drink the tide thrice a day—swallow it and spit it forth again—and your name will be a curse to sailors forever.”

And so it was. Thrice a day she burned with a terrible thirst and stuck her head out of the cave and drank down the sea, shrinking the waters to a shallow stream, and then spat the water

out again in a tremendous torrent, making a whirlpool near her rock in which no ship could live.

This was Charybdis. As for Scylla, who lived under the right-hand rock, she, too, had once been a beautiful naiad. Poseidon himself spied her swimming one day and fell in love with her and so provoked the jealousy of his wife, Amphitrite, that she cried:

“I will make her the most hideous female that man or god ever fled from!”

Thereupon she changed Scylla into something that looked like a huge, fleshy spider with twelve legs and six heads. She also implanted in her an insatiable hunger, a wild greed for human flesh. When any ship came within reach of her long tentacles, she would sweep the deck of sailors and eat them.

Ulysses stood in the bow as the ship nosed slowly up the strait. The roaring of the waters grew louder and louder, and now he saw wild feathers of spume flying as Charybdis sucked down the tide and spat it back. He looked at the other rock. Scylla was not in sight. But he knew she was lurking underneath, ready to spring. He squinted, trying to measure distances. The only chance to come through unharmed, he saw, was to strike the middle way between the two rocks, just beyond the suction of the whirlpool, and just out of Scylla’s reach. But to do this meant that the ship must not be allowed to swerve a foot from its exact course, for the middle way was no wider than the ship itself.

He took the helm and bade his men keep a perfectly regular stroke. Then, considering further, he turned the helm over to Eurylochus and put on his armor. Grasping sword and spear, he posted himself at the starboard rail.

“For,” he said to himself, “there is no contending with the whirlpool. If we veer off our course it must be toward the other monster. I can fight any enemy I can see.”

The men rowed very carefully, very skillfully. Eurylochus chanted the stroke, and the black ship cut through the waters of the strait, keeping exactly to the middle way.

They were passing between the rocks now. They watched in amazement as the water fell away to their left, showing a shuddering flash of sea bed and gasping fish, and men roared back again with such force that the water was beaten into white froth. They felt their ship tremble.

“Well done!” cried Ulysses. “A few more strokes and we are through. Keep the way—the middle way!”

But, when measuring distance, he had been unable to reckon upon one thing. The ship was being rowed, and the great sweep oars projected far beyond the width of the hull. And Scylla, lurking underwater, seized two of the oars and dragged the ship toward her.

Dumbfounded, Ulysses saw the polished shafts of the oars which had been dipping and flashing so regularly suddenly snap like twigs, and before he knew what was happening, the deck tilted violently. He was thrown against the rail and almost fell overboard.

He lay on the deck, scrambling for his sword. He saw tentacles arching over him; they were like the arms of an octopus, but ending in enormous human hands.

He found his sword, rose to his knees, and hacked at the tentacles. Too late. The hands had grasped six sailors, snatched men screaming through the air and into the sea.

Ulysses had no time for fear. He had to do a number of things immediately. He roared to the crew to keep the ship on course lest it be swept into the whirlpool. Then he seized an oar himself and rowed on the starboard side where the oars had been broken.

From where he sat he could see Scylla's rock, could see her squatting at the door of her cave. He saw her plainly, stuffing the men into her six bloody mouths. He heard the shrieks of his men as they felt themselves being eaten alive.

He did not have time to weep, for he had to keep his crew rowing and tell the helmsman how to steer past the whirlpool.

They passed through the strait into open water. Full ahead lay Thrinacia with its wooded hills and long white beaches, the Isle of the Sun-Titan, their next landfall.

The Cattle of the Sun

INSTEAD OF LANDING on Thrinacia, as the crew expected, Ulysses dropped anchor and summoned his two underchiefs, Eurylochus and Perimedes, to take counsel. He said:

“You heard the warning of old Teiresias down in Tartarus. You heard him say that this island belongs to Hyperion, the Sun-Titan, who uses it as a grazing land for his flocks. The warning was most dire: Whosoever of our crew harms these cattle in any way will bring swift doom upon himself and will never see his home again.”

“We all heard the warning,” said Eurylochus, “and everyone will heed it.”

“How can you be so sure?” said Ulysses. If this voyage has taught you nothing else, it should have proved to you that there is nothing in the world so uncertain as man’s intentions, especially his good ones. No, good sirs, what I propose is that we change our plans about landing here and seek another island, one where death does not pasture.”

“It will never do,” said Eurylochus. “The men are exhausted. There is a south wind blowing now, which means we would have to row. We simply do not have the strength to hold the oars.”

“Our stores are exhausted, too,” said Perimedes. The food that Circe gave us is almost gone. The water kegs are empty. We must land here and let the men rest and lay in fresh provisions.”

“Very well,” said Ulysses. “If it must be, it must be. But I am holding you two directly responsible for the safety of the sun-cattle. Post guards at night, and kill any man who goes near these fatal herds.”

Thereupon the anchor was raised, and the ship put into harbor. Ulysses did not moor the ship offshore, but had the men drag it up on the beach. He sent one party out in search of games, another to fill the water kegs, and a third to chop down pine trees. From the wood was pressed a fragrant black sap, which was boiled in a big iron pot. Then he had the men tar the ship from stem to stern, caulking each crack.

The hunting party returned, downhearted. There seemed to be no game on the island, they told Ulysses, only a few wild pigs, which they had shot, but no deer, no bear, no rabbits, no game birds. Just the pigs and great herds of golden cattle.

The water party returned triumphantly, barrels full.

The men were so weary that Ulysses stood guard himself that night. Wrapped in his cloak, naked sword across his knees, he sat hunched near the driftwood fire, brooding into the flames.

“I cannot let them rest here,” he said to himself. “If game is so scarce, they will be tempted to take the cattle. For hungry men the only law is hunger. No, we must put out again tomorrow and try to find another island.”

The next morning he routed out the men. They grumbled terribly but did not dare to disobey. However, they were not fated

to embark. A strong south wind blew up, almost gale strength, blowing directly into the harbor. There was no sailing into the teeth of it, and it was much too strong to row against.

“Very well,” said Ulysses, “scour the island for game again. We must wait until the wind drops.”

He had thought it must blow itself out in a day or so, but it was not to be. For thirty days and thirty nights the south wind blew, and they could not leave the island. All the wild pigs had been killed. The men were desperately hungry. Ulysses used all his cunning to find food. He had the men fish in the sea, dig the beaches for shellfish and turtle eggs, search the woods for edible roots and berries. They tore the clinging limpets off rocks and shot gulls. A huge pot was kept boiling over the driftwood fire, and in it the men threw anything remotely edible—sea polyps, sea lilies, fish heads, sand crabs—vile broth. But most days they had nothing else. And they grew hungrier and hungrier.

For thirty days the strong south wind blew, keeping them beached. Finally, one night when Ulysses was asleep, Eurylochus secretly called the men together, and said, “Death comes to men in all sorts of ways. And however it comes, it is never welcome. But the worst of all deaths is to die of starvation. And to be forced to starve among herds of fat beef is a hellish torture that the gods reserve for the greatest criminals. So I say to you men that we must disregard the warning of that meddling ghost, Teiresias, and help ourselves to this cattle. We can do it now while Ulysses sleeps.

And if indeed the Sun-Titan is angered and seeks vengeance—well, at least we shall have had one more feast before dying.”

It was agreed. They went immediately into the meadow. Now, Hyperion’s cattle were the finest ever seen on earth. They were enormous, sleek, broad-backed, with crooked golden horns, and hides of beautiful dappled gold and white. And when the men came among them with their axes, they were not afraid, for no one had ever offered them any harm. They looked at the men with their great plum-colored eyes, whisked their tails, and continued grazing.

The axes rose and fell. Six fine cows were slaughtered. Because they knew they were committing an offense against the gods, the men were very careful to offer sacrifice. Upon a makeshift altar they placed the fat thigh-bones and burned them as offerings. They had no wine to pour upon the blazing meat as a libation, so they used water instead, chanting prayers as they watched the meat burn.

But the smell of the roasting flesh overcame their piety. They leaped upon the carcasses like wild beasts, ripped them apart with their hands, stuck the flesh on spits, and plunged them into the open fire.

Ulysses awoke from a dream of food. He sniffed the air and realized it was no dream, that the smell of roasting meat was real. He lifted his face to the sky, and said, “O mighty ones, it was unkind to let me fall into sleep. For now my men have done what they have been told they must not do.”

He drew his sword and rushed off to the light of the fire.

But just then Zeus was hearing a more powerful plea. For the Sun-Titan had been informed immediately by the quick spies that serve the gods, and now he was raging upon Olympus.

“O Father Zeus,” he cried, “I demand vengeance upon the comrades of Ulysses who have slaughtered my golden kine. If they are spared, I will withdraw my chariot from the sky. No longer will I warm the treacherous earth but will go to Hades and shine among the dead.”

“I hear you, cousin,” said Zeus, “and promise vengeance.”

Ulysses dashed among the feasting crew, ready to cut them down even as they squatted there, eating.

“Wait,” cried Eurylochus. “Hold your hand. These are not the Sun-God’s cattle, but seven stags we found on the other side of the island.”

“Stags?” roared Ulysses. “What kind of monstrous lie is this? You know, there are no stags on this island.”

“They were there,” said Eurylochus. “And now they are here. Perhaps the gods relented and sent them as food. Come, eat, dear friend, and do not invent misdeeds where none exist.”

Ulysses allowed himself to be persuaded, sat down among the men, and began to eat with ravenous speed. But then a strange thing happened. The spitted carcasses turning over the fire began to low and moo as though they were alive; one of the flayed hides

crawled over the sand to Ulysses, and he saw that it was dappled gold and white and knew he had been tricked.

Once again he seized his sword and rushed toward Eurylochus.

“Wait!” cried Eurylochus. “Do not blame me. We have not offended the gods by our trickery. For the south wind has fallen—see? The wind blows from the north now, and we can sail away. If the gods were angry, Ulysses, would they send us a fair wind?”

“To the ship!” shouted Ulysses. “We sail immediately.”

The men gathered up the meat that was left and followed Ulysses to the beached ship. They put logs under it and rolled it down to the sea. Here they unfurled the sail and slid out of the harbor.

Night ran out and the fires of dawn burned in the sky. The men hurried about their tasks, delighted to be well fed and sailing again, after the starving month on Thrinacia.

But then Ulysses, observing the sky, saw a strange sight. The sun seemed to be frowning. He saw that black clouds had massed in front of it. He heard a rustling noise and looked off westward, where he saw the water ruffling darkly.

“Down sail!” he shouted. “Ship the mast!”

Too late. A wild west wind came hurtling across the water and pounced on the ship. There was no time to do anything. Both forestays snapped. The mast split and fell, laying its white sail like a shroud over the ship. A lightning bolt flared from the blue sky

and struck amidships. Great billows of choking yellow smoke arose. The heat was unbearable. Ulysses saw his men diving off the deck, garments and hair ablaze and hissing like cinders when they hit the water.

He was still shouting commands, trying to chop the sail free and fighting against gale and fire. But he was all alone. Not one man was aboard. The ship fell apart beneath him. The ribs were torn from the keel. The ship was nothing but a mass of flaming timbers, and Ulysses swam among them. He held on to the mast, which had not burned. Pushing it before him, he swam out of the blazing wreckage. He found the keel floating free. The oxhide backstay was still tied to the head of the mast; with it he lashed mast and keel together into a kind of raft.

He looked about, trying to find someone to pull aboard. There was no one. He had no way of steering the raft but had to go where the wind blew him. And now, to his dismay, he found the wind shifting again. It blew from the south, which meant that he would be pushed back toward the terrible strait.

All day he drifted, and all night. When dawn came, it brought with it a roaring sucking sound, and he saw that he was being drawn between Scylla and Charybdis. He felt the raft being pulled toward the whirlpool. It was the very moment when Charybdis took her first drink of the day. She swallowed the tide and held it in her great bladder of a belly. The raft spun like a leaf in the outer eddies of the huge suction, and Ulysses knew that when he reached the

vortex of the whirlpool, he and the raft would be drawn to the bottom and that he must drown.

He kept his footing on the raft until the very last moment, and just as it was pulled into the vortex, he leaped as high as he could upon the naked face of the rock, scrabbling for a handhold. He caught a clump of lichen, and clung with all his strength. He could climb no higher on the rock; it was too slippery for a foothold. All he could do was cling to the moss and pray that his strength would not give out. He was waiting for Charybdis to spit forth the tide again.

The long hours passed. His shoulders felt as though they were being torn apart by red-hot pincers. Finally he heard a great tumult of waters and saw it frothing out of the cave. The waves leaped toward his feet. And then he saw what he was waiting for—his raft came shooting up like a cork.

He dropped upon the timbers. Now he would have some hours of quiet water, he knew, before Charybdis drank again. So he kept to that side of the strait, holding as far from Scylla as he could, for he well remembered the terrible reach of her arms.

He passed safely beyond the rocks and out of the strait. For nine days he drifted under the burning sun, nine nights under the indifferent moon. With his knife he cut a long splinter from the timbers and shaped it into a lance for spearing fish. He did not get any. Then he lay on his back, pretending to be dead, and gulls came

to peck out his eyes. He caught them and wrung their necks. He ate their flesh and drank their blood and so stayed alive.

On the tenth day he found himself approaching another island.

He was very weak. The island grew dim as he looked at it. A black mist hid the land, which was odd because the sun was shining. Then the sky tilted, and the black mist covered him.

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Calypso

WHEN ULYSSES AWOKE HE found himself lying on a bed of sweet-smelling grass. The sun shone hotly, but he was in a pool of delicious cool shade under a poplar tree. He was still dizzy. The trees were swaying, and bright flowers danced upon the meadow. He closed his eyes, thinking, "I am dead then. The god that hunts me took pity and shortened my hard life, and I am now in the Elysian Fields."

A voice answered, "You have not died. You are not in the Elysian Fields. You have come home."

He opened his eyes again. A woman was bending over him. She was so tall that he knew she was no mortal woman but nymph or naiad or demigoddess. She was clad in a short tunic of yellow and purple. Her hair was yellow and long and thick.

"You are here with me," she said. "You have come home."

"Home? Is this Ithaca? Are you Penelope?"

"This is Ogygia, and I am Calypso."

He tried to sit up. He was too weak. "But Ithaca is my home," he said. "And Penelope is my wife."

"Home is where you dwell. And wives, I am told, often change. Especially for sailors. Especially for you. And now you belong to me, because this island and everything on it is mine."

Ulysses went back to sleep. For he believed he was dreaming and did not wish to wake up again and find himself on the raft. But when he awoke, he was still in his dream. He was strong enough now to sit up and look around. He was in a great grove hemmed by trees—alder and poplar and cypress. Across this meadow four streams ran, crossing each other, making a sound like soft laughter. The meadow was a carpet of wild flowers, violets, parsley, bluebells, daffodils, and cat-faced pansies. His bed had been made in front of a grotto, he saw. Over it a wild grapevine had been trained to fall like a curtain.

The vine curtain was pushed aside, and Calypso came out.

“You are awake,” she cried, “and just in time for your wedding feast. The stag is roasted. The wine has been poured. No, don’t move. You’re still too weak. Let me help you, little husband.”

She stooped and lifted him in her great white arms and carried him as easily as though he were a child in the grotto and set him before the hearth. A whole stag was spitted over the flame. The cave was carpeted with the skins of leopard and wolf and bear.

“Lovely and gracious goddess,” said Ulysses, “tell me, please, how I came here. The last I remember I was on my raft, and then a blackness fell.”

“I was watching for you,” said Calypso. “I knew you would come, and I was waiting. Then your raft floated into sight. I saw you slump over and roll off the raft. And I changed you into a fish, for sharks live in this water and they are always hungry. As soon as

I turned you into a fish, a gull stooped—and he would have had you—but I shot him with my arrow. Then I took my net and fished you out, restored you to your proper shape, fed you a broth of herbs, and let you sleep. That was your arrival, O man I have drawn from the sea. As for your departure, that will never be. Now eat your meat and drink your wine, for I like my husbands well fed.”

Ulysses ate and drank and felt his strength return.

“After all,” he thought, “things could be worse. In fact they have been much worse. This may turn out to be quite a pleasant interlude. She is certainly beautiful, this Calypso. Rather large for my taste and inclined to be bossy, I’m afraid. But who’s perfect?”

He turned to her, smiling, and said, “You say you were waiting for me, watching for my raft. How did you know I would be coming?”

“I am one of the Titan brood,” said Calypso. “Daughter of mighty Atlas, who stands upon the westward rim of the world bearing the sky upon his shoulders. We are the elder branch of the gods, we Titans. For us there is no before or after, only now, wherein all things are and always were and always will be. Time, you see, is a little arrangement man has made for himself to try to measure the immeasurable mystery of life. It does not really exist. So when we want to know anything that has happened in what you call ‘before,’ or what will happen in what you call ‘after,’ we simply shuffle the pictures and look at them.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“I have watched your whole voyage, Ulysses. All I have to do is poke the log in a certain way, and pictures form in the heart of the fire and burn there until I poke the log again. What would you like to see?”

“My wife, Penelope.”

Calypso reached her long arm and poked the log. And in the heart of the flame Ulysses saw a woman, weaving.

“She looks older,” he said.

“You have been away a long time. Only the immortals do not age. I was 2,300 years old yesterday. Look at me. Do you see any wrinkles?”

“Poor Penelope,” said Ulysses.

“Don’t pity her too much. She has plenty of company. She is presumed to be a widow, you know.”

“Has she married again?”

“I weary of this picture. Would you like to see another?”

“My son, Telemachus.”

She poked the fire again, and Ulysses saw the flickering image of a tall young man with red-gold hair. He held a spear in his hand and looked angry.

“How he has grown,” murmured Ulysses. “He was a baby when I left. He is a young man now, and a fine one, is he not?”

“Looks like his father,” said Calypso.

“He seems to be defying some enemy,” said Ulysses. “What is happening?”

“He is trying to drive away his mother’s suitors, who live in your castle now. She is quite popular—for an older woman. But then, of course, she has land and goods. A rich widow. You left her will provided, O sailor. She has many suitors and cannot decide among them. Or perhaps she enjoys their courtship too much to decide. But your son is very proud of his father, whom he does not remember, and seeks to drive the suitors from your castle.”

“ I had better go home and help him,” said Ulysses.

“Put that out of your mind. It simply will not happen. Forget Ithaca, Ulysses. You are a hero, a mighty hero, and heroes have many homes, and the last is always the best. Look at this. See some of your exploits. Like many warriors, you were too busy fighting to know what really happened.”

She poked the log again and again, and a stream of pictures flowed through the fire. Ulysses saw himself standing on a rock in the Cyclops’ cave, holding the white-hot sword above the great sleeping eye, preparing to stab it in. He saw himself wrestling with the leather bag of winds that Aeolus had given him; saw himself running with the wolves and lions who had been Circe’s lovers in the dark courtyard of her castle. Then, sword in hand, he saw himself hacking at Scylla’s tentacles as she reached across the tilting deck for his men. Going back he saw himself before his homeward voyage crouched in the black belly of the wooden horse he had made. Next, climbing out of that horse after it had been dragged into the city and racing with lifted sword to slaughter the

sleeping Trojan warriors. And, as he watched and saw the old battles refought, the men who had been his friends, and the monstrous enemies he had overcome, his heart sang with pride, and a drunken warmth stronger than the fumes of wine rose to his head, drowning out all the pictures of home.

He stood up and said, “Thank you for showing me myself, Calypso. I do seem to be a hero, don’t I? And worthy to love a daughter of the Titans.”

“Yes,” said Calypso.

Now, Calypso had amused herself with shipwrecked sailors before. But she was hard to please, and none of them had lasted very long. When she was tired of someone she would throw him back into the sea. If she were feeling good-natured she would change him to gull or fish first. Indeed, the trees of the grove were filled with nesting sea birds—gull and heron and osprey and sand owls—who called to her at night, reproaching her.

“What is that clamor of birds?” said Ulysses.

“Just birds.”

“Why do they shriek so?”

“They are angry at me for loving you. They were men once, like yourself.”

“How did they get to be birds?”

“Oh, well, it’s no very difficult transformation, when you know how. I thought they would be happier so.”

“They don’t sound very happy.”

“They have jealous natures.”

“You are not unlike Circe in some ways,” said Ulysses. “You island goddesses are apt to be abrupt with your former friends. I’ve noticed this.”

“It’s a depressing topic, dear. Let’s talk about me. Do you find me beautiful today?”

“More beautiful than yesterday, if that is possible. And no doubt will find you even lovelier tomorrow, since you have shown me the penalty of any inattention.”

“Do not fear,” said Calypso. “You are not like the others. You are bolder and have more imagination. You are a hero.”

“Perhaps you could persuade your feathered friends to nest elsewhere? They make me nervous.”

“Nothing easier. I shall simply tell them to depart. If they do not, I shall change them all to grasshoppers, all save one, who will eat the rest and then die of overeating.”

“Truly, you are wise and powerful, and fair beyond all women, mortal or immortal.”

She smiled. “You have such an apt way of putting things,” she said.

So Ulysses made himself at home on the island and passed the time hunting game, fishing the sea, and reveling with the beautiful Calypso. He was happy. Thoughts of home grew dim. The nymph taught him how to poke the magic log upon her hearth so that it would cast up fire pictures. And he sat by the hour on the great

hearth, reading the flickering tapestry of days gone by and days to come. But she had instructed the log never to show him scenes of Ithaca, for she wished him not to be reminded of his home in any way, lest he be tempted to depart. But Ulysses was as crafty as she was, and after he had poked the log many times, asking it to show him what was happening on his island, and the log had cast up pictures of other times, other places, he realized that Calypso had laid a magic veto upon scenes of home. And this, instead of making him forget, made him more eager than ever to know what was happening to Telemachus and Penelope.

One day he went into the wood, snared a sea crow, and asked, “Can you speak?”

“Yes,” said the crow.

“Were you once a man?”

“Once ... once ... at the time of your grandfather, Sisyphus. I was a clever man, a spy. That’s why Calypso changed me into a crow when she grew weary of me, for of all creatures we are the best for spying and prying and tattling.”

“Then you’re the bird for me,” cried Ulysses. “Listen, I wish you to fly to Ithaca. Go to my castle and see what is happening. Then come back and tell me.”

“Why should I? What will you give me?”

“Your life.”

“My life? I already have that”

“But not for long. Because if you refuse to do as I ask, I shall wring your neck.”

“Hmmm,” said the crow. There is merit in your argument. Very well. I shall be your spy. Only don’t let Calypso know. She’ll catch me and feed me to the cat before I can report to you. I have a notion she’d like you to forget Ithaca.”

“Fly away, little bird,” said Ulysses, “and do what you have to do. I’ll take care of things here.”

The next day, at dusk, as he was returning from the hunt; he heard the crow calling from the depth of an oak tree.

“Greetings,” said Ulysses. “Have you done what I asked?”

“I have flown to Ithaca,” said the crow. “A rough journey by sea, but not really so far as the crow flies. I flew to your castle and perched in an embrasure and watched and watched. Briefly, your son is grieving, your wife is weaving, and your guests are *not* leaving.”

“What does my wife weave?”

“Your shroud.”

“Has she decided so soon that I am dead? I have been gone scarcely twenty years.”

“She is faithful. But the suitors, who are brawling, ill-mannered young men, are pressing her to choose one of them for a husband. However, she refuses to choose until she finishes the shroud. And it has been three years a-weaving, for each night she rips up the work she has done by day, so the shroud is never

finished. But the suitors grow impatient. They are demanding that she finish her weaving and choose a groom. Your son opposes them. And they threaten to kill him unless he steps aside.”

“Thank you, crow,” said Ulysses.

“What will you do now—try to escape?”

“Escape? I do not consider myself a captive, good bird. I shall simply inform Calypso that I intend to leave and ask her to furnish transportation.”

“You make it sound easy,” said the crow. “Good luck.”

And he flew away.

Ulysses went to Calypso in her grotto, fell on his knees before her, and said, “Fair and gracious friend, you have made me happier than any man has a right to be, especially an unlucky one. But now I must ask you one last great favor.” Calypso frowned. “I don’t like the sound of that,” she said. “What do you mean ‘last’? Why should I not go on doing you favors?”

“I must go home.”

“This is your home.”

“No. My home is Ithaca. Penelope is my wife. Telemachus is my son. I have enemies. They live in my castle and steal my goods. They wish to kill my son and take my wife. I am a king. I cannot tolerate insults. I must go home.”

“Suppose you do go home, what then?”

“I will contend with my enemies. I will kill them or they will kill me.”

“You kill them, say—then what?”

“Then I live, I rule. I don’t know. I cannot read the future.”

“I can. Look.”

She poked the magic log. Fire pictures flared. Ulysses saw himself sitting on his throne. He was an old man. Penelope was there. She was an old woman.

“You will grow old ... old ...” Calypso’s voice murmured in his ear, unraveling in its rough purring way like raw silk. “Old ... old ... You will live on memories. You will eat your heart out recalling old glories, old battles, old loves. Look ... look into the fire.”

“Is that me?”

“That’s you, humping along in your old age among your hills, grown dry and cruel.”

“What is that on my shoulder?”

“An oar.”

“Why do I carry an oar where there is no sea?”

“If you go back to Ithaca, you will meet great trouble. You will be driven from your throne and be forced to carry an oar on your shoulder until you come to a place where no man salts his meat, and where they think the oar is a winnowing-fan. Then, if you abase yourself to Poseidon, he may forget his hatred for a while and grant you a few more years.”

“Is that me standing at the shore?”

“That is you.”

“Who is that young man?”

“Your son.”

“Not Telemachus?”

“Another son. A fiercer one.”

“Why does his spear look so strange?”

“It is tipped with the beak of a stingray.”

“Why does he raise it against me?”

“To kill you, of course. And so death will come to you from the sea at the hands of your own son. For you angered the god of the sea by wounding his son, and he does not forgive.” She tapped the log and the fire died. “Do you still want to go back to Ithaca?” she said.

“Will my future be different if I stay here?”

“Certainly. If you stay with me, it will be entirely different. You will no longer be a mortal man. I will make you my eternal consort, make you immortal. You will not die or grow old. This will be your home, not only this island, but wherever the Titans rule.”

“Never die, never grow old. It seems impossible.”

“You are a man to whom impossible things happen,” said Calypso. “Haven’t you learned that by now?”

“ ‘*Never*’ ...” said Ulysses. “ ‘*Always*’ ... These are words I find hard to accept.”

“Do not think you will be bored. I am expert at variety. I deal in transformations, you know. I can change our forms at will. We

can love each other as lion and lioness, fox and vixen. Touch high as eagles, twine as serpents, be stallion and mare. We can fly and prowl and swim. You can be a whale once and seek me deeply, or a tomcat, perhaps, weird voice burning the night, crying murder and amour. And then ... then ... we can return to this bowered island as Calypso and Ulysses, goddess and hero.”

“You are eloquent,” said Ulysses. “And you need no eloquence, for your beauty speaks more than any words. Still, I cannot be immortal, never to die, never to grow old. What use is courage then?”

Calypso smiled at him. “Enough discussion for one night. You have time to decide. Take five or ten years. We are in no hurry, you and I.”

“Five or ten years may seem little to an immortal,” said Ulysses. “But I am still a man. It is a long time for me.”

“That’s just what I said,” said Calypso. “It is better to be immortal. But think it over.”

The next morning, instead of hunting, Ulysses went to the other side of the island and built an altar of rocks and sacrificed to the gods. He poured a libation of unwatered wine, and raised his voice:

“O great gods upon Olympus—thunder-wielding Zeus and wise Athene, earth-shaking Poseidon, whom I have offended, golden Apollo—hear my prayer. For ten years I fought in Troy and for ten more years have wandered the sea, been hounded from

island to island, battered by storms, swallowed by tides. My ships have been wrecked, my men killed. But you have granted me life. Now, I pray you, take back the gift. Let me join my men in Tartarus. For if I cannot return home, if I have to be kept here as a prisoner of Calypso while my kingdom is looted, my son slain, and my wife stolen, then I do not wish to live. Allow me to go home, or strike me dead on the spot.”

His prayer was carried to Olympus. Athene heard it. She went to Zeus and asked him to call the gods into council. They met in the huge throne room. As it happened, Poseidon was absent. He had ridden a tidal wave into Africa, where he had never been, and was visiting the Ethiopians.

Athene said, “O father Zeus, O brother gods, I wish to speak on behalf of Ulysses, who of all the mighty warriors we sent to Troy has the most respect for our power and the most belief in our justice. Ten years after leaving the bloody beaches of Troy he has still not reached home. He is penned now on an island by Calypso, daughter of Atlas, who uses all her Titanic enticements to keep him prisoner. This man’s plight challenges our Justice. Let us help him now.”

Zeus said, “I do not care to be called unjust. I am forgetful sometimes, perhaps, but then I have much to think of, many affairs to manage. And remember, please, my daughter, that this man has been traveling the sea, which belongs to my brother Poseidon, whom he has offended. Poseidon holds a heavy grudge, as you

know; he does not forgive injuries. Ulysses would have been home years ago if he had not chosen to blind Polyphemus, who happens to be Poseidon's son."

"He has paid for that eye over and over again," cried Athene. "Many times its worth, I vow. And the earth-shaker is not here, as it happens. He is off shaking the earth of Africa, which has been too dry and peaceable for his tastes. Let us take advantage of his absence and allow Ulysses to resume his voyage."

"Very well," said Zeus. "It shall be as you advise."

Thereupon he dispatched Hermes, the messenger god, to Ogygia. Hermes found Calypso on the beach singing a wild sea song, imitating now the voice of the wind, now the lispings, scraping sound of waves on a shallow shore, weaving in the cry of heron and gull and osprey, tide suck and drowned moons. Now, Hermes had invented pipe and lyre, and loved music. When he heard Calypso singing her wild sea song, he stood upon the bright air, ankle wings whirring, entranced. He hovered there, listening to her sing. Dolphins were drawn by her voice. They stood in the surf and danced on their tails.

She finished her song. Hermes landed lightly beside her.

"A beautiful song," he said.

"A sad song."

"All beautiful songs are sad."

"Yes ..."

"Why is that?"

“They are love songs. Women love men, and they go away. This is very sad.”

“You know why I have come then?”

“Of course. What else would bring you here? The Olympians have looked down and seen me happy for a little while, and they have decreed that this must not be. They have sent you to take my love away.”

“I am sorry, cousin. But it is fated that he find his way home.”

“Fate ... destiny ... what are they but fancy words for the brutal decrees of Zeus. He cannot abide that goddesses should mate with mortal men. He is jealous, and that is the whole truth of it. He wants us all for himself. Don't deny it. When Eos, Goddess of Dawn, chose Orion for her lover, Zeus had his daughter, Artemis, slay him with her arrows. When Demeter, harvest wife, met Jason in the plowed fields, Zeus himself flung his bolt, crippling him. It is always the same. He allowed Ulysses to be shipwrecked time and again. When I found him he was riding the timbers of his lost ship and was about to drown. So I took him here with me, cherished him, and offered to make him immortal. And now Zeus suddenly remembers, after twenty years, that he must go home immediately, because it is ordained.”

“You can't fight Zeus,” said Hermes gently. “Why try?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Permit Ulysses to make himself a raft. See that he has provisions. Then let him depart.”

“So be it”

“Do not despair, sweet cousin. You are too beautiful for sorrow. There will be other storms, other shipwrecks, other sailors.”

“Never another like him.”

“Who knows?”

He kissed her on the cheek and flew away.

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Ino's Veil

IN HER GENEROUS WAY, Calypso went beyond what the gods had ordered and provided Ulysses not with a raft but with a beautiful tight little vessel, sturdy enough for a long voyage, and small enough for one man to sail.

But he would have done just as well with a raft, for his bad luck held. He was seventeen days out of Ogygia, scudding along happily, when Poseidon, on his way back from Africa, happened to notice the little ship.

The sea god scowled and said:

“Can that be Ulysses? I thought I had drowned him long ago. One of my meddlesome relatives up there must be shielding him, and I have a good notion who. Well, I’ll give my owlish niece a little work to do.”

His scowl deepened, darkening the sun. He shook a storm out of his beard. The winds leaped, the water boiled. Ulysses felt the tiller being torn out of his hand. The boat spun like a chip. The sail ripped, the mast cracked, and Ulysses realized that his old enemy had found him again.

He clung to the splintered mast. Great waves broke over his head, and he swallowed the bitter water. He came up, gasping. The deck broke beneath him.

“Why am I fighting?” he thought “Why don’t I let myself drown?”

But he kept fighting by instinct. He pulled himself up onto a broken plank and clung there. Each boiling whitecap crested over him, and he was breathing more water than air. His arms grew too weak to hold the plank, and he knew that the next wave must surely take him under.

However, there was a Nereid near, named Ino, who hated Poseidon for an injury he had done her long before, and now she resolved to balk his vengeance. She swam to Ulysses’ timber and climbed on.

He was snorting and gasping and coughing. Then he saw that he was sharing his plank with a green-haired woman wearing a green veil.

“Welcome, beautiful Nereid,” he said. “Are you she who serves Poseidon, ushering drowned men to those caverns beneath the sea where the white bones roll?”

“No, unhappy man,” she said. “I am Ino ... and I am no servant of the windy widowmaker. I would like to do him an injury by helping you. Take this veil. It cannot sink even in the stormiest sea. Strip off your garments, wrap yourself in the veil, and swim toward those mountains. If you are bold and understand that you cannot drown, then you will be able to swim to the coast where you will be safe. After you land, fling the veil back into the sea, and it will find its way to me.” She unwound the green veil from her body

and gave it to him. Then she dived into the sea. “Can I believe her?” thought Ulysses. “Perhaps it’s just a trick to make me leave the pitiful safety of this timber. Oh, well, if I must drown, let me do it boldly.”

He pulled off his wet clothes and wrapped himself in the green veil and plunged into the sea.

It was very strange. When he had been on the raft, the water had seemed death-cold, heavy as iron, but now it seemed warm as a bath, and marvelously buoyant. He had been unable to knot the veil, but it clung closely to his body. When he began to swim he found himself slipping through the water like a fish.

“Forgive my suspicions, fair Ino,” he cried. Thank you ... thank you ...”

For two days he swam, protected by Ino’s veil, and on the morning of the third day he reached the coast of Phaeacia. But he could not find a place to come ashore. For it was a rocky coast, and the water swirled savagely among jagged boulders. So he was in great trouble again. While the veil could keep him from drowning, it could not prevent him from being broken against the rocks.

The current caught him and swept him in. With a mighty effort he grasped the first rock with both hands and clung there, groaning, as the rushing water tried to sweep him on. But he clung to the rock like a sea polyp, and the wave passed. Then the powerful back-tow caught him and pulled him off the rock and out to sea. He had

gained nothing. His arms and chest were bleeding where great patches of skin had been scraped off against the rock.

He realized that the only thing he could do was try to swim along the coast until he found an open beach. So he swam and he swam. The veil held him up, but he was dizzy from loss of blood. Nor had he eaten for two days. Finally, to his great joy, he saw a break in the reef. He swam toward it and saw that it was the mouth of a river. Exerting his last strength, he swam into the river, struggled against the current, swimming past the shore where the river flowed among trees. Then he had no more strength. He was exhausted.

He staggered ashore, unwrapped the veil from his body, and cast it upon the river so that it would be borne back to Ino. When he tried to enter the wood, he could not take another step. He collapsed among the reeds.

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Nausicaa

IN THOSE DAYS, GIRLS did not find their own husbands, especially princesses. Their marriages were arranged by their parents, and it all seemed to work out as well as any other way. But Nausicaa, sixteen-year-old daughter of the King and Queen of Phaeacia, was hard to please, and had been turning down suitors for two years now. Her father, Alcinous, and her mother, Arete, were becoming impatient. There were several hot-tempered kings and princes who had made offers—for Nausicaa was very lovely—and Alcinous knew that if he kept turning them down he might find himself fighting several wars at once. He was a fine warrior and enjoyed leading his great fleet into battle. Still, he preferred his wars one at a time.

He told the queen that Nausicaa would have to be forced to choose.

“I was very difficult to please, too,” said Arete. “But I think you’ll admit I married well. Perhaps she, too, knows in her heart that if she bides her time the gods will send a mighty man to be her husband.”

The king smiled. Arete always knew the right thing to say to him. So the discussion ended for that day. Nevertheless, the queen knew that her husband was right, and that the girl would have to choose.

That night Nausicaa was visited by a dream. It seemed to her that the goddess Athene stood over her bed, tall and gray-eyed, and spoke to her, saying, “How can you have a wedding when all your clothes are dirty? Take them to the river tomorrow and wash them.”

The goddess faded slowly until all that was left was the picture on her shield—a snake-haired girl. And it seemed that the snakes writhed and hissed and tried to crawl off the shield to get at the dreamer. Nausicaa awoke, moaning. But she was a brave girl and went right back to sleep and tried to dream the same dream again, so that she could learn more about the wedding. But the goddess did not return.

The next morning she went to her mother and told her of the dream.

“I don’t understand it,” she said. “What wedding?”

“Yours, perhaps,” said Arete.

“Mine? With whom?”

“The gods speak in riddles. You know that. Especially when they visit us in dreams. So you must do the one clear thing she told you. Take your serving girls to the river and wash your clothes. Perhaps, if you do that, the meaning will show itself.”

Thereupon Nausicaa told her serving girls to gather all the laundry in the castle, and pile it in the mule cart. She also took food, a goatskin bottle of wine, and a golden flask of oil so that they could bathe in the river. Then they set off in the red cart, and

the harness bells jingled as the mules trotted down the steep streets toward the river.

It was a sparkling morning. Nausicaa felt very happy as she drove the mules. They drove past the city walls, down the hill, and along a road that ran through a wood until they came to the river.

They dumped the clothes in the water and stamped on them, dancing and trampling and treading them clean. Then they dragged the clothes out, and pounded them on flat stones, afterwards spreading them to dry in the hot sun.

They then flung off their garments and swam in the river, scrubbing each other and anointing themselves with oil.

“Well, you look clean enough to get married,” cried Nausicaa. “But it’s easier to wash than to wed, isn’t it, girls?”

The maidens giggled wildly, and Nausicaa shouted with laughter. She was so drunk with sun and water that she felt she could run up the mountain and dance all day and night. It was impossible to sit still. She seized a leather ball from the cart and flung it to one of her maids, who caught it and threw it back. Then the others joined in, and the girls frisked on the riverbank, tossing the ball back and forth.

Ulysses awoke from a deep sleep. He was still dazed and could barely remember how he had gotten among the reeds. He peered out, saw the girls playing, and then shrank back, for he did not wish to be seen as he was, naked and bruised.

But Nausicaa threw the ball so hard that it sailed over the heads of the girls and fell near the clump of reeds where Ulysses was hiding. A girl ran to pick it up, then shrank back, screaming.

“A man!” she cried. “A man—all bloody and muddy.”

Ulysses reached out, plucked a spray of leaves from a fallen olive branch, and came out of the reeds.

The girls saw a naked man holding a club. His shoulders were bleeding, his legs muddy, and his hair crusted with salt. They fled, screaming. But Nausicaa stood where she was and waited for him.

“Is this why Athene sent me here?” she thought “Is this my husband, come out of the river? Is this what I am to take after all the beautiful young men I have refused? Come back, you silly geese,” she shouted to the girls. “Haven’t you ever seen a man before?”

Then she turned to Ulysses, who had fallen to his knees before her.

“Speak, grimy stranger,” she said. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“Do not set your dogs upon me,” said Ulysses. “I did not mean to surprise you in your glade.”

“What talk is this? Are you out of your head?”

“Forgive me, but I know the fate of Actaeon, who came upon you in the wood. You turned him into a stag and had your hounds tear him to pieces.”

“Whom do you take me for?”

“Why, you are Artemis, of course, Goddess of the Chase, maiden of the silver bow. I have heard poets praise your beauty, and I know you by your white arms. By your hair, and eyes, and the way you run—like light over water.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I am not Artemis. I am Nausicaa. My father is king of this island. And I ask again—who are you?”

“An unlucky man.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Strange places, princess. I am a sailor, hunted by a god who sends storms against me, wrecks my ships, kills my men. I come now from Ogygia, where I have been held captive by the Titaness, Calypso, who bound me with her spells. But as I was sailing away, a storm leaped out of the blue sky, smashing my boat. And I have been swimming in the sea for more than two days. I was dashed against the rocks of your coast but managed to swim around it till I found this river. When I came ashore here, I had no strength to go farther and fell where you found me.”

“I suppose no one would look his best after spending two days in the sea and being beaten against rocks. You tell a good story, I’ll say that for you. Why don’t you bathe in the river now and try to make yourself look human again. We can give you oil for anointing, and clean garments belonging to my brother. Then you can follow me to the castle and tell your story there.”

“Thank you, sweet princess,” said Ulysses.

He took the flask of oil and went into the river and bathed and anointed himself. When he came out, he found clean garments waiting. The serving girls helped him dress and combed out his tangled hair.

“Well,” said Nausicaa, “you look much improved. I can believe you’re some kind of chieftain now. Are you married?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. You would have to be, at your age.”

“I have not seen my wife for twenty years. She considers herself a widow.”

“Has she remarried?”

“Perhaps. I do not know. Last I heard, she was being besieged by suitors.”

“I am besieged by suitors, too, but haven’t found any I like well enough to marry.”

As they spoke at the bank of the river, the serving girls had been piling the laundry into the mule cart

“But I am thoughtless, keeping you here,” said Nausicaa. “You need food and rest. You must come to the castle and finish your story there.”

“The sight of your beauty is food and drink to me. And the sound of your voice makes me forget my weariness.”

She laughed. “Are you courting me, stranger?”

“I am a homeless wanderer. I cannot court a princess. But I can praise her beauty.”

“Come along to the castle. I want to introduce you to my father and mother. They are kind to strangers, very partial to brave men, and love to hear stories. And I want to hear more about you, too.”

Now, that day, as it happened, King Alcinous had consulted an oracle, who prophesied, saying:

“I see danger. I see a mountain blocking your harbor, destroying your commerce. I sense the cold wrath of the god of the sea.”

“But the earth-shaker has always favored us,” said the king. “He has showered blessings upon this island. Our fleets roam far, return laden. Why should he be angered now?”

“I do not know. It is not clear, it is not clear. But I say to you, O King, beware of strangers, shipwrecks, storytellers. Believe no tale, make no loan, suffer no harm.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. But there is no need to understand, only to obey.”

The oracle departed, leaving the king very thoughtful.

Just at this time, Nausicaa was leading Ulysses into the courtyard of the castle. She bade her maids take him to the guest house.

“Wait till I send for you,” she said. “Food will be brought, and wine.”

She raced to her mother’s chamber.

“Oh, Mother, Mother,” she cried. “I’m so glad I obeyed the dream and went to the river to wash our clothes. What do you think I found there? A man, hiding in the reeds, naked and wounded. I soon set him right and brought him here. Such an interesting man.”

“Brought him here? Here to the castle? Paraded a naked beggar through the streets for the whole town to see? My dear child, haven’t you given them enough to gossip about?”

“He’s no beggar, Mother. He’s a sailor or a pirate or something. Such stories he tells. Listen, he landed on an island once where men eat flowers that make them fall asleep and forget who they are. So they sleep all day and pick flowers all night and are very happy. This man’s crew went ashore and ate the flowers and forgot who they were and didn’t want to go back to the ship, just sleep. But he dragged them back anyway. I’d like to try those flowers, wouldn’t you?”

“Who is this man? What’s his name?”

“They came to another island where the sun and moon chase each other around the sky, and day flashes on like a lamp when you pass your hand over it. But you know who lived there? Giant cannibals, tall as trees, and they killed most of his men and cooked them in a big pot and broke two of his ships—and he had only one left.”

“I asked you his name.”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me. It’s a secret or something.”

“Do you believe everything he tells you?”

“Oh, yes. He’s not exactly handsome, but very strong-looking, you know. Too old though, much too old. And married, of course. But I don’t think he gets along with his wife. You can see he has suffered. You can see by his eyes.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the guest house. Don’t you think we should have a banquet for him tonight? He’s a distinguished visitor, isn’t he—all those things he did?”

“We don’t quite know what he is, do we, dear? I think I had better meet him myself first. Your father’s in a funny mood. Met with the oracle today, and something went wrong, I think.”

“Yes, yes, I want you to meet him before Father does. I want to know what you think. Shall I fetch him?”

“I’ll send a servant, child. You are not to see him again until I find out more about him. Do you understand?”

“Oh, yes, find out, find out! Tell me everything he says.”

Queen Arete spoke with Ulysses, and then went to her husband, the king, and told him of their visitor. She was amazed to see his face grow black with rage.

“By the gods,” he cried. “These are foul tidings you bring. Only today the oracle warned against strangers, shipwrecks, and storytellers. And now you tell me our daughter has picked up some nameless ruffian who combines all three—a shipwrecked stranger telling wild tales. Precisely what is needed to draw upon us the

wrath of the sea god. I shall sacrifice him to Poseidon, and there will be an end to it.”

“You may not do that,” said Arete.

“Who says ‘may not’ to me? I am king.”

“Exactly why you may not. Because you are king. The man comes to you as a suppliant. He is under your protection. If you harm him, you will bring down upon yourself the wrath of all the gods—not just one. That is the law of hospitality.”

So the king ordered a great banquet that night to honor his guest. But certain young men of the court who were skilled at reading the king’s moods knew that he was displeased and decided to advance themselves in his favor by killing the stranger and making it seem an accident.

“We will have games in the courtyard,” said Euryalus, their leader. “We will hurl discus and javelin, shoot with the bow, wrestle, and challenge him to take part. And, when he does, it may be that some unlucky throw of javelin, or misshot arrow, will rid us of his company. Or, perchance, if he wrestles, he will find his neck being broken. It looks to be a thick neck, but he has been long at sea and is unused to such exercises.”

So the young men began to hold their contests in the courtyard. When Ulysses stopped to watch them, Euryalus stepped forth and said, “There is good sport here, stranger, if you care to play.”

“No, thank you,” said Ulysses. “I’ll just watch.”

“Yes, of course,” said Euryalus. “These games are somewhat dangerous. And one can see that you are a man of prudence. But then, of course, you are rather old for such sports, aren’t you?”

He laughed sneeringly, picked up the heavy discus, whirled, and threw. It sailed through the air and landed with a clatter far away. All the young men laughed and cheered.

“Where I come from,” said Ulysses, “such little discs are given babies to teethe on. The grown men need a bit more to test them.”

He strode over to a battle chariot and broke off one of its wheels at the axle. It was a very heavy wheel, of oak bound with brass. He hefted it, and said:

“A little light, but it will do.”

For he was filled with the wild rage that makes a man ten times stronger than he really is. He cradled the great wheel, whirled, and threw. It flew through the air, far past where the discus had landed, and thudded against the inner wall of the courtyard, knocking a hole in it. He turned to the others, who were paralyzed with amazement

“Poor throw,” he said. “But then, as you say, I’m rather old for such sport. However, since we are gathered here in this friendly fashion, let us play more games. If any of you would like to try me with sword or spear or dagger, or even a simple cudgel, let him step forth. Or, perchance, there is one who would prefer to wrestle?”

“That was well thrown, stranger,” said Euryalus. “What is your name?”

“I do not choose to tell you my name, O athlete.”

“You are not courteous.”

“If you care to teach me manners, young sir, I offer again. Sword, spear, cudgel—any weapon you choose. Or no weapon at all except our hands.”

“We are civilized here in Phaeacia,” said Euryalus. “We do not fight with our guests. But I cannot understand why you refuse to tell us your name.”

“A god hunts me. If I say my name, it may attract his notice.”

The young men nodded. For this is what was believed at that time. But Euryalus ran to tell the king.

“I knew it,” said Alcinous. “He carries a curse. He is the very man the oracle warned me against. I must get rid of him. But the law of hospitality forbids me to kill him under my roof. So tonight we entertain him at a banquet. But tomorrow he leaves this castle, and we shall find a way to see that he does not return.”

“He is no weakling, this old sailor,” said Euryalus. “He throws the discus almost as well as I.”

Now, all this time, Nausicaa had been thinking about the stranger and weaving a plan, for she was determined to find out who he was. She visited the old bard who had taught her to play the lyre, and whose task it was to sing for the guests at the royal feasts. She spoke and laughed with the old man and fed him undiluted

wine until he lost his wits. Then she locked him in the stable, where he fell fast asleep on a bundle of straw, and she departed with his lyre.

At the banquet that night, when the king called for the bard to sing his tales, Nausicaa said, “The old man is ill and cannot come. However, if you permit, I shall sing for your guests.”

The king frowned. But Ulysses said, “This illness is a blessing, King. I think I should rather hear your black-haired daughter sing than the best bard who ever plucked a lyre.”

The king nodded. Nausicaa smiled and began to sing. She sang a tale of heroes. Of those who fought at Troy. She sang of fierce Achilles and mighty Ajax. Of Menelaus and his shattering war cry. Of brave Diomedes, who fought with Ares himself when the war god came in his brazen chariot to help the Trojans.

She watched Ulysses narrowly as she sang. She saw his face soften and his eyes grow dreamy, and she knew that he had been there and that she was singing of his companions. But she still did not know his name.

Then she began to sing of that master of strategy, the great trickster, Ulysses. She sang of the wooden horse and how the warriors hid inside while the Trojans debated outside, deciding what to do. Some of them wanted to chop it to pieces; others wished to take it to a cliff and push it off; still others wanted to bring it within the city as an offering to the gods—which, of course, was what Ulysses wanted them to do. She told of the men

hiding in the belly of the horse, listening to their fate being debated, and of the fierce joy that flamed in their hearts when they heard the Trojans decide to drag the horse within the walls. And of how, in the blackness of the night, they came out of the horse, and how Ulysses led the charge. She sang of him fighting there by the light of the burning houses, knee-deep in blood, and how he was invincible that night and carried everything before him.

And as she sang, she kept watching the stranger's face. She saw tears steal from between his clenched eyelids and roll down his cheeks. Amazed, the banqueters saw this hard-bitten sailor put his head in his hands and sob like a child.

He raised his streaming face and said, "Forgive me, gracious king. But the wonderful voice of your daughter has touched my heart For you must know that I am none other than Ulysses, of whom she sings."

A great uproar broke out. The young men cheered. The women wept. The king said:

"My court is honored, Ulysses. Your deeds are known wherever men love courage. Now that I know who you are, I put all my power and goods at your disposal. Name any favor you wish, and it shall be yours."

Ulysses said: "O King, if I were the age I was twenty years ago when the ships were launched at Aulis, then the favor I would ask is your daughter's hand. For surely I have traveled the whole world over without seeing her like. I knew Helen, whose beauty

kindled men to that terrible war. I knew the beauties of the Trojan court whom we took captive and shared among us. And, during my wanderings I have had close acquaintance with certain enchantresses whose charms are more than human, namely Circe and Calypso. Yet never have I seen a girl so lovely, so witty, so courteous and kind as your young daughter. Alas, it cannot be. I am too old. I have a wife I must return to, and a kingdom, and there are sore trials I must undergo before I can win again what belongs to me. So all I ask of you, great king, is a ship to take me to Ithaca, where my wife waits, my enemies wait, my destiny waits.”

Arete whispered to the king:

“Yes ... yes ... give him his ship tomorrow. I wish it could be tonight. See how your daughter looks at him; she is smitten to the heart. She is sick with love. Let him sail tomorrow. And be sure to keep watch at the wharf lest she stow away.”

“It shall be as you say, mighty Ulysses,” said the king. “Your ship will sail tomorrow.”

So Ulysses departed the next day on a splendid ship manned by a picked crew, laden with rich goods the king had given him as hero gifts.

It is said that Athene drugged Poseidon’s cup at the feast of the gods that night, so that he slept a heavy sleep and did not see that Ulysses was being borne to Ithaca. But Poseidon awoke in time to see the ship sailing back and understood what had happened. In a rage he snatched Athene’s Gorgon-head shield, the

sight of which turns men to stone, and flashed it before the ship just as it was coming into port after having left Ulysses at his island. The ship and all its crew turned to stone, blocking the harbor, as the oracle had foretold.

It is said, too, that Nausicaa never accepted any of the young men who came a-wooing, announcing that she was wedded to song. She became the first woman bard and traveled all the courts of the world singing her song of the heroes who fought at Troy, but especially of Ulysses and of his adventures among the terrible islands of the Middle Sea.

Some say that she finally came to the court of Ithaca to sing her song, and there she stayed. Others say that she fell in with a blind poet who took all her songs and wove them into one huge tapestry of song.

But it all happened too long ago to know the truth of it.

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The Return

ULYSSES HAD LANDED ON a lonely part of the shore. His enemies were in control of the island, and it was death to be seen. He stood on the empty beach and saw the Phaeacian ship depart. He was surrounded by wooden chests, leather bags, great bales—the treasure of gifts he had been given by Alcinous.

He looked about, at the beach and the cliff beyond, the wooded hills the color of the sky. He was home after twenty years, but it did not seem like home. It seemed as strange and unfriendly as any of the perilous isles he had landed on during his long wanderings. And he knew that Ithaca would not be his again until he could know it as king, until he had slain his enemies and regained his throne.

His first care was to find a cave in the cliffside, and there stow all his treasure. He moved swiftly now; he had planned his first moves on his homeward trip. It had helped him keep his thoughts away from Nausicaa. He took off his rich cloak and helmet and breastplate and hid them in the cave he had found, then laid his sword and spear beside them. He tore his tunic so that it hung in rags. He scooped up mud and smeared his face and arms and legs. Then he huddled his shoulders together and practiced a limping walk. Finally he was satisfied and began to hump away along the cliff road, no longer a splendid warrior, but a feeble old beggar.

He made his way to the hut of his swineherd, Eumaeus, a man his own age, who had served him all his life, and whom he trusted. Everything was the same here, he saw. The pigs were rooting in the trampled earth. There were four lanky hounds who started from their sleep and barked, as he came near.

A man came out of the hut and silenced the dogs. Ulysses felt the tears well in his eyes. It was Eumaeus, but so old, so gray.

“What do you want?” said the swineherd.

“Food, good sir. Such scraps as you throw to the hogs. I am not proud, I am hungry.”

“Ate you a native of these parts?” said Eumaeus.

“No. I come from Crete.”

“A long way for a beggar to come.”

“I was not always a beggar. I was a sailor once yes, and a captain of ships. I have seen better days.”

“That’s what all beggars say.”

“Sometimes it’s true. I once met a man from Ithaca, a mighty warrior and the most famous man I have ever met. He gave me a good opinion of Ithaca. It is a place, I know, where the hungry and helpless are not spurned.”

“I suppose this man you met was named Ulysses.”

“Why, yes. How did you guess?”

“Because I have heard that tale so many times. Do you think you’re the first beggar to come slinking around, pretending to have news of our king? Everyone knows that he vanished on his journey

home from Troy. Beggars swarm all over us trying to get some supper by telling lies.”

“Then you will give me no food?”

“I didn’t say that. Even liars have to eat. Ulysses never turned a beggar away, and neither will I.”

The swineherd fed Ulysses and then let him rest by the fire. Ulysses pretended to sleep but watched his host through half-closed eyes and saw that the man was staring at him. He stretched and yawned.

“Are you sure you’re a stranger to this island?” said Eumaeus. “Seems to me I’ve seen you before.”

“No,” said Ulysses. “You are mistaken. What shall I do now? Have I worn out my welcome, or may I sleep on your hearth tonight?”

“What will you do tomorrow?”

“Go to the castle and beg.”

“You will not be welcome there.”

“Why not? I will tell them how I met your king, and how kind he was to me. That should make them generous.”

“It won’t,” said Eumaeus. “It will probably get you killed. Those who hold the castle now want to hear nothing about him—except the sure news of his death.”

“How is that?”

“They hate him, because they do him harm. There are more than a hundred of them—rude, brawling young princes from

neighboring islands and thievish young nobles of this island. They dwell in his castle as if they had taken it after a siege and seek to marry his wife, Penelope, refusing to leave until she accepts one of them. They drink his wine, devour his stores, break up the furniture for firewood, roister all night, and sleep all day. Do you know how many hogs I have to bring them? Fifty a day. That is how gluttonous they are. My herds are shrinking fast, but they say they will kill me the first day I fail to bring them fifty hogs.”

“I heard he had a grown son. Why does he not defend his father’s goods?”

“He’s helpless. There are too many of them.”

“Is he at the castle now?”

“No one knows where he is. He slipped away one night. Just as well. They were planning to kill him. The rumor is that he took ship and crew and went to seek his father. I hope he stays away. They will surely kill him if he returns.”

“I go there tomorrow,” said Ulysses. “It sounds like splendid begging. Such fiery young men are frequently generous, especially with other people’s goods.”

“You don’t know them,” said Eumaeus. “They are like wild beasts. But you cannot keep a fool from his folly. Go, if you must. In the meantime, sleep.”

Now, upon this night Telemachus was at sea, sailing toward Ithaca. He had found no news of his father and was coming home with a very heavy heart. He would have been even more distressed

had he known that a party of the wicked suitors were lying in wait for him aboard a swift ship full of fighting men. The ship was hidden in a cove, and the suitors meant to pounce upon him as he put into port.

But Athene saw this and made a plan. She went to Poseidon and said:

“I know you are angry with me, Uncle, for helping Ulysses. But now I wish to make it up to you. See, down there is a ship from Ithaca.” She pointed to the suitors’ vessel. “No doubt it holds friends of Ulysses, sailing out to meet their king. Why not do them a mischief?”

“Why not?” growled Poseidon.

And he wound a thick black mist about the suitors’ ship so that it was impossible for the helmsman to see.

“Nevertheless,” he said to Athene. “I still owe Ulysses himself a great mischief. I have not forgotten. In the meantime, let his friends suffer a bit.”

The suitors’ ship lay helpless in the mist, and Telemachus, sailing past them, ignorant of danger, put into port and disembarked.

Athene then changed herself into a young swineherd and hailed Telemachus on the beach:

“Greetings, my lord. I am sent by your servant, Eumaeus, to beg you to come to his hut before you go to the castle. He has important news to tell.”

The lad set off, and Telemachus followed him toward the swineherd's hut.

Ulysses, dozing by the fire, heard a wild clamor of hounds outside, then a ringing young voice calling to them. He listened while the snarls turned to yaps of pleasure.

"It is my young master," cried Eumaeus, springing up. "Glory to the gods—he has come softly home."

Telemachus strode in. He was flushed from his walk. His face and arms were wet with the night fog, and his red-gold hair was webbed with tiny drops. To Ulysses he looked all aglitter, fledged by firelight, a golden lad. And Ulysses felt a shaft of wild joy pierce him like a spear, and for the first time he realized that he had come home.

But Telemachus was displeased to see the old beggar by the fire, for he wished to speak to Eumaeus privately to ask him how matters stood at the castle and whether it was safe for him to return.

"I do not wish to be discourteous, old man," he said, "but would you mind very much sleeping in the pig byre? You can keep quite warm there, and there are secret matters I wish to discuss."

"Be not wroth, my lord, that I have given this man hospitality," said Eumaeus. "He claims to have met your father once. A pitiful beggar's tale, no doubt, but it earned him a meal and a bed."

"Met my father? Where? When? Speak!"

But at the word “father,” Ulysses could not endure it any longer. The voice of the young man saying that word destroyed all his strategies. The amazed Eumaeus saw the old beggar leap from his stool, lose his feebleness, grow wilder, taller, and open his arms and draw the young man to him in a great bear-hug.

“Dearest son,” said the stranger, his voice broken with tears. “I am your father, Ulysses.”

Telemachus thought he was being attacked and tensed his muscles, ready to battle for his life. But when he heard these words and felt the old man’s tears burning against his face, then his marrow melted, and he laid his head on his father’s shoulder and wept.

Nor could the honest old swineherd say anything; his throat was choked with tears, too. Ulysses went to Eumaeus and embraced him, saying: “Faithful old friend, you have served me well. And if tomorrow brings victory, you will be well rewarded.”

Then he turned to his son and said, “The goddess herself must have led you here tonight. Now I can complete my plan. Tomorrow we strike our enemies.”

“Tomorrow? Two men against a hundred? These are heavy odds, even for Ulysses.”

“Not two men—four. There is Eumaeus here, who wields a good cudgel. There is the neatherd whom we can count on. And, no doubt, at the castle itself we will find a few more faithful servants. But it is not a question of numbers. We shall have surprise on our

side. They think I am dead, remember, and that you are helpless. Now, this is the plan. You must go there in the morning, Telemachus, pretending great woe. Tell them you have learned on your journey that I am indeed dead and that now you must advise your mother to take one of them in marriage. This will keep them from attacking you—for a while anyway—and will give us the time we need. I shall come at dusk, just before the feasting begins.”

“What of my mother? Shall I tell her that you are alive?”

“By no means.”

“It is cruel not to.”

“It will prove a kindness later. Women cannot keep secrets, and we have a battle to fight. No, bid her dress in her finest garments, and anoint herself, and be as pleasant as she can to the suitors, for this will help disarm them. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“Now, mark this well. You will see me being insulted, humiliated, beaten perhaps. Do not lose your temper and be drawn into a quarrel before we are ready to fight. For I must provoke the suitors to test their mettle and see where we should strike first.”

Telemachus knelt in the firelight and said, “Sire, I shall do as you bid. I don’t see how we can overcome a hundred strong men, but to die fighting at your side will be a greater glory than anything a long life can bestow. Thank you, Father, for giving me this chance to share your fortune.”

“You are my true son,” said Ulysses, embracing the boy tenderly. “The words you have just spoken make up for the twenty years of you I have missed.”

Eumaeus banked the fire, and they all lay down to sleep.

Ulysses came to the castle at dusk the next day and followed Eumaeus into the great banquet hall, which was thronged with suitors. He humped along behind the swineherd, huddling his shoulders and limping. The first thing he saw was a dog lying near a bench. By its curious golden brown color he recognized it as his own favorite hunting hound, Argo. It was twenty-one years old, incredibly old for a dog, and it was crippled and blind and full of fleas. But Telemachus had not allowed it to be killed because it had been his father's.

As Ulysses approached, the dog's raw stump of a tail began to thump joyously upon the floor. The tattered old ears raised. The hound staggered to his feet, let out one wild bark of welcome, and leaped toward the beggar. Ulysses caught him in his arms. The dog licked his face, shivered, and died. Ulysses stood there holding the dead dog.

Then Antinous, one of the most arrogant of the suitors, who fancied himself a great jokster, strode up and said, “What are you going to do with that dead dog, man, eat him? Things aren't that bad. We have a few scraps to spare, even for a scurvy old wretch like you.”

Ulysses said, “Thank you, master. I am grateful for your courtesy. I come from Crete, and—”

“Shut up!” said Antinous. “Don’t tell me any sad stories. Now take that thing out and bury it.”

“Yes, gracious sir. And I hope I have the honor of performing a like service for you one day.”

“Oho,” cried Antinous. “The churl has a tongue in his head. Well, well ...”

He seized a footstool and smashed it over Ulysses’ back. Telemachus sprang forward, blazing with anger, but Eumaeus caught his arm.

“No,” he whispered. “Hold your peace.”

Ulysses bowed to Antinous and said, “Forgive me, master. I meant but a jest. I go to bury the dog.”

As soon as he left the room, they forgot all about him. They were agog with excitement about the news told by Telemachus, that Ulysses’ death had been confirmed, and that Penelope would now choose one of them to wed. They crowded about Telemachus, shouting questions.

He said, “Gently, friends, gently. My mother will announce her choice during the course of the night. But first she desires that you feast and make merry.”

The young men raised a great shout of joy, and the feasting began. Ulysses returned and went the round of the suitors, begging scraps of food. Finally he squatted near Eurymachus, a fierce

young fellow whom he recognized to be their leader. Eurymachus scowled at him, but said nothing.

Into the banquet hall strode another beggar—a giant, shaggy man. He was a former smith who had decided that it was easier to beg than to work at the forge. He was well liked by the suitors because he wheedled and flattered them and ran their errands. He swaggered over to Ulysses and grasped him by the throat

“Get out of here, you miserable cur,” he said. “Any begging around here to do, I’ll do it. I, Iros.”

He raised his huge, meaty fist and slammed it down toward Ulysses’ head. But Ulysses, without thinking, butted the man in the stomach, knocking him back against the wall.

“Look at that,” cried Eurymachus. The old souse has a head like a goat. For shame, Iros, you ought to be able to squash him with your thumb.”

“Exactly what I intend to do,” said Iros, advancing on Ulysses.

“A fight! A fight!” cried the suitors. “A beggar-bout. Good sport”

They crowded around the beggars, leaving just space enough for them to move.

Ulysses thought quickly. He could not risk revealing himself for what he was, yet he had to get rid of the fellow. So he shrank into his rags, as though fearful, allowing Iros to approach. Then, as the great hands were reaching for him and the suitors were cheering and jeering, he swung his right arm, trying to measure the force of

the blow exactly. His fist landed on the smith's chin. The suitors heard a dry, cracking sound, as when you snap a chicken bone between your fingers, and they knew that their man's jaw was broken. He fell to the floor, unconscious, blood streaming from mouth and nose. Ulysses stooped and hoisted him over his shoulder and marched out of the banquet room, saying, "I'd better let him bleed outside. It will be less unpleasant for you gentlemen."

He draped the big man over a stile and came back.

"Well-struck, old bones," said Eurymachus. "You fight well for a beggar."

"A beggar?" said Ulysses. "What is a beggar, after all? One who asks for what he has not earned, who eats others' food, uses their goods? Is this not true? If so, young sir, I think you could become a member of our guild tomorrow."

Eurymachus carefully wiped the knife that he had been using to cut his meat and held the point to Ulysses' throat.

"Your victory over that other piece of vermin seems to have given you big ideas," he said. "Let me warn you, old fool, if you say one word more to me that I find unfitting, I will cut you up into little pieces and feed you to the dogs. Do you understand?"

"I understand, master," said Ulysses. "I meant but a jest."

"The next jest will be your last," growled Eurymachus.

Telemachus stepped between them and said, "Beggar, come with me to my mother. She has heard that you are a voyager and would question you about the places you have seen."

“What?” cried Eurymachus. “Take this stinking bundle of rags to your mother? She will have to burn incense for hours to remove the stench.”

“You forget yourself, sir,” said Telemachus. “You have not yet been accepted by my mother. She is still free to choose her own company.”

Eurymachus played with his knife, glaring at Telemachus. He was angry enough to kill, but he did not wish to lose his chance with Penelope by stabbing her son. So he stepped aside and let Telemachus lead the old beggar out of the hall.

“You have done well,” whispered Ulysses. “Another second and I would have been at the cur’s throat, and we would have been fighting before we were ready. Besides, it is time I spoke to your mother. She enters our plans now.”

When he was alone with Penelope, he sat with his face lowered. He did not wish to look at her. For her presence set up a great, shuddering tenderness inside him, and he knew that he had to keep himself hard and cruel for the work that lay ahead.

“In this chamber, you are not a beggar, you are a guest,” said Penelope. “So take your comfort, please. Be at ease here with me, and tell me your tidings. I understand you met my husband, Ulysses, once upon your voyages.”

“Beautiful queen,” said Ulysses. “I knew him well. Better than I have admitted. I am a Cretan. I was a soldier. When the war with Troy started I went as part of a free-booting band to sell our swords

to the highest bidder. We took service with your husband, Ulysses, and I fought under his banner for many years. Now his deeds before Troy have become famous in the time that has passed since the city was destroyed. Bards sing them from court to court all over the lands of the Middle Sea. Let me tell you a little story, though, that has never been told.

“I lay with him in that famous wooden horse, you know. We crouched in the belly of the horse that was dragged into Troy and set before the altar as an offering to the gods. The Trojans were crowding around, looking at this marvelous wooden beast, wondering at it, for such a thing had never been seen. But Queen Helen knew the truth somehow and, being a mischief-loving lady always, tapped on the belly of the horse, imitating the voices of the heroes’ wives. She did it so cunningly that they could have sworn they heard their own wives calling to them and were about to leap out of the horse too soon, which would have been death.

“Now, Helen saved your voice till last. And when she imitated it, I heard Ulysses groan, felt him tremble. He alone was clever enough to know it was a trick, but your voice, even mimicked, struck him to the heart. And he had to mask his distress and use all his force and authority to keep the others quiet. A tiny incident madame, but it showed me how much he loved you.”

Penelope said: “Truly, this is a story never told. And yet I think that of all the mighty deeds that are sung, I like this little one best.”

Her face was wet with tears. She took a bracelet from her wrist and threw it to him, saying, “Here is a gift. Small payment for such a tale.”

“Thank you, Queen,” said Ulysses. “My path crossed your husband’s once again. My ship sailed past the Island of the Dawn. We had run out of water and were suffering from thirst and there we saw a marvelous thing: A fountain of water springing out of the sea, pluming, and curling upon itself. We tasted it and it was fresh, and we filled our water barrels. When I told about this in the next port, I learned how such a wonder had come to be. The enchantress, Circe, most beautiful of the daughters of the gods, had loved your husband and sought to keep him with her. But he told her that he must return to his wife, Penelope. After he left, she wept such tears of love as burned the salt out of the sea and turned it into a fountain of pure water.”

Penelope took a necklace from her neck and said, “I liked the first story better, but this is lovely, too.”

Ulysses said, “Thank you, Queen. I have one thing more to tell. Your husband and I were talking one time around the watch-fire on a night between battles, and he spoke, as soldiers speak, of home. He said that by the odds of war, he would probably leave you a widow. And, since you were beautiful, you would have many suitors and would be hard put to decide. Then he said, ‘I wish I could send her this advice: Let her take a man who can bend my

bow. For that man alone will be strong enough to serve her as husband, and Ithaca as king.’ ”

“Did he say that—truly?”

“Truly.”

“How can I ask them to try the bow? They will jeer at me. They may feel offended and do terrible things.”

“Disguise your intention. Tell them you cannot decide among such handsome, charming suitors. And so you will let their own skill decide. They are to hold an archery contest, using the great bow of Ulysses, and he who shoots best to the mark will win you as wife. They cannot refuse such a challenge, their pride will not permit them to. Now, good night, lady. Thank you for your sweet company. I shall see you, perchance, when the bow is bent.”

“Good night, old wanderer,” said Penelope. “I shall never forget the comfort you have brought me.”

As Ulysses was making his way through the dark hallway, something clutched his arm and hissed at him:

“Ulysses ... Ulysses ... My master, my king ... my baby ... my lord ...”

He bent his head and saw that it was an old woman and recognized his nurse, Eurycleia, who had known him from the day he was born, and who had tended him through his childhood.

“Dear little king,” she wept “You’re back ... you’re back. I knew you would come. I told them you would.”

Very gently he put his hand over her mouth and whispered: “Silence ... No one must know, not even the queen. They will kill me if they find out Silence ... silence ...”

She nodded quickly, smiling with her sunken mouth, and shuffled away.

Ulysses lurked outside the banquet hall until he heard a great roar from the suitors and knew that Penelope had come among them. He listened outside and heard her announce that she would choose the man, who, using her husband’s great bow, would shoot best to the mark. He heard young men break into wild cheers. Then he hid himself as Telemachus, leading the suitors into the courtyard, began to set out torches for the shooting. Then it was that he slipped unnoticed into the castle and went to the armory where the weapons were kept. He put on a breastplate and arranged his rags over it so that he looked as he had before. Then he went out into the courtyard.

All was ready for the contest. An avenue of torches burned, making it bright as day. In the path of light stood a row of battle-axes driven into the earth, their rings aligned. Each archer would attempt to shoot through those rings. Until now only Ulysses himself had been able to send an arrow through all twelve axe-rings.

Now Penelope, followed by her servants, came down the stone steps carrying the great bow. She handed it to Telemachus, saying:

“You, son, will see that the rules are observed.” Then, standing tall and beautiful in the torchlight, she said, “I have given my word to choose as husband he who best shoots to the mark, using this bow. I shall retire to my chamber now, as is fitting, and my son will bring me the name of my next husband. Now may the gods reward you according to your deserts.”

She turned and went back into the castle. The noise fell. The young men grew very serious as they examined the great bow. It was larger than any they had ever seen, made of dark polished wood, stiffened by rhinoceros horn, and bound at the tips by golden wire. Its arrows were held in a bull-hide quiver; their shafts were of polished ash, their heads of copper, and they were tailed with hawk feathers.

Ulysses squatted in the shadows and watched the suitors as they crowded around Telemachus, who was speaking.

“Who goes first? Will you try, sir?”

Telemachus handed the bow to a prince of Samos, a tall, brawny man, and a skilled archer.

He grasped the bow in his left hand, the dangling cord in his right, and tugged at the cord in the swift, sure movement that is used to string a bow.

But it did not bend. He could not make the cord reach from one end to the other. He put one end of the bow on the ground and grasped the other end and put forth all his strength. His back muscles glistened like oil in the torchlight. The bow bent a bit

under the enormous pressure, and a low sighing sound came from the crowd, but when he tugged on the cord, the bow twisted in his hand as if it were a serpent and leaped free. He staggered and almost fell. An uneasy laugh arose. He looked wildly about, then stomped away, weeping with rage.

Telemachus picked up the bow and said, "Next."

One by one they came; one by one they fell back. Not one of them could bend the bow! Finally, all had tried but Antinous and Eurymachus. Now Antinous was holding the bow. He shook his head and said:

"It is too stiff; it cannot be bent. It has not been used for twenty years. It must be rubbed with tallow and set by the fire to soften."

"Very well," said Telemachus.

He bade a servant rub the bow with tallow and set it near the fire. Ulysses kept out of sight. As they were waiting, Telemachus had a serving girl pass out horns of wine to the suitors. The men drank thirstily, but there was no laughter. They were sullen. Their hearts were ashen with hatred; they did not believe the bow could be softened. And Ulysses heard them muttering to each other that the whole thing was a trick.

Finally, Antinous called for the bow. He tried to string it. He could not.

"It cannot be done," he cried.

"No," said Eurymachus. "It cannot be done. I will not even try. This is a trick, another miserable, deceitful trick. Shroud that is

never woven, bow that cannot be bent, there is no end to this widow's cunning. I tell you she is making fools of us. She will not be taken unless she be taken by force."

A great shouting and clamor arose. The suitors pressed close about Telemachus, hemming him in so tightly he could not draw his sword.

"Stop!" shouted Ulysses.

He cried it with all his force, in the great bellowing, clanging battle voice that had rung over spear shock and clash of sword to reach the ears of his men on so many fields before Troy. His great shout quelled the clamor. The amazed suitors turned to see the old beggar stride out of the shadows into the torchlight. He came among them, grasped the bow, and said, "I pray you, sirs, let me try."

Antinous howled like a wolf and sprang toward Ulysses with drawn sword. But Telemachus stepped between them and shoved Antinous back.

"My mother watches from her chamber window," he said. "Shall she see you as cowards, afraid to let an old beggar try what you cannot do? Do you think she would take any of you then?"

"Yes, let him try," said Eurymachus. "Let the cur have one last moment in which he pretends to be a man. And when he fails, as fail he must, then we'll chop his arms off at the shoulders so that he will never again be tempted to draw bow with his betters."

"Stand back," cried Telemachus. "Let him try."

The suitors fell back, their swords still drawn. Ulysses held the bow. He turned it lightly in his hands, delicately, tenderly, like a bard tuning his lyre. Then he took the cord and strung the bow with a quick turn of his wrist, and as the suitors watched, astounded, he held the bow from him and plucked the cord, making a deep vibrating harp note. Dumbfounded, they saw him reach into the quiver, draw forth an arrow, notch it, then bend the bow easily, powerfully, until the arrowhead rested in the circle of his fingers, just clearing the polished curve of the bow.

He stood there for a second, narrowing his eyes at the mark, then let the arrow fly. The cord twanged, the arrow sang through the air, and passed through the axe-rings, all twelve of them.

Then, paralyzed by amazement, they saw him calmly sling the quiver over his shoulder and straighten up so that his breastplate gleamed through the rags. He stood tall and, throwing back his head, spoke to the heavens:

“So the dread ordeal ends, and I come to claim my own. Apollo, dear lord of the silver bow, archer-god, help me now to hit a mark no man has hit before.”

“It is he!” cried Antinous. “Ulysses!”

He died, shouting. For Ulysses had notched another arrow, and this one caught Antinous full in the throat. He fell, spouting blood.

No suitor moved. They looked at the twitching body that had been Antinous and felt a heavy sick fear, as if Apollo himself had

come to loose his silver shaft among them. Eurymachus found his tongue and cried: "Pardon us, great Ulysses. We could not know you had returned. If we have done you evil, we will repay you, but hold your hand."

"Too late," said Ulysses. "Your evil can be repaid only by death. Now fight, or flee."

Then Eurymachus raised his sword and called to the suitors, "Up, men! Rouse yourselves, or he will kill us all as we stand here. Let us kill him first."

And he rushed toward Ulysses and fell immediately with an arrow through his chest. But he had roused them out of their torpor. They knew now that they must fight for their lives, and they charged across the yard toward Ulysses in a great half-circle.

Ulysses retreated slowly, filling the air with arrows, dropping a suitor with each shaft. But still they kept coming through the heaped dead. Now he darted backward suddenly, followed by Telemachus and Eumaeus, the swineherd, who had been protecting him with their shields. They ran into the dining hall and slammed the great portal, which immediately began to shake under the axe blows of the suitors.

"Overturn the benches," cried Ulysses. "Make a barricade."

The neatherd had joined them. And now Telemachus and the two men overturned the heavy wooden benches, making a barricade. They stood behind the wall of benches and watched the huge door splintering.

It fell. The suitors poured through. Now Ulysses shot the rest of his arrows so quickly that the dead bodies piled up in the doorway making a wall of flesh through which the suitors had to push their way.

His quiver was empty. Ulysses cast the bow aside and took two javelins. But he did not throw. For the suitors were still too far away, and he had to be sure of killing each time he threw.

A suitor named Agelaus had taken charge now, and he motioned to his men: “Let fly your spears—first you, then you, then the rest. And after each cast of spears let us move closer to the benches.”

The long spears hurtled past the rampart. One grazed Telemachus’ shoulder, drawing blood. And Ulysses, seeing the blood of his son, lost the battle-coldness for which he was famous among warriors. For the first time he felt the wild, hot, curdling rage rising in him like wine, casting a mist of blood before his eyes. Without making a decision to move, he felt his legs carrying him toward the great hearth. There he knelt and grasped the ring of the firestone—a huge slab of rock, large enough for a roasting ox. The suitors, charging toward the wall of benches, saw him rise like a vision out of the past, like some Titan in the War of the Gods, holding an enormous slab of rock over his head.

They saw their danger and tried to draw back, tried to scatter. But Ulysses had hurled the slab. It fell among the suitors and crushed them like beetles in their frail armor.

Only four of the suitors were left alive. Now Ulysses and Telemachus and the two servants were upon them—one to each and each killed his man. Then Ulysses and Telemachus raised a wild, exultant yell. Dappled with blood, they turned to each other, and Ulysses embraced his son.

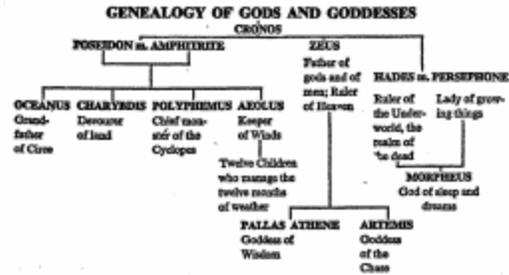
“Well struck,” he said. Then, to Eumaeus, “Thank you, good friend. Now go tell your queen, Penelope, that the contest has been decided, and the winner claims her hand.”

“Father,” said Telemachus. “When I reach my full strength, shall I be able to bend the great bow?”

“Yes,” said Ulysses. “I promise you. I will teach you everything you have to know. I have come home.”

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Addenda



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FROM ANCIENT MYTHS TO MODERN ENGLISH

MANY OF THE WORDS we use in present-day English have come from ancient Greek myths and legends. These names from the adventures of Ulysses have become familiar words to us:

Calypso, whom Ulysses meets on the island of Ogygia, sings a sad song at his departure. Do you know of a song sung by the natives of another island, Trinidad?

Gorgon, the hideous face upon Athene's shield, was a woman with snaky hair. A glimpse of her turned anyone to stone. Nausicaa sees her in a dream, and her father's sailors are turned to stone when Poseidon flashes the shield before them. Today, any ugly or repulsive woman might be called a *Gorgon*.

Morpheus, the shaper of dreams and the bringer of sleep, almost tranquilized Ulysses' men forever. A powerful narcotic drug now carries his name: *morphine*.

Oracle. Ancient men consulted oracles, mediums by which the gods revealed hidden knowledge and future events to mortals. Teiresias foretells Ulysses' future, and Alcinous is warned of strangers by an oracle. What kind of information today might we describe as *oracular*?

Siren. You remember the ugly bird-women who lured poor sailors to their doom. But the songs were beautiful enough to drive

Ulysses mad. Today, a *siren* is any alluring, dangerous female.

Tantalus, whom Ulysses hoped to meet in Hades, has been given a terrible punishment there. He is perpetually tempted by food and drink, which are always just beyond reach. What do we mean today when we speak of being *tantalized*?

Titan. Calypso, larger than life, was one of the breed of Titans, tremendous in size and strength. Our word is *titanic*. What might it mean?

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BERNARD EVSLIN

THE **DOLPHIN RIDER**

AND OTHER GREEK MYTHS



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The Dolphin Rider

And Other Greek Myths

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*For Tanya
who listens with her eyes*

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The Dolphin Rider

This is the tale of Arion. He was a very talented young man who asked Apollo, the god of music, to teach him the lyre. Apollo was so amused by this bold request, which no one in the world had dared to make before, that he taught Arion to play the lyre most beautifully.

Now Arion lived in a city near the sea called Corinth. He was a bold, adventure-loving youth, and wanted very much to travel. But when he was a child an oracle, foretelling the future, had said, "Avoid the sea. For no ship will bring you back from any voyage you make." Arion's parents believed this, and made him stay at home.

But the boy grew more restless every day. He would go down to the harbor and watch the ships scudding out to the open sea, their sails spread to the wind. When he saw this he felt full of longing for far places. He would unsling his lyre and sing a song of ships and storms and castaways... of giants and cannibals and sea-monsters, and all the adventures he had dreamed of.

His song was so beautiful that dolphins rose to the surface to listen. They sat there in the water, balancing themselves on their tails, listening. Sometimes they wept great salt tears. When Arion stopped singing, they clapped their flippers, shouting, "Bravo! Bravo! More...More!" and he would have to sing again. Often he sang to them all night long. And when the stars paled he could see giant shadows gliding nearby — swordfish and sharks, devilfish and giant turtles, which had risen from the depths, not for an easy meal, but to listen to the enchanting sounds he was making.

Then, for his twentieth birthday, Apollo gave Arion a golden lyre. The youth was eager to try it out at the great music festival held in Sicily.

“Oracles and soothsayers are gloomy by nature,” he told himself. “How often do they tell you anything happy? They try to scare you so that you’ll come back and pay them again, hoping to hear something better. Anyway, that’s what I choose to believe, for I must see the world no matter what happens.”

So Arion took his lyre and set sail for Sicily. He played and sang so beautifully in the festival that the audience went mad with delight. They heaped gifts upon him — a jeweled sword, a suit of silver armor, an ivory bow and quiver of bronze-tipped arrows, and a fat bag of gold. Arion was so happy that he forgot all about the prophecy. In his eagerness to get home and tell about his triumphs, he took the first ship back to Corinth, although the captain was a huge, ugly, dangerous-looking fellow, with an even uglier crew.

On the first afternoon out, Arion was sitting in the bow, gazing at the purple sea, when the captain strode up and said, “Pity — you’re so young to die.”

“Am I to die young?” Arion asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely certain.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I’m going to kill you.”

“That does seem a pity,” said Arion. “When is this sad event to take place?”

“Soon. In fact, immediately.”

“But why? What have I done?”

“Something foolish. You let yourself become the owner of a treasure that I must have — that jewelled sword, the silver armor, not to mention that delicious, fat bag of gold. You should never show things like that to thieves.”

“Why can’t you take what you want without killing me?”

“Too big a risk, my boy. You might complain to the king about being robbed, and that would be very dangerous for us. So you have to go. I’m sure you understand.”

“I see you’ve thought the matter over carefully,” said Arion. “Well, I have only this to ask: Let me sing a last song before I die.”

At the music festival, Arion had composed a song of praise to be sung on special occasions. And he sang it now — praising first Apollo, who had taught him music, then old Neptune, master of the sea. He sang praise to the sea itself and those who dwell there — the gulls and ocean nymphs and gliding fish. He sang to the magic changefulness of the waters, which put on different colors as the sun climbs and sinks.

So singing, Arion leaped from the bow of the ship, lyre in hand, and plunged into the sea.

He had sung so beautifully that the creatures of the deep had swum up to hear him. Among them was a school of dolphins. The largest one quickly dived, then rose to the surface, lifting Arion on his back.

“Thank you, friend,” said Arion.

“A poor favor to return for such heavenly music,” said the dolphin as he swam away with Arion on his back.

The other dolphins danced along on the water, as Arion played. They swam very swiftly and brought Arion to Corinth a day before the ship was due. He went immediately to his friend, Periander, king of Corinth, and told him his story. Then he took the king down to the waterfront to introduce him to the dolphin that had saved his life. The dolphin, who had become very fond of Arion, longed to stay with him in Corinth. So the king had the river dammed up to make a giant pool on the palace grounds, and there the dolphin stayed when he wished to visit Arion.

When the thieves’ ship arrived in port, captain and crew were seized by the king’s guard and taken to the castle. Arion stayed hidden.

“Why have you taken us captive, oh king?” said the captain. “We are peaceable law-abiding sailors.”

“My friend Arion took passage on your ship!” roared the king. “Where is he? What have you done with him?”

“Poor lad,” said the captain. “He was quite mad. He was on deck singing to himself one day, and then suddenly jumped overboard. We put out a small boat, circled the spot for hours. We couldn’t find a trace. Sharks probably. Sea’s full of them there.”

“And what do you do to a man-eating shark when you catch him?” asked the king.

“Kill him, of course,” said the captain. “We can’t let them swim free and eat other sailors.”

“A noble sentiment,” said Arion, stepping out of his hiding place. “That’s exactly what we do to two-legged sharks in Corinth.”

So the captain and his crew were taken out and hanged. The ship was searched and Arion found all that had been taken from him. He insisted on dividing the gifts with the king. When Periander protested, Arion laughed and said: “Treasures are trouble. You’re a king and can handle them. But I’m a minstrel and must travel light.”

And all his life Arion sang songs of praise. His music grew in power and beauty until people said he was a second Orpheus. When he died Apollo set him in the sky — and his lyre, and the dolphin too. They shine in the night sky still, the stars of constellations we still call the Lyre and the Dolphin.

The Gift of Fire

Prometheus was a bold young giant who insisted on finding things out for himself. He feared no one, not even Zeus, who ruled the gods on Mount Olympus and the men on earth, and kept everyone frightened with his mighty thunderbolt. Prometheus knew how much the powerful god hated questions about his rule, but the young giant asked them anyway when there was something he wanted to know.

One morning he walked up to Zeus and said, “Oh, thunderer, I do not understand. You have put men on earth, but you keep them in fear and darkness.”

“Perhaps you had better leave all matters concerning man to me,” said Zeus in a warning tone. “Their fear, as you call it, is simply respect for the gods. The ‘darkness’ is the peaceful shadow of my law. Man is happy now. And he will remain happy — unless someone tells him he is *unhappy*. Let us not speak of this again.”

But Prometheus persisted. “Look at man!” he said. “Look below. There he crouches in cold dark caves. He is at the mercy of the beasts and the weather. He even eats his meat raw. Tell me why you refuse to give man the gift of fire.”

Zeus answered, “Don’t you know, Prometheus, that every gift has a price? And the cost of the gift is usually more than it is worth. Man does not have fire, true. He has not learned the crafts which go with fire. But he is lucky all the same. He does not suffer disease, or warfare, or old age, or that inward sickness called worry. He is quite happy without fire. And so, I say, he shall remain.”

“Man is happy the way animals are happy,” retorted Prometheus. “What was the sense of creating this race called man if he must live like the beasts,

without fire? He doesn't even have any fur to keep him warm."

"He is different from the beasts in other ways," said Zeus. "Man needs someone to worship. And we gods need someone to worship us. That is why man was made."

"But wouldn't fire and the things that fire can do for him make him more interesting?"

"More interesting, perhaps, but much more dangerous. Like the gods, man is full of pride. It would take very little to make this pride swell to giant size. If I improve man's lot, he will forget the very thing which makes him so pleasing to us: his need to worship and obey. He will become poisoned with pride and begin to fancy that he himself is a god. Before we know it he will be storming Mount Olympus. You have said enough, Prometheus. I have been patient with you. Do not try me too far. Go now, and trouble me no more with your questions."

But Prometheus was not satisfied. All that night he lay awake making plans. When dawn came he left his bed and, standing tiptoe on Olympus, stretched his arm to the eastern horizon, where the first faint flames of the sun were flickering. In his hand he held a reed filled with dry fiber. He thrust it into the sunrise until a spark smouldered. Then he put the reed in his tunic and came down from the mountain.

At first, men were frightened by his gift. It was so hot, so quick. It bit sharply when you touched it, and set the shadows dancing. The men thanked Prometheus, but they asked him to take away his gift.

But instead Prometheus took the haunch of a newly killed deer and held it over the fire. When the meat began to sear and sputter, filling the cave with the rich smell of roasting venison, the people went mad with hunger. They flung themselves on the meat, and ate greedily, burning their tongues.

"That which cooked the meat is called fire," Prometheus told them. "It is an ill-natured spirit, a little brother of the sun, but if you handle it carefully it can change your whole life. You must feed it with twigs — but only until it is big enough to roast your meat or heat your cave. Then you must stop, or it will eat everything in sight, and you too. If it escapes, use this magic — water. If you touch it with water it will shrink to the right size again."

Prometheus left the fire burning in the first cave, and the children stared at it, wide-eyed. Then he went to every cave in the land, bringing his gift of fire.

For some time afterward, Zeus was kept busy with the affairs of the gods. Then, one day, he looked down from Mt. Olympus, and was amazed. Everything had changed. Zeus saw woodsmen's huts, farmhouses, villages, walled towns, even a castle or two. He saw men cooking their food and carrying torches to light their way at night. He saw forges blazing, men beating out ploughs, keels, swords, spears. They were making ships and raising white winds of sails, daring to use the fury of the winds for their journeys. They were even wearing helmets, and riding out to do battle — like the gods themselves.

Zeus was very angry. He seized his largest thunderbolt. "So men want fire," he said to himself. "I'll give them fire — more than they can use. I'll burn their miserable little ball of earth to a cinder."

But then another thought came to him and he lowered his arm. "No," he said to himself. "I'll attend to these mortals later. My first business is with Prometheus. And when I finish with him no one else — man, god, or giant — will dare to disobey me."

Zeus then called his guards and had them seize Prometheus. He ordered them to drag him off to the far north. There they bound Prometheus to a mountain peak with great chains specially forged by the god of fire. These chains were so strong that even a giant could not break them, no matter how hard he struggled. When the friend of man was bound to the mountain, Zeus sent two vultures to hover about him forever, tearing at his vitals, and eating his liver.

Men knew that a terrible thing was happening on the mountain, but they did not know what it was. They could hear the wind shriek like a giant in torment, and sometimes like fierce birds.

For centuries Prometheus lay there helpless — until another hero was born, brave enough to defy the gods. He climbed the mountain peak, struck the chains from Prometheus, and killed the vultures. His name was Hercules.

And so, at last, man was able to repay Prometheus for his great gift — the gift of fire.

The Mysterious Box

Zeus brooded. He could not forget how Prometheus had dared to break his law and teach man the use of fire. After the lord of the sky had punished Prometheus with an endless torment for giving man fire, he began to plan how to punish man for accepting the gift. He thought and brooded, and finally he hit upon a plan.

“A good scheme,” he told himself. “It will give me vengeance and entertainment as well. Of course there is always a chance that the girl will resist temptation and save mankind. But I’ll take that risk.”

He ordered the fire god to mold a girl out of clay. Then Zeus breathed life into the clay girl. The clay turned to flesh, and a maiden lay sleeping before him. Then he called the gods together, and asked them each to give her a special gift, and told them what he wanted those gifts to be.

Apollo taught her to sing and play the lyre. Athena taught her to spin. Ceres taught her how to plant seeds and make things grow. Venus gave her the gift of beauty and taught her to dance. Neptune gave her the power to change herself into a mermaid so that she could swim in the stormiest seas without drowning. Mercury gave her a beautiful golden box. But he told her she must never, never open it. And, finally, Hera gave her the tricky gift of curiosity.

Mercury took her by the hand and led her down the slope of Mount Olympus. He led her to the brother of Prometheus and said, “Father Zeus regrets the disgrace which has fallen upon your family. And to show you that he doesn’t blame you for your brother’s crime, he offers you this girl to be your wife. She is the fairest maid in all the world. Her name is Pandora, the all-gifted.”

So the brother of Prometheus married Pandora. She spun and baked and tended her garden, and played the lyre and danced for her husband. For a while they were the happiest young couple on earth.

But from the first Pandora could not help thinking about the golden box. She was very proud of it. She kept it on the table and polished it every day. But the box sparkled in the sunlight and seemed to be winking at her. She could not help wondering what was inside.

She began to talk to herself in this way: “Mercury must have been teasing. He’s always making jokes; everyone knows that. Yes, he was teasing me, telling me never to open his gift. If it is so beautiful outside, what a treasure there must be inside! Diamonds and sapphires and rubies more lovely than anyone has ever seen. After all, it is a gift from the hand of a god. If the box is so rich, the gift inside must be even more splendid. Perhaps Mercury really expects me to open the box and tell him how delighted I am with his gift. Perhaps he’s waiting for me to thank him. He probably thinks I’m ungrateful.”

But even as she was telling herself all this, she knew in her heart that it was not so. The box must *not* be opened. She *must* keep her promise.

Finally, she knew she had to do something to stop herself from thinking about the box. She took it from the table, and hid it in a dusty little storeroom. But it seemed to be burning there in the shadows. It scorched her thoughts wherever she went. She kept passing that room and stepping into it and making excuses to dawdle there. Once she took the box from its hiding place and stroked it — then quickly shoved it out of sight and rushed from the room.

After some days of this torment, she locked the golden box in a heavy oak chest. She put great bolts on the chest, and dug a hole in her garden. Then she put the chest in the hole and covered it over — and rolled a boulder on top of it. When her husband came home that night, her hair was wild and her hands were bloody, and her tunic was torn and stained. But all she would tell him was that she had been working in the garden.

That night the moonlight blazed in the room. Pandora could not sleep. She sat up in bed and looked around. All the room was swimming in moonlight. Everything was different. There were deep shadows and bright patches of silver, all mixed, all moving. She arose quietly and tiptoed from the room.

She went out into the garden. The trees were swaying. The whole world was adance in the magic white fire of moonlight. She felt full of wild strength. She walked over to the rock and pushed. The rock rolled away as lightly as a pebble. Then she took a shovel and dug down to the chest. She unfastened the bolts and drew out the golden box. It was cold, cold! The coldness burned her hand to the bone. She trembled, not with cold, but with fear. She felt that the box held the very secret of life. She must look inside or die.

Pandora took a little golden key from her tunic, fitted it into the keyhole, and gently opened the lid. There was a swarming, a wild throbbing, a nameless rustling, and a horrid sickening smell. Out of the box, as she held it up in the moonlight, swarmed small, scaly, lizardlike creatures with bat wings and burning red eyes.

They flew out of the box, circled her head once, clapping their wings and screaming thin little jeering screams. Then they flew off into the night, hissing and cackling.

Half fainting, Pandora sank to her knees. With her last bit of strength she clutched the box and shut down the lid, catching the last little monster just as it was wriggling free. It shrieked and spat and clawed her hand, but she thrust it back into the box and locked it in. Then she dropped the box and fainted away.

What were those loathsome creatures that flew out of the golden box? They were all the ills that trouble mankind; the spites and jealousies, disease of every kind, old age, famine, drought, poverty, war, and all the evils that bring grief and misery. After they flew out of the box, they scattered. They flew into every home, and swung from the rafters, waiting. And even today, when their time comes, they swoop down and sting, bringing pain and sorrow and death to men and women everywhere.

But bad as they were, things could have been worse. For the creature that Pandora managed to shut in the box was the worst of all. It was Foreboding, the knowledge of misfortune to come. If it had flown free, people would know ahead of time every terrible thing that was to happen to them throughout their lives. Hope would have died. And that would have been the death of man as well. For people can bear endless trouble, but they cannot live without hope.

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Narcissus and Echo

Echo was the best beloved of all the nymphs of river and woods. She was not only very beautiful and very kind, but she had a hauntingly beautiful voice. All the children of the villages used to come into the woods to beg her to sing to them and tell them stories.

One day as Echo sat among a circle of wide-eyed boys and girls, telling them stories of heroes and gods and monsters, a handsome young woodsman, all dressed in green, came into the grove. He was carrying a bulging sack over his shoulder.

Now Echo didn't know this, but the young woodsman was Zeus, king of the gods, in disguise. Occasionally Zeus liked to change into human form and wander the earth. He waited, enchanted by Echo's voice, until she finished her tale, and then said, "Well told, beautiful maiden! I have a present for you and for each boy and girl."

He opened the sack. It was full of golden apples — solid gold and heavy and shining. He gave one to Echo and one each to the children, who began to play ball with them, tossing them from one to another. In the midst of their play the woodsman disappeared.

Echo knew now that the woodsman was Zeus, for she recognized the golden apples which grew on a magic tree belonging to Zeus' wife, Hera. Echo also knew that Hera, who was not as kind as Zeus, would be very angry when she learned that her husband was giving away her precious golden apples. Echo couldn't wait to tell the news to her friend Venus, goddess of love and beauty.

The next day she told Venus how Zeus had come to the grove disguised as a woodsman and given away Hera's golden apples. "See, he gave me one too," she said, tossing it up in the air so that it flashed in the sunlight.

“You’d better hide that, my child,” said Venus.

“Why? It’s so beautiful. I don’t want to hide it. I want to look at it.”

“Take my advice,” said Venus. “Hide it. Hera is very jealous. She knows what Zeus has done and she is furious.”

Poor Echo was soon to learn how dangerous it was to make Hera angry. For the queen of the gods sent her spies everywhere. And very soon she learned that Zeus had given one of her precious golden apples to a wood nymph named Echo.

“Echo, eh?” snarled Hera. “That little tree toad who thinks she’s a nightingale? Well, I’ll make her sorry she ever laid eyes on a golden apple. I’ll punish her in a way that will be remembered forever.”

Hera strode down from Olympus, muttering to herself, scowling, black hair flying. This happened on a day that Venus was visiting Echo. They were sitting comfortably in the woods on a fallen log, chatting.

“All the world asks me for favors,” Venus said. “But not you, Echo. Tell me, isn’t there someone you want to love you? Just name him, and I will send my son, Cupid, to shoot him with an arrow, and make him fall madly in love with you.”

But Echo laughed, and said, “Alas, sweet Venus, I have seen no boy who pleases me. None seems beautiful enough to match my secret dream. When the time comes I shall ask your help — if it ever comes.”

“Well, you are lovely enough to have the best,” said Venus. “And remember, I am always at your service.”

Now Echo did not know this, but at that very moment the most beautiful boy in the whole world was lost in that very wood. His name was Narcissus. He was so handsome that he had never been able to speak to any woman except his mother, for any girl who saw him immediately fainted. Because of this he had a very high opinion of himself. As he went through the woods, he thought: “Oh, how I wish I could find someone as beautiful as I am. I will not love anyone less perfect in face or form than myself. Why should I? This makes me lonely, it’s true. But it’s better than lowering myself.”

As he walked along talking to himself, Narcissus was getting more and more lost in the woods. In another part of that wood, Echo had just said farewell to Venus, and was going back to the hollow tree in which she lived. As she came to a clearing in the forest, she saw something that made her

stop in astonishment and hide behind a tree. What she saw was a tall, purple-clad figure moving through the trees. She recognized Hera, and hurried forward to curtsy low before the queen of the gods. “Greetings, great queen,” Echo said. “Welcome to the wood.”

“Wretched creature!” Hera cried. “I know how you tricked my husband! Well, I have a gift for you too. Because you used your voice to bewitch my husband, you shall never be able to say anything again — except the last words that have been said to you. Now, try babbling.”

“Try babbling,” said Echo.

“No more shall you chat with your betters. No more shall you gossip, tell stories or sing songs. You shall endure this punishment forever.”

“Forever,” said Echo, sobbing.

Then Hera went away to search for Zeus. Echo, weeping, rushed toward her home in the hollow tree. As she was running she saw a dazzling brightness that she thought was the face of a god, and she stopped to look. But it was no god. It was a boy about her own age, with yellow hair and eyes the color of sapphires. When she saw him, all the pain of her punishment dissolved and she was full of great laughing joy. Here was the boy she had been looking for all her life. He was a boy as beautiful as her secret dream — a boy she could love.

Echo danced toward him. He stopped and said, “Pardon me, but can you show me the path out of the wood?”

“Out of the wood?” said Echo.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m lost. I’ve been wandering here for hours and I can’t seem to find my way out of the wood.”

“Out of the wood.”

“Yes, I’ve told you twice. I’m lost. Can you help me find the way?”

“The way?”

“Are you deaf, perhaps? Why must I repeat everything?”

“Repeat everything?”

“No, I will not. It’s a bore. I won’t do it.”

“Do it.”

“Look, I can’t stand here arguing with you. If you don’t want to show me the way, I’ll just try to find someone who can.”

“Who can.”

Narcissus glared at her and turned away. But Echo went to him, and put her arms around him, and tried to kiss his face.

“Oh, no!” said Narcissus, pushing her away. “Stop it! You can’t kiss me.”

“Kiss me.”

“No!”

“No!”

Again Echo tried to kiss Narcissus, but he pushed her aside. She fell on her knees on the path, and lifting her lovely tearstained face, tried to speak to him. But she could not. She reached up and grasped his hand.

“Let go!” he said. “You cannot hold me here. I will not love you.”

“Love you.”

Narcissus tore himself from her grip and strode away. “Farewell.”

“Farewell.”

Echo looked after Narcissus until he disappeared. And when he was gone she felt such sadness, such terrible tearing grief, that it seemed as if she was being torn apart. And since she could not speak out, she offered up this prayer silently:

“Oh, Venus, fair goddess, you promised me a favor. Hear me now, though I am voiceless. My love has disappeared and I want to disappear too, for I cannot bear this pain.”

Venus, in the garden on Mount Olympus, heard Echo’s prayer, for prayers do not have to be spoken to be heard. She looked down upon the grieving nymph, and pitied her, and made her disappear. Echo’s body melted into thin cool air, so that the pain was gone. All was gone except her voice, for Venus could not bear to lose that lovely sound. The goddess said:

“I grant you your wish — and one thing more. You have not asked vengeance upon the love that has made you suffer. You are too sweet and kind. But *I* shall take vengeance. I decree that whoever caused you this pain will know the same terrible longing. He will fall in love with someone who cannot return his love. And he will seek forever for what he can never have.”

Now Narcissus knew nothing of this. He was not aware of Echo’s grief, or the vow of Venus. He still wandered the forest path, thinking, “These girls who love me on sight — it’s too bad I cannot find one as beautiful as I am. Until I do, I shall not love.”

Finally he sank down on the bank of a river to rest. Not a river really, but a finger of the river — a clear little stream moving slowly through the rocks. The sun shone on the water so that it became a mirror, holding the trees and the sky upside down. And Narcissus, looking into the stream, saw a face.

He blinked at the water again. It was still there — the most beautiful face he had ever seen. As beautiful, he knew, as his own, even though the shimmer of light behind it made it slightly blurred. He gazed and gazed at the face. He could not have enough of it. He knew that he could look upon this face forever. He put out his hand to touch it. The water trembled, and the face disappeared.

“A water nymph,” he thought. “A lovely daughter of the river god. The loveliest of his daughters, no doubt. She is shy. Like me, she can’t bear to be touched. Ah, here she is again.”

The face looked up at him out of the stream. Again, very timidly, he reached out his hand. Again the water trembled and the face disappeared.

“I will stay here until she loves me,” he thought. “She may hide now, but soon she will love me and come out.” And he said aloud, “Come out, lovely one.”

And the voice of Echo, who had followed him to the stream, said, “Lovely one.”

“Hear that, hear that!” cried Narcissus, overjoyed. “She cares for me too. You do, don’t you? You love me.”

“Love me.”

“I do. I do,” cried Narcissus. “Finally, I have found someone I love. Come out, come out. Oh, will you never come out?”

“Never come out?” said Echo.

“Don’t say that, please don’t say that. Because I will stay here till you do. This, I vow.”

“I vow.”

“Your voice is as beautiful as your face. And I will stay here adoring you forever.”

“Forever.”

And Narcissus stayed there, leaning over the stream, watching the face in the water. Sometimes he pleaded with it to come out, coaxing, begging,

always looking. But day after day he stayed there; night after night, never moving, never eating, never looking away from that face.

Narcissus stayed there so long that his legs grew into the bank of the river and became roots. His hair grew long, tangled, and leafy, and his pale face became delicate yellow and white. He became the flower Narcissus that lives on the river bank, and leans over watching its reflection in the water.

You can find him there to this day. And in the woods, when all is still, in certain valleys and high places, you can sometimes come upon Echo. And if you call her in a certain way, she will answer your call.

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Wild Horses of the Sun

The two young boys had been wrestling, boxing, and shooting arrows at a tree stump all day long. The black-haired boy was a son of Zeus. The yellow-haired one, named Phaeton, was a son of Apollo. But, as it happened, neither of them had ever met his father.

When the boys grew tired of the games, they sat down on the edge of a cliff, dangling their legs over the blue sea, and began boasting and lying to each other. This was a very long time ago and most things have changed — but not boys.

“My father is Zeus,” said the black-haired boy. “He’s the chief god, lord of the mountain, king of the sky.”

“My father is lord of the sun,” said Phaeton.

“My father is called the thunderer,” replied the other. “When he is angry, the sky grows black and the sun hides. His spear is a lightning bolt. That’s what he kills people with. He can hurl it a thousand miles and never miss.”

“Without my father there would be no day,” said Phaeton. “It would always be night. Each morning he drives the golden chariot of the sun across the sky, bringing the daytime. Then he dives into the ocean, boards a golden ferryboat, and sails back to his eastern palace. Then it is nighttime.”

“When I visit my father,” said the black-haired boy, “he gives me presents. Do you know what he gave me last time? A thunderbolt — a little one, but just like his. And he taught me how to throw it. I killed three vultures, scared a fishing boat, and started a forest fire. Next time I go to see him, I’ll throw it at more things. Do you visit your father?”

Phaeton never had, but he wasn’t going to admit it. “Certainly,” he said. “All the time. And he teaches me things too.”

“What kinds of things? Has he taught you to drive the sun chariot?”

“Oh, yes. He taught me how to handle the horses of the sun, how to make them go, and how to make them stop. They’re huge wild horses and they breathe fire.”

“I bet you made all that up,” said the black-haired boy. “I don’t believe there is a sun chariot. There’s the sun, look at it. It’s not a chariot.”

“What you see is just one of the wheels,” said Phaeton. “There’s another wheel on the other side, and the body of the chariot is slung between them. That is where my father stands and drives his horses.”

“All right, so it’s a chariot,” said the black-haired boy. “But I still don’t believe your father would let you drive it. In fact, I don’t think Apollo would know you if he saw you. Maybe he isn’t even your father. People like to say they’re descended from the gods — but how many of us are there, really?”

“I’ll prove it to you,” cried Phaeton, scrambling to his feet. “I’ll go to the palace of the sun right now and hold my father to his promise.”

“What promise?”

“He said that the next time I visited him he would let me drive the sun chariot all by myself, because I was getting so good at it. I’ll show you. I’ll drive the sun right across the sky.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” said the other. “But how will I know if you’re driving the sun? I won’t be able to see you from down here.”

“You’ll know me,” said Phaeton. “I’ll come down close and drive in circles over the village. Just watch the sky tomorrow.”

Phaeton went off then. He traveled day and night, not stopping for food or rest, guiding himself by the stars, heading always east. He walked on and on and on until, finally, he had lost his way completely.

While Phaeton was making his journey, Apollo was sitting in his great throne room. It was the quiet hour before dawn, when night had dropped its last coolness upon the earth. At this hour, Apollo always sat on his throne. He wore a purple cloak embroidered with golden stars, and a crown made of silver and pearls. Suddenly a bird flew in the window and perched on his shoulder. This bird had sky-blue feathers, a golden beak, golden claws, and golden eyes. It was one of Apollo’s sun hawks, whose job it was to fly here and there gathering information. Sometimes they were called spy birds.

Now the bird spoke to Apollo. “I have seen your son,” she said.

“Which son?”

“Phaeton. He was coming to see you. But he lost his way and lies exhausted at the edge of a wood. The wolves will surely kill him.”

“Then we’d better get to him before the wolves do,” said Apollo. “Round up some of your flock and bear Phaeton here in a manner that befits the son of a god.”

The sun hawk then seized the softly glowing rug at the foot of the throne and flew away with it. She called to three other hawks to each hold a corner of the rug. They flew over a river and a mountain and a wood and finally came to the field where Phaeton lay. They flew down among the howling wolves, among the burning eyes set in a circle about the sleeping boy. They rolled Phaeton onto the rug, and then each took a corner of the rug in her beak again, and flew away.

Phaeton felt himself being lifted into the air. The cold wind woke him up, and he sat up straight. The people below saw a boy, with folded arms, sitting on a carpet that was rushing through the cold bright moonlight far above their heads. And that is why we hear tales of flying carpets even to this day.

Phaeton remembered lying down on the grass to sleep, and now, he knew, he was dreaming. And when he saw the great cloud castle on top of the mountain, all made of snow and rosy in the early light, he was surer than ever that he was dreaming. He saw sentries in flashing golden armor, carrying golden spears. In the courtyard he saw enormous woolly dogs with fleece like cloud-drift guarding the gate.

Over the wall flew the carpet, over the courtyard, through the huge doors. And it wasn’t until the sun hawks gently let down the carpet in front of the throne that Phaeton began to think that this dream might be very real. He raised his eyes shyly and saw a tall figure sitting on the throne—taller than anyone Phaeton had ever seen, with golden hair and stormy blue eyes and a strong laughing face. Phaeton fell on his knees.

“Father!” he cried. “I am Phaeton, your son!”

“Rise, Phaeton. Let me look at you.”

The boy stood up. His legs were trembling.

“Well, boy, what brings you here?” said Apollo. “Don’t you know that you should wait for an invitation before visiting a god — even your father?”

“I had no choice, Father. I was jeered at by a son of Zeus. He was bragging about his father, so I did a little bragging and lying too. I would have thrown him over the cliff, and myself after him, if I hadn’t decided to make my lies come true.”

“Well, you’re my son, all right,” said Apollo. “Proud, rash, taking every dare, refusing no adventure. Speak up, then. What is it you wish? I will do anything in my power to help you.”

“Anything, Father?”

“Anything in my power. I swear by the River Styx, an oath sacred to the gods.”

“I wish to drive the sun across the sky. All by myself. From dawn till night.”

Apollo’s roar of anger shattered every crystal goblet in the great castle.

“Impossible!” he cried. “No one can drive those horses but me. They are tall as mountains and wild as tigers. They are stronger than the tides, stronger than the winds. It is all that I can do to hold them in check. How could your puny grip control them? They will race away with the chariot, scorching the poor earth to a cinder.”

“You promised, Father. You swore by the River Styx!”

“You must not hold me to my oath. If you do, it will be a death sentence for earth...a poor charred cinder floating in space...just what the Fates have said would happen. But I did not know it would be so soon, so soon.”

“It is almost dawn, Father. Can we harness the horses?”

“Please, Phaeton. Ask me anything else and I will grant it. But do not ask me this.”

“I have asked, Sire, and you have given your oath. The horses grow restless.”

“I will do as you ask,” said Apollo. “Come.”

He led Phaeton to the stable of the sun where the giant horses were being harnessed to the golden chariot. Huge they were. Red and gold and fire-maned, with golden hooves and hot yellow eyes. When they neighed, the sound rolled across the sky. Their breath was flame.

The sun chariot was an open shell of gold. Each wheel was the flat round disc of the sun, as it is seen in the sky. Phaeton looked very small as he stood in the chariot. The reins were thick as bridge cables, much too large

for him to hold, so Apollo tied them around his son's waist. Then Apollo stood at the head of the team, gentling the horses, speaking softly to them.

“Good horses, go easy today. Go at a slow trot, my swift ones, and do not leave the path. You have a new driver today.”

The great horses dropped their heads to Apollo's shoulder, and whinnied softly, for they loved him. Phaeton saw the flame of their breath play about his father's head. He saw Apollo's face shining out of the flame. But Apollo was not harmed, for he was a god and could not be hurt by physical things.

Then Apollo came to Phaeton and said, “Listen to me, my son. You are about to start a terrible journey, and by the obedience you owe me as a son, by the faith you owe a god, by my oath that cannot be broken, and your pride that will not bend, I ask you this. Keep to the middle way. If you go too high the earth will freeze. If you go too low it will burn. Keep to the middle way. Give the horses their heads; they know the path — the blue middle course of day. Don't drive them too high or too low, and above all do not stop. If you do, you will fire the air about you, charring the earth and blistering the sky. Will you heed me?”

“I will, I will!” cried Phaeton. “Stand away, Sire. The dawn grows old and day must begin! Go, horses, go!”

And Apollo stood watching as the horses of the sun, pulling behind them the golden chariot, climbed the eastern slope of the sky.

At first things went well for Phaeton. The great steeds trotted easily across the high blue meadow of the sky. Phaeton thought to himself, “I can't understand why my father made such a fuss. This is easy. There is nothing to it.”

When he looked over the edge of the chariot, he could see tiny houses far below, specks of trees, and a dark blue puddle that was the sea. The coach was trundling across the sky. The great sun wheels were turning, casting light, warming and brightening the earth, chasing away the shadows of night.

“Just imagine,” Phaeton thought, “people are looking up at the sky, praising the sun, hoping the weather stays fair. How many are watching me?” Then he thought, “But I'm too small for them to see, too far away. And the light of the sun is too bright. For all they know, I could be Apollo making his usual run. How will they know it's me, *me, me*, if I can't go

closer? Especially Zeus' son — how will *he* know? I'll go home tomorrow, and tell him what I did, and he'll laugh at me and say I'm lying, just as he did before. No! I must show him that I am driving the chariot of the sun. Apollo said not to drive too close to earth, but how will he know? I won't stay long. I'll just dip down toward our village and circle it a few times until everyone recognizes me."

When they were over the village where Phaeton lived, he jerked on the reins, pulling the horses' heads down. They whinnied angrily, and tossed their heads, but he jerked the reins again.

"Down!" he cried. "Down! Down!"

The horses plunged down through the bright air, their golden hooves twinkling, their golden manes flying. They pulled the great glittering chariot over the village in a long flaming swoop. Phaeton was horrified to see the houses burst into fire. The trees burned like torches. And people rushed about screaming, their loose clothing on fire.

Phaeton could not see because of the smoke. Had he burned his own home — and his mother and sisters? He threw himself backward in the chariot, pulling at the reins with all his might, shouting "Up! Up!"

The horses, made furious by the smoke, reared on their hind legs. They leaped upward, galloping through the smoke, pulling the chariot up, up.

Swiftly the earth fell away beneath them until the village was just a smudge of smoke. Again Phaeton saw the pencil-stroke of mountain, the inkblot of sea. "Whoa!" he cried. "Turn now! Forward on your path!"

But he could no longer handle the horses. They were galloping, not trotting. They had taken the bit in their teeth. They did not turn toward the path of the day — across the meadow of the sky — but galloped up and up. And the people on earth saw the sun shooting away until it was no larger than a star.

Then darkness came, and cold. The earth froze hard. Rivers froze, and the oceans too. Boats were caught fast in the ice, and it snowed in the jungle. Marble buildings cracked. It was impossible for anyone to speak, for their breath froze on their lips. In villages and cities, in fields and in woods, people died of the cold. Their bodies were piled up like firewood.

Still Phaeton could not hold the horses, and still they galloped upward dragging light and warmth away from the earth. Finally, they had gone so high that the air was too thin for them to breathe. Phaeton saw the flame of

their breath, which had been red and yellow, burn blue in the thin air. He himself was gasping for breath, and he felt the marrow of his bones freezing.

The horses, maddened by the feeble hand on the reins, swung around and dived toward earth again. As they galloped downward, all the ice melted, causing great floods. Whole villages were swept away by a solid wall of water. Trees were uprooted and forests were torn away. Still the horses swooped lower and lower. Now the water began to boil — great billowing clouds of steam arose.

Phaeton could not see; the steam was too thick. He untied the reins from his waist, for they would have cut him in two. He had no control over the horses at all. They galloped upward again, out of the steam, taking at last the middle way in the sky. But they raced wildly, using all their tremendous strength. They circled the earth in a matter of minutes, smashing across the sky from horizon to horizon. They made the day flash on and off, like someone playing with a lantern. And the people who were left alive were bewildered by day and night following each other so swiftly.

Up high on Olympus, the gods in their cool garden heard the clamor of grief from below. Zeus looked down on earth and saw the runaway horses of the sun and the hurtling chariot. He saw the dead and the dying, the burning forests, the floods, the strange frost. Then he looked again at the chariot and saw that it was not Apollo who was driving, but someone he did not know. He stood up, drew back his arm, and hurled a thunderbolt.

It stabbed through the air, striking Phaeton and killing him instantly. The boy was knocked out of the chariot, and his body, flaming, fell like a star. The horses of the sun, knowing themselves driverless now, galloped homeward toward their stables at the eastern edge of the sky.

Since that day, no one has been allowed to drive the chariot of the sun except the sun god himself. But there are still traces on earth of Phaeton's reckless ride. The ends of the earth are still covered with ice caps. Mountains still rumble, trying to spit out the fire that was started in their bellies by the diving sun. And where the horses of the sun swung too close to earth, are the great scorched places called deserts.

The Solid Gold Princess

Once there was a king named Midas, and what he loved best in all the world was gold. He had plenty of his own, but he could not bear the thought of anyone else having any. One morning he happened to wake at dawn and, watching Apollo driving his sun chariot along the slope of the sky, he said to himself, "Of all the gods I like you least, Apollo. How dare you be so wasteful, scattering golden light on rich and poor alike — on king and peasant, on merchant, shepherd, sailor? Don't you understand that only kings should have gold; only the rich know what to do with it?"

Midas did not mean his words to be heard, but the gods have sharp ears. Apollo did hear, and was very angry. That night he came to Midas in a dream and said, "Other gods would punish you, Midas, but I am famous for my good nature. Instead of harming you, I will do you a kindness and grant your dearest wish. What is it to be?"

Midas cried, "Let everything I touch turn to gold!"

He shouted this out in a strangling greedy voice. The guards at his doorway nodded to each other and said, "The king calls out. He must be dreaming of gold again."

Midas awoke in a bad mood. "Oh, if it were only true," he said to himself, "and everything I touch turned to gold. What's the use of such dreams? They only tease and torment a man."

That morning as he was walking in the garden, his hand brushed a rose. Amazed, he watched it turn to gold. Petals and stalk, it turned to gold and stood there, rigid, heavy, gleaming. A bee buzzed out of its stiff folds and, furious, lit on the king's hand to sting him. The king looked at the heavy golden bee on the back of his hand and moved it to his finger.

"I shall wear it as a ring," he said.

Then he hurried about the garden, touching all the roses, watching them stiffen and gleam. They lost their odor. The disappointed bees rose in swarms and buzzed angrily away. Butterflies departed. The flowers tinkled like little bells when the breeze moved among them, and the king was well pleased.

His little daughter, the princess, who had been playing in the garden, ran to him and said, "Father, Father, what has happened to the roses?"

"Are they not pretty, my dear?"

"No! They're ugly! They're horrid and sharp and I can't smell them any more! What happened?"

"A magical thing."

"Who did the magic?"

"I did."

"Unmagic it then! I hate these roses," she said, and began to cry.

"Don't cry," he said, stroking her head. "Stop crying and I will give you a golden doll with a gold-leaf dress and tiny golden shoes."

The princess stopped crying, and Midas felt her hair grow spiky under his fingers. Her eyes stiffened and froze into place. The little blue vein in her neck stopped pulsing. She was a statue, a figure of pale gold standing in the garden path. Her tears were tiny golden beads on her golden cheeks.

Midas looked at his daughter and said, "Oh, my dear, I'm sorry. But I have no time to be sad this morning. I shall be busy turning things into gold. When I have a moment I'll think about your problem, I promise."

He hurried out of the garden. On his way back to the castle he amused himself by kicking up gravel and watching it tinkle down as tiny nuggets. The door he opened became golden. The chair he sat upon became solid gold like his throne. The plates turned into gold, and the cups became gold cups before the amazed eyes of his servants, whom Midas was careful not to touch. He wanted them to keep on serving him.

Greedy he bit into a piece of bread and honey. But his teeth clanked on metal — his mouth was full of metal. He felt himself choking. He plucked from his mouth a piece of gold which had been bread. Very lightly then he touched the other food to see what would happen. Meat...apples... walnuts... all turned to gold, even when he touched them with only the tip of his finger. When he did not touch the food with his fingers, but lifted it

on his fork, it became gold as soon as it touched his lips. He was savagely hungry now.

But worse than hunger was the thought of drinking. He realized that wine, or water, or milk would turn to gold in his mouth, and choke him if he swallowed.

“What good is all my gold,” he cried, “if I cannot eat and cannot drink?”

Midas shrieked with rage, pounded on the table, and flung the plates about. Then he raced out of the castle and along the golden gravel path to the garden, where the stiff flowers chimed hatefully. The statue of his daughter looked at him with scooped and empty eyes. In the blaze of the sun, Midas raised his arms heavenward and cried, “You, Apollo, false god, traitor! You pretended to forgive me, but you punished me with a gift!”

Then it seemed to Midas that the sun grew brighter, and that the sun god stood before him on the path, tall, stern, clad in burning gold. A voice said, “On your knees, wretch!”

Midas fell to his knees.

“Have you learned anything?”

“I have...I have...I will never desire gold again. I will never accuse the gods. Please take back the fatal gift.”

Apollo reached out his hand and touched the roses. The tinkling stopped. The flowers softened and swayed and blushed. Fragrance grew on the air again. And the bees returned, and the butterflies. Apollo touched the statue’s cheek. It lost its stiffness, its metallic gleam. The princess ran to the roses, knelt among them, and cried, “Oh, thank you, Father. You’ve changed them back again.” Then she ran off, shouting and laughing.

Apollo said, “I take back my gift, Midas. Your touch is cleansed of its golden curse. But you may not escape without punishment. Because you have been the most foolish of men, you shall wear a pair of donkey’s ears.”

Midas touched his ears. They were long and furry. He said, “I thank you for your forgiveness, Apollo... even though it comes with a punishment.”

Apollo said, “Eat and drink. Enjoy the roses. Watch your child grow. And remember, life is the greatest wealth. In your stupidity you have been wasteful of life, and that is the sign you wear on your head. Farewell.”

Midas put a tall pointed hat on his head so that no one would see his ears. Then he went to eat and drink his fill.

For years Midas wore the cap so that no one would know of his disgrace. But the servant who cut his hair had to know, so Midas made him swear not to tell. He warned the servant that it would cost him his head if he spoke of the king's ears. But the servant was a gossip. He could not bear to keep a secret, especially such a secret about the king. He was afraid to tell it, but he also felt that he would burst if he did not.

So one night he went down to the bank of the river, dug a little hole, put his mouth to the hole, and whispered, "Midas has donkey's ears...Midas has donkey's ears." Quickly he filled up the hole again, and ran back to the castle feeling better.

But the reeds on the riverbank had heard him, and they always whisper to each other when the wind blows. They were heard whispering, "Midas has donkey's ears...donkey's ears..." Soon the whole country was whispering, "Have you heard about Midas? Have you heard about his ears?"

When the king heard, he knew who had told the secret. He ordered the man's head cut off. But then he thought, "Apollo forgave me. Perhaps I had better forgive this blabbermouth." And he let the man keep his head.

Then Apollo appeared to the king again and said, "Midas, you have learned the final lesson, mercy. As you have done, so shall you be done by."

And as Apollo spoke Midas felt his long hairy ears shrinking back to the right size.

When he was an old man, Midas would tell his smallest granddaughter the story of how her mother was turned into a golden statue. "See, I'm changing you too," he would say. "Look, your hair is all gold."

And she pretended to be frightened.

The Dragon's Teeth

Long ago, when the world was very new, people believed that great things were about to happen when the sun and the moon appeared side by side in the sky. So they gazed this day as the sun and the moon stood side by side, and they wondered what was going to happen.

It was to mean more than anyone could imagine. Diana, the moon goddess, had insisted on meeting her brother, Apollo, the sun god. She yoked her milk-white stags to the silver moon chariot, and drove it across the sky. She reined up next to Apollo's sun chariot, whose red and gold, fire-maned stallions were pawing the air impatiently. They did not like to stop once they had started.

"Quickly, sister!" said Apollo. "We must go higher. If I halt my sun chariot too long in one place the earth will burn."

So, side by side, the sun and moon rose in the sky. Then brother and sister climbed out of their chariots and stood face to face.

"I know that this must be very important to you," said Apollo. "Otherwise you would not change the course of the sun and the moon."

"Important indeed," said Diana. "An evil thing is happening in the Eastern Kingdom. The son and daughter of the king are said to be radiantly beautiful. Cadmus and Europa are their names. And people have begun to whisper that this prince and princess are more beautiful than we are. Imagine! They dare compare these mortals to us!"

"Well," said Apollo. "We have managed such matters before. It seems to me we can handle this quite easily. You and I shall go there at twilight, when the sun and moon don't need us to drive them. With my golden arrows, I shall kill this Prince Cadmus. And you, with your silver arrows, will rid yourself of Princess Europa."

“Just what I had in mind!” cried Diana. “You always speak my thoughts, beloved twin. Let us go there this very evening.”

“Agreed,” said Apollo. “Now I must be on my way. I have driven my chariot so high, that the earth is shivering this summer day.”

Brother and sister parted. But they were not to meet at dusk for their deadly errand. As it happened, the West Wind had heard their conversation. Knowing that Zeus would be interested in their plans, he flew off to Mount Olympus to tell his story. When Zeus heard what the West Wind had to say, he grew very angry. He sent his messenger to summon the twins. Apollo and Diana stood before the throne of Zeus, who looked sternly down upon them and said, “Listen well and do not answer. Simply obey. I want no harm to come to Princess Europa or her brother, Cadmus. Know this, oh twins! I, your father, Zeus, have looked about the world from my place here on the mountain top. Wherever I looked I have found no one as beautiful or as good as the Princess Europa. I intend to make her my mortal bride. Man has grown slack and weak and cowardly. He is generally displeasing to me. I mean to breed a new race of heroes to lead mankind. And Europa will be my mortal wife. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” said Apollo.

“And you, Diana. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Father,” said Diana. “And I shall obey you in all things.”

“Go then, good children,” said Zeus. “Off to your tasks. Let the sun and moon ride the skies, bright with my favor.”

Apollo and Diana hastened away, thankful that they had only been scolded by Zeus, not punished, for his anger was terrible.

Now on the eastern shore of the Inner Sea at that time, the grassland ran right down to the water. On this day, Europa and her friends were picking flowers and weaving them into garlands. She was a lovely, spirited, playful girl, and she took an enormous pride in being descended from mighty warriors. She loved tales of adventure, and admired courage beyond all things. On this summer morning, she wished she had something more exciting to do than weave garlands. Therefore, when a huge white bull suddenly appeared in the meadow and started browsing and the other girls shrank away, Europa cried out, “Oh, what a beautiful bull! What are you afraid of? If anyone dares me, I’ll ride him!”

“No, princess!” cried her companions. “Don’t try to ride him. He’s too fierce.”

“Fierce? Nonsense! Look at those big gentle brown eyes. Very well, if no one else dares to ride him, I will.”

Then Europa seized a garland of flowers and ran toward the bull. Now she did not know it, but this bull was Zeus himself, who could take any form he desired. You see, it is very dangerous for the gods to appear before mortals in their godlike majesty and divine fire. Sometimes mortals are burned to cinders by this fire, and Zeus did not wish this to happen. Therefore, he changed himself into a white bull.

Europa wound the garland of flowers about the bull’s horns, then leaped on his back and dug her heels into his side to make him gallop. He galloped through the meadow, past the meadow, through fields and groves. He did not even stop at the edge of the sea, but breasted the tide and swam away with Europa. Bull and rider vanished over the horizon. Europa tried to fight her fear, tried to bite back her sobs.

“Please,” she said. “Swim back with me now. Take me back, please. Otherwise, my brother, Cadmus, will come hunting for you, and he will kill you.”

But the bull kept swimming. It was a perfect day. Light danced on the waves. Europa sat comfortably on the bull’s broad back, holding on to its horns. She stopped sobbing and began to enjoy the adventure. No girl, she thought to herself, had ever traveled so far, and no girl in the world would be able to match the tale she would have to tell when she finally returned to her father’s court. But she never returned.

When her frightened companions ran back to the palace and gasped out their story, the king was furious. He raged and stormed. His son, Prince Cadmus, was even angrier. But he did not waste his time in a fit of temper. Within an hour he had called up a crew, rigged out his ship, and was sailing out to sea, determined to find his sister if he had to search every corner of the world.

Indeed, he searched the whole world over. He went as far as he could in every direction. He traveled to the very edge of the world in the east, where the people eat only tangerines and do everything as slowly as they can. They ride giant turtles and when they have races, the one who comes in last is the winner. When he asked these people if they had seen his sister,

Europa, it took them several days to answer his question. But when they had finished answering he knew she had not been there.

He went as far as he could to the south where the sun chariot swings low over the scorched brown sand. Here the people's hair grows out of their heads in the shape of parasols to protect them from the white-hot spokes of the sun wheel. At night the stars flare like torches. Tempers sizzle in the heat, and men fight each other with curved knives. Several parasol-haired men attacked Cadmus with their knives when he asked about his sister, but he fought them off. His sword was a blade of light as he whirled it in the sun, cutting down his enemies like grass. They fled, leaving their wounded on the sand. One of them moaned, saying, "Do not kill me, bright prince, and I will answer your question."

"Answer, then," said Cadmus. "Have you seen my sister, Europa, a lovely girl, riding on the back of a white bull?"

"We have seen no such princess," said the man. "As for a bull, we don't even know what that is. There is no animal by that name in this part of the world."

Cadmus knew that the man was telling the truth, so he left the southern edge of the world, and traveled north as far as he could. It was so cold there that the people were dressed completely in furs. They even wore fur masks so that all you could see were their eyes. When they spoke, the words froze in the air and fell tinkling to the ground, breaking up into letters — and Cadmus had to read their answer. It was the same answer. "No. We have not seen your sister. We have not seen the white bull."

Then Cadmus traveled westward — to a completely unknown part of the world. He sailed to the edge of the earth, to its western rim. Here was the Garden of the Hesperides, where Hera's golden apple tree grew. There he saw an astounding sight. A giant, tall as a mountain, with white hair and a white beard, was holding the world on his shoulders. It was Atlas, punished by Zeus for making war against the gods. Atlas was forced to hold the earth and the sky on his shoulders until the end of time.

The apple nymphs who guarded Hera's golden apple tree were very pleased to see Cadmus. They did not often see strangers in that part of the world, and they made the prince welcome. They fed him fruit from the orchard, and they sang to him. But they too had the same answer: "We have not seen your sister, nor have we seen the white bull." But they had a piece

of advice for him. “You will need more help than we can give,” they told him. “This theft of your sister sounds like some high matter of the gods. You must go to someone very wise, someone who knows the plans of the gods and can read the future. You must go to the oracle at Delphi, and ask what you want to know.”

Cadmus thanked the kindly nymphs and set sail once again, eastward. He came to the land of Greece. There, on the slope of a sacred mountain, stood the white marble temple to Apollo, called Delphi. In caves within the mountain dwelt the priestesses of Apollo. These wise women, called oracles, could sometimes read the future, if asked properly.

Cadmus went down into a cave and there found a woman so old that her skin looked like the bark of a tree. But her eyes were very bright. She sat on a three-legged stool holding a staff of hazelwood. Cadmus bowed to her and said, “Greetings, priestess. I am Cadmus, prince of the East. I seek my sister, the Princess Europa, who was carried away by a white bull. I have searched the four corners of the world and can find no trace of her. I come to you, priestess of Apollo, wisest of women, to ask your help.”

The old woman peered into his face. Then she raised her staff and tapped sharply on the rock floor of the cave, crying,

Mountain, steam!
Send me my dream!

Steam hissed suddenly out of a crack in the floor, wrapping itself about Cadmus and the old woman. Cadmus kept perfectly still. When the steam cleared, he saw that the old woman was asleep. She mumbled something. He bent to hear. The words came more clearly:

Fear not for your sister’s life.
A god has taken her as wife.

“What god, Mother?” cried Cadmus. “Which one?”

But the old woman spoke no more, and seemed to slip into a deeper sleep.

“God or mortal — no one steals my sister!” cried Cadmus. “If you will not tell me who, I shall search among the gods themselves!”

He slipped a golden band off his arm and tossed it into the lap of the old woman. Then he rushed out of the cave. Outside, in the April morning air, what had happened in the cave seemed like a dream. Yet Cadmus knew he must guide himself by the old woman’s words.

“I’ve often heard,” he said to himself, “that these soothsayers speak in rhymes and riddles. Her answer was in rhyme, but it seemed clear enough. No riddle there. A god has stolen my sister. Very well, I shall visit the gods.”

He decided to visit Vulcan first. The god of fire had built himself a workshop inside a live volcano in Sicily. There Cadmus went. He climbed the mountain and descended into the smoky crater. The place was full of sooty shadows lit only by the red volcanic fires.

Cadmus stared in wonder at the fire god. He was so huge that he seemed to fill the great crater. His enormous span of shoulders and broad chest were knotted with muscle. He wore a leather apron and swung a hammer, the handle of which was the trunk of a tree. The head of the hammer was a single lump of iron larger than a boulder. Vulcan swung this gigantic sledge as if it were a tack hammer. He hobbled from forge to forge, for he was lame, looking over the work of the one-eyed Cyclopes who were his helpers.

Cadmus could hardly make his voice heard through the hammering and clanging. He leaped up on an anvil as Vulcan came near, and spoke into the god’s ear!

“Oh, Vulcan,” he said. “Mighty smith, god of mechanics and inventors, forgive me for interrupting your labors, but I have a question I must ask you. Were you the god who changed himself into a white bull and ran off with my sister, Princess Europa?”

Vulcan’s great laugh was like the clanging of hammer on anvil. “What need have I for a mortal wife? I am married to Venus, the goddess of love herself. She is all the wife I want. I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go question Neptune? This whole affair seems more in his style somehow.”

“Thank you, great Vulcan. I go to seek Neptune.”

“Before you go, I have some gifts for you. You’re a bold one, and I admire courage. Here are some things you may find useful on your adventures — a helmet of beaten brass which no battle-axe can dent, though swung by a giant. And here is a shield of polished brass. No sword or spear can pierce it. And see, it is polished more brightly than any mirror so that you can flash the sun in your enemies’ eyes, confusing them. And take this. The first two gifts are for defense, but a hero must go on the attack. Here is

a sword of thrice-tempered iron that can cut through armor as easily as shears through a piece of cloth. Watch this!”

Vulcan swung the sword and struck an anvil, splitting it cleanly in two. “Farewell, Cadmus. Proceed on your quest. Use my weapons well, for it is my guess that the time is coming when you will need them.”

“Thank you again, lord of metal. I promise to treat your beautiful weapons with the honor that is their due.”

Cadmus climbed out of the volcano, went down to the shore, and gazed out upon the purple sea. He wondered how he could sink to its depths without drowning and find Neptune’s castle. Then he saw a wonderful thing — a boat made of coral and pearl drawn by twelve dolphins who were swimming so fast that the boat only skimmed the top of the waves. In the boat stood a tall green-clad figure wearing a crown of pearls, carrying a three-pronged staff, called a trident, made of bright gold. She was so tall and beautiful that Cadmus knew she was a goddess. He fell on his knees, crying, “Welcome to you, beautiful goddess... whoever you are.”

“Who I am is wife of Neptune and goddess of the sea,” she answered.

“I must speak to your husband, goddess. I have a question to ask that he alone can answer.”

“I know your question, Cadmus. And I know the answer too.”

Cadmus rose from his knees, and stared at Neptune’s wife in surprise. She smiled, and her smile was like light over water. “Are you surprised that I recognize you, and know of your quest? Word gets around very quickly among the gods, my boy. There aren’t many mortals bold enough to seek us out and question us.”

“Tell me, goddess. Did your husband, Neptune, steal my sister?”

“The answer is no. He did not. It is true that he is a master of sea-change, and full of wild moods. He would be quite capable of changing himself into anything and stealing anyone, but he did not take your sister. That I know.”

“Thank you for your courtesy and kindness, oh queen of the sea,” said Cadmus. “Then I must seek my sister elsewhere.”

“Try Mercury,” said the sea queen. “He is god of thieves, you know, and quite apt to steal anything. Besides, he is also god of commerce, gamblers, travelers, as well as being the messenger god. He knows everyone’s affairs. Even if he didn’t take your sister, he might be able to tell you who did.”

“Thank you again, beautiful goddess. And grant me this last favor. Allow me to paint your wonderful green eyes on the bow of my ship so that their beauty may outstare all peril.”

“You are a well-spoken young man,” said the goddess. “Paint my eyes on the bow of your ship. I shall look through them every now and again and assure you safe passage. Farewell.”

The dolphins whirled the sea queen away in her little boat of coral and pearl, but Cadmus did not have to search for Mercury. The god found him. A huge shadow glided toward Cadmus across the beach. He looked up, expecting to see an eagle, but it was no eagle. It was a winged god who slid through the bright air and perched on a rock. A smiling young god, glittering with gold at head and ankles, and holding a golden staff entwined with golden serpents.

“You are Mercury,” gasped Cadmus. “I was about to seek you.”

“I know you were,” said Mercury. “We gods know what’s going on in the world, particularly when it concerns us. Besides, you have caused a great deal of talk on Olympus. Rare indeed is the mortal who dares to seek out the high gods and question them about their behavior. It is usually the other way around.”

“I thank you for seeking me out,” said Cadmus. “Tell me then, great Mercury, divine messenger, was it you who stole my sister, Europa, to take for your mortal wife?”

“No,” said Mercury. “It was not I. I have no wife and I do not intend to get one — goddess, half-goddess, or mortal. I travel far, and must travel light.”

“Thank you, lord of distances,” said Cadmus. “Then I must seek elsewhere.”

“No!” said Mercury. He had stopped smiling. His face was stern, and his voice cut like a whiplash. “No! You will question no more gods, Cadmus.”

“I do not wish to quarrel with a god,” said Cadmus. “But I must seek my sister until I find her.”

“Listen to me,” said Mercury. “You have been very busy among the gods. You have learned that neither Vulcan nor Neptune has kidnapped Europa. And you know that I did not steal your sister. So how many gods does that leave you?”

“Hades,” said Cadmus. “But I shall not seek him in the underworld. I know in my heart that my sister is not among the dead. And there is Apollo.”

“Do not question Apollo. He would grow very angry at such a question. He is the sun god and his anger scorches. If you seek Apollo, you will be a cinder before you get your question out. Besides, I can vouch for him, it was not Apollo. Now who does that leave among the gods?”

“But — ” whispered Cadmus. And he stopped, unable to speak the mighty name.

“Exactly,” said Mercury. “Zeus! Father Zeus, king of the gods, whom we ourselves dare not question.”

“But was it he?” asked Cadmus. “Was it he who changed himself into a white bull and took my sister as mortal wife?”

“It was Zeus,” said Mercury. “You have been honored above all human families, for your sister has become the mortal bride of Zeus. She dwells now on Crete, the most beautiful island in the world. She is the mother of three sons, who will become mighty kings. They will build great empires and become the fathers of warriors and heroes. Europa herself is very happy, and would not trade her life for any other. Do not seek her further. Do not try to visit her on Crete. That coast is guarded by a bronze sentinel as tall as a tree. On the command of Zeus, he hurls huge boulders at ships that sail too near. Perhaps in time you will see your sister again, but not yet.”

Cadmus felt the hot tears running down his face. But they were tears of joy, for he knew that his sister was safe and happy. “Thank you, great Mercury,” he murmured. “Thank you, god of messages. I can return now to the East. My father is old, and I shall soon be king.”

“No,” said Mercury. “Your quest is not ended. You are part of the family whom Zeus loves. Your sister, Europa, has become the mother of kings. Her name will be given to the whole western part of the world. But you too are part of the plan. You must settle these new lands. If you have the courage and the strength and the wisdom, you will found a new kingdom, and build a great city. But first you will have to pass through the most dreadful peril that has ever been faced by mortal man.”

“What must I do?” asked Cadmus, standing tall and proud before Mercury. “My heart is singing with joy and pride! If Zeus sends great perils

to test me, so much the better. I can prove myself, and go on to whatever deeds he wishes me to perform.”

“Bravely spoken, Cadmus,” said Mercury. “Here is the first thing you must do:

Follow a cow...
Where she rests
Tell yourself *now*.”

Before Cadmus could question him further, Mercury leaped into the air, ankle-wings whirring. He hovered a moment, saying:

If I wish to send you word,
I’ll send a purple bird.

Then the god flashed off into the blue air. “Farewell,” he cried. But he was so high now that his voice drifted down as a gull’s cry.

Cadmus watched the speck of gold vanish from sight. When he turned, there to his surprise stood a beautiful brown cow with large amber eyes and small horns. The cow mooed musically, then ambled off. Cadmus followed as Mercury had directed. He understood nothing. He only knew that he must do as the god had said. All the rest of that day he followed the cow. She wandered away from the coast and moved inland at the same ambling pace, which let her cover great distances. Cadmus followed. He could not stop to eat or drink, he had to keep the cow in sight.

Night came on. “Surely,” Cadmus thought, “she will stop now.” But the cow did not stop. The stars hung low as torches, and it was easy to see the cow. She climbed a low hill, and went down the other side. Still Cadmus followed. His legs were weary. The helmet and shield and sword that Vulcan had given him seemed to weigh more with every step. They seemed to be dragging him down to the ground. But he could not cast off his weapons, nor could he rest as long as the cow moved before him. All night he followed her. Finally, he could walk no further. He fell to the ground.

“Am I to disappoint Zeus in my first test?” he said to himself. “Shall I fail simply because I am weary? No! This cannot be!”

Cadmus tried to drag himself to his feet, but he could not. So he crawled after the cow on his hands and knees. Fortunately, the cow seemed to be tiring and was going more slowly. She was climbing the slope of a steep hill, and that slowed her even more. Cadmus climbed the hill after her, dragging himself along on his knees, pulling himself on by the strength of

his arms. Finally, the cow reached the top of the hill, and began to go down the other side. Now Cadmus simply let himself roll after her. When she started across the plain, he crawled after her. But now he had to crawl more slowly. His knees were scraped and bleeding. His hands were bleeding.

“I will go on even if my flesh is torn away and I have to creep on my bones,” he said to himself.

Then to his delight, he saw the cow suddenly fold herself into a low shadow and lay down to rest. As he watched, the cow lowered her head and slept. Cadmus drew in a great breath of the fresh air. He took off his helmet, lay down his shield, and placed his sword carefully on it. Then he also slept.

When he awoke, the sun was high. The cow was gone, but it did not matter. Where she had rested there was a circle of crushed grass, and Cadmus suddenly knew what Mercury had meant. Here was where he must build his city. Indeed, it was a perfect site for a city. There was a broad plain, cut by two rivers and surrounded by low hills, offering natural defense against an enemy.

“I will build my city here!” cried Cadmus, turning his face to the sky. “Here will I found my kingdom!”

He gazed about the great empty plain. “But how can I even begin? Oh, well, Zeus said I must. And he who sent the task will send the tools.”

Suddenly, the air was filled with a hideous clanking sound. The sun was blotted out by an enormous shadow. Cadmus looked up, and brave as he was, he almost fainted away with sheer terror. The sight that he saw was the most dreadful ever seen by man. Imagine an alligator as big as a ship — a flying alligator, with brass wings. This monster’s entire hide was made of sliding brass scales, and it had a long thick tail bristling with brass spikes. Its feet had brass claws like baling hooks, but this was not the worst part. This beast, which was a dragon, spat flame from its mouth. Hot red fire spurted from its jaws.

The dragon was still a mile away, but Cadmus felt the awful heat begin to roast him as he stood there on the plain. He knew that this was the peril of which Mercury had spoken. This was the monster he would have to destroy before he could build his city and found a kingdom. And Cadmus knew that there was no way under the morning sun that he could fight this flaming, spiked beast. The heat had become unbearable. Clutching his shield and sword, his helmet firmly planted on his head, Cadmus rushed to the river.

He dived as deep as he could. His heavy weapons carried him to the bottom but, remembering a trick he had learned as a boy, Cadmus seized a handful of hollow reeds just before he dived.

He poked a reed up to the surface of the water, and held the other end in his mouth so that he could draw in enough air to keep himself alive. He felt the icy water grow warm as the dragon passed overhead. But the flames could not reach him. He waited, crouched on the bottom of the river until the clanging faded away. Then he climbed out of the river. He was covered with slimy mud, exhausted, and very downhearted. He knew that he must seek help.

“Good morning, Cadmus.”

He whirled about, saw no one. Then he spotted a bird, flying in slow circles above his head.

“Was it you who spoke?” he said to the bird.

“I don’t see anyone else here,” said the bird.

“Since when do birds speak?”

“When they have been educated as I have. Then they learn to speak — quite well too.”

The bird looked something like a crested bluejay. And had the same kind of bossy voice. But instead of blue, it was purple. Then Cadmus remembered Mercury’s last instruction.

If I wish to send you word,
I’ll send a purple bird.

“Did Mercury send you?” cried Cadmus.

“He did, indeed. And he sent this message.

To make the dragon yield,
Let him dread his head
Upon your shield.”

And the bird flew away. “Wait!” cried Cadmus. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s the entire message,” said the bird. “Farewell.”

The bird disappeared. Cadmus tried to puzzle out the meaning of the message. He knew that he did not have much time. In the distance he heard a tiny chiming, the brass scales clanking; the dragon was flying his way again.

“These rhymes and riddles spoken by gods and oracles seem to come true,” he said to himself. “If only I could get the meaning of this one. But

it's a puzzle, and I don't have much time."

To make the dragon yield,
Let him dread his head
Upon your shield.

"Well, I have a shield all right, but what does that have to do with the dragon's head?"

Cadmus had been wiping the muddy shield all this while with a handful of rushes. Now he studied it intensely. What he saw was his own face. The bright shield was a mirror.

"That's it!" he cried. "I understand! I must let the dragon see himself in the shield. But to do that he will have to get very close...much too close for comfort. Now may all the gods help me, for here he is!"

Indeed, the great shadow had darkened the plain again. The hot breath of the dragon was scorching the grass. Cadmus saw the dragon, jaws yawning, swooping toward him in a long curving dive. "He's stopped spouting flame," thought Cadmus. "He must want to eat me and doesn't want me over-cooked."

The dragon swooped low and struck at Cadmus with one great brass claw. Brass rang on brass as the claw struck the helmet Vulcan had made. But Cadmus was not touched; the claw did not pierce the helmet. The monster swerved in the air and flew back, flailing with his great tail. But Cadmus was ready. He sliced off the tip of the dragon's tail with the sword Vulcan had made. The beast howled in agony, rose to a great height, and came diving down, furiously beating his enormous wings and lashing his wounded tail. The dragon was falling with all his tremendous weight but Cadmus stood his ground. He looked up, and saw the terrible monster hurtling toward him — jaws open, teeth flashing like ivory daggers.

"Now is the time," he thought. "I must test Mercury's rhyme."

He held up the shield, stood with its bright brass disk covering his face and torso. The shield was on his bent left arm, his right arm held the sword. He stood rooted to the ground. He did not let his arm tremble, but held the shield steady as the dragon dove straight at him. The monster fell headfirst toward the shield, and on it saw a sight so horrible that it penetrated even that dim dragon brain. It was, of course, his own reflection in the mirror of the shield. But the dragon had never seen himself before and he did not know he was looking at himself. He thought another monster was attacking

him. When he spit flame at the shield, he thought the monster facing him spit flame right back. When he saw this, the dragon gasped in horror.

Now when you gasp in horror you draw your breath in. That is what the dragon did. He drew in a great breath, not of air but of fire, for he was spitting flame at the time. He inhaled his own flame. Fire entered him and scorched everything inside. Lungs, liver, and heart were burned to a crisp. With a terrible choking shriek of agony the dragon fell to the plain. The fire had worked itself outward, and as Cadmus watched, the whole great length of the monster burned in a bright blue flame. The air was filled with bitter smoke, but it was sweet to Cadmus, seeing his enemy perish before his eyes. The dragon burned away completely, leaving only a handful of brass scales and his ivory teeth, for ivory does not burn.

In the thrashings of his last agony, the dragon had scorched and trampled the grass in a great circle so that it looked as if a city were being built.

“Thank you, Mercury!” cried Cadmus. “Thank you, great Zeus! You have sent my enemy and given me the courage to fight.”

“Good work, Cadmus!” said a voice. “Mercury sends his congratulations.” It was the purple bird again, circling slowly about Cadmus.

“I bid you welcome, purple bird. And thank you for your words of good advice.”

“Mercury sends this last word to you, Cadmus,” said the bird. “Listen well.

Set blade to earth and dig beneath
Then plant the dragon’s teeth.”

The bird flew off swiftly before Cadmus could question him further.

“Well, all the other riddle-rhymes worked,” thought Cadmus. “No reason why this one shouldn’t.”

He picked up his sword and poked its point into the earth, to make a hole. Then he walked across the field, making a neat row of holes. When he finished one row, he began another, until he had a hundred holes, enough for the dragon’s hundred teeth. He went to the pile of ivory and brass, all that was left of the dragon, and filled his helmet with the teeth. Then he went from hole to hole, planting a tooth in each, and carefully covering it over with earth. He planted fifty of the dragon’s teeth in this way. But he had no time to plant the rest. Before his astounded eyes metal spikes came

up out of the earth. As Cadmus watched, fifty armed men grew swiftly from the holes and stepped out on the field. Each of them wore a helmet, breastplate, shield, and either carried a sword or battle-axe. They were huge fierce-looking men. They glared about angrily, suspiciously, not knowing where they were. Cadmus ducked behind a rock. He had led men in battle, and he knew when men were in a killing mood.

“Fifty of them,” he said to himself. “Too many. I’ll have to reduce that number.”

Hiding behind the boulder, he threw out a stone. It struck the helmet of one man, who turned furiously on his neighbor and hit him with his axe, killing him. Then the man next to the man who had fallen attacked the first warrior. Then he was attacked immediately by two others. The fighting spread. Cadmus kept himself hidden behind the rock, occasionally throwing out another stone when he thought the fighting might stop. Cadmus let them fight until all but seven were killed. Then he sprang out of his hiding place, stood upon the rock, and raised his sword.

“Stop!” he shouted.

The men stopped fighting and gaped at him.

“I am your king. I am Cadmus. The gods have sent you here to this plain to help me build a city, and found a kingdom. You shall lead my armies.”

But the men were not ready for such words. They were still full of anger. They charged Cadmus, who sprang off the rock, and met them head on. The helmet made by Vulcan could not be dented. The shield made by Vulcan could not be pierced. And the sword made by Vulcan sheared through the attackers’ armor. Swiftly, he killed two of them. The others fell back.

“You see,” he said. “It was meant to be. The gods protect me and the gods speak through me. I am your king. You are my captains. Now let us build our city.”

They knelt then before Cadmus and swore to serve him faithfully. Under his direction, the five men built a city that was first called Cadmea and then called Thebes. Each of the five led an army that marched forth to conquer their enemies and make Thebes into a great kingdom. All that took years, of course. But it started on that bright morning when Cadmus held his ground and trusted his destiny.

Cadmus did not see his sister again. Years later, when Thebes had become a great kingdom, and Cadmus a great king, he married a beautiful

goddess named Harmonia, daughter of Vulcan and Venus. The wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia was the first wedding of a mortal ever attended by the gods. They all came, and they all brought gifts. Europa came too. Brother and sister embraced again. And Europa ever after treasured the gift which her brother, Cadmus, gave her — an ivory necklace made of the dragon's teeth which Cadmus had not planted.

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The Beautiful Witch

Ulysses was sailing home with three ships and a hundred men. But in the first two weeks at sea, he lost two ships and most of their crew. One ship was driven onto a reef by a sudden gale and wrecked completely. Another ship was stomped to splinters by angry giants who would not allow anyone to land on their island. As for the men, many drowned, many more were devoured by sea monsters and man-eating ogres.

Now, in his third week at sea, Ulysses was left with only one ship and a crew of thirty men. He was in an unknown part of the sea, among strange islands. He did not want to risk another landing. But food and water were running low, and he knew he had to take the risk.

He moored his ship off a small, heavily wooded island, and ordered his men to wait on board until he signaled to them. He wanted to explore the island alone before disembarking his crew. Ulysses rowed toward shore in a small skiff, beached the boat and then struck inland. He climbed a low hill, then up a tree near the top of the hill. Now he was high enough for a clear view on all sides.

A feather of smoke, rising from a grove of trees, caught his eye. He climbed down and made his way toward the smoke. Glimmering through the trees, he saw what looked like a small castle of polished gray stone. He did not dare go near, for he could hear strange howling sounds. A pack of dogs, he thought, but they sounded unlike any dogs he had ever heard.

He left the grove, and made his way back toward the beach. He couldn't decide whether to sail away immediately or take a chance on having his men land. He didn't like the sound of that howling. There was something in it that chilled his bones. Still, he had no real choice. His men were hungry and the little island offered plenty of game to hunt and streams of pure

water. So Ulysses signaled his men to come ashore on five small boats. When they landed on the beach, he divided them into two groups. One group he led himself. The other he assigned to his most trusted officer, Tyro. He ordered Tyro to scout the castle, and then, with his own party, left to explore the coastline.

As Tyro and his band of men approached the castle, they heard the strange howling. It grew louder as they approached. Some of the men drew their swords. Others notched arrows to their bowstrings as they pressed on preparing to fight. When they passed the last screen of trees and came to the walls of the shining gray castle, they saw a terrible sight. A pack of wolves and lions were running together, like hounds, racing around the walls.

When the animals caught sight of the men they flung themselves on the strangers. So swiftly did this happen that no man had time to use his weapon. The great beasts stood on their hind legs, put their forepaws on the men's shoulders, and licked their faces. They uttered low growling whines. Tyro, who was half-embracing a huge tawny lion, said, "These fearsome beasts greet us as though we were their lost friends. Look at their eyes. How sad they are — as if they were trying to tell us something."

Just then they heard someone singing in the castle. It was a woman's voice, so lovely that without seeing her they knew the woman was beautiful.

Tyro ordered his men to go into the castle and then report back to him. "I will stay here and make sure you are not surprised," he said.

Tyro stood watch at the castle gate — sword in one hand, dagger in the other, and bow slung across his back. The rest of the men entered the castle. They followed the sound of singing through the rooms and out onto a sunny terrace. There a woman sat weaving. The bright flax leaped through her fingers as if it were dancing to the music in her voice. The men stood and stared. The sun seemed to be trapped in her hair — it was so bright. She wore a dress as blue as the summer sky, matching her eyes. Her long white arms were bare to the shoulders, and when she stood up and greeted them, they saw she was very tall.

"Welcome, strangers," she said. "I am Circe, daughter of Helios, a sun god. I can do magic — weave simple spells, and read dreams. But let us not talk about me, tell me about yourselves. You are warriors, I see, men of the

sword. I welcome you. I shall have baths drawn for you and clean garments laid out. And then, I hope, you will all be my guests for dinner.”

When Ulysses’ men had bathed and changed, Circe gave them each a red bowl, into which she put a kind of porridge made of cheese, barley, honey, and wine — and a few secret things known only to herself. The odor that arose from the food was more delicious than anything the men had ever smelled before. And as each man ate he felt himself doing strange greedy things — lapping, panting, grunting, and snuffling at the food. Circe passed among them, filling the bowls again and again. And the men, waiting for their bowls to be filled, looked about. Their faces were smeared with food. “How strange,” they thought. “We’re eating like pigs.”

And as this thought came to the men, Circe passed among them, touching each one on the shoulder with a wand, saying,

Glut and swink,
Eat and drink,
Gobble food and guzzle wine.
Too rude I think for human folk,
Quite right, I think,
For *swine!*

As she said this spell in her lovely laughing voice, the men began to change. Their noses grew wide and long; their hair hardened into bristles; their hands and feet became hooves and they ran about on all fours, sobbing and snuffling, searching the floor for bones and crumbs.

But all the time they were crying real tears from their little red eyes, for they were pigs only in form. Their minds were still the minds of men, and they knew what had happened to them.

Circe kicked them away from the table. “Out! Out!” she cried, striking them with her wand and herding them out of the castle into a large sty. And there she flung them acorns and chestnuts and red berries, and watched them grubbing in the mud for the food she threw. She laughed a wild hard bright laugh and went back into the castle.

While all this was happening, Tyro was waiting at the gate. When the men did not return, he crept up to a bow-slit in the castle wall and looked in. It was dark now, and he saw the glimmer of torchlight and the dim shape of a woman at a loom, weaving. But he saw nothing of his men. And he could not hear their voices. A great fear seized him and he raced off as fast

as he could, hoping that the beasts would not howl. The wolves and lions stood like statues or walked like shadows. Their eyes glittered in the cold moonlight, but none of them uttered a sound.

Tyro ran until the breath strangled in his throat. He thought his heart would crack out of his ribs, but he did not stop. He kept running, stumbling over roots, slipping on stones. He ran and ran until he reached the beach and fell into Ulysses' arms. He gasped out the story — told Ulysses of the lions and wolves, of the woman singing in the castle, and how the men had gone in and not come out.

Ulysses said to his men, "I must go to the castle to see what has happened, but there is no need for you to risk your lives. Stay here. If I do not return by sunset tomorrow, then you must board the ship and sail away, for you will know that I am dead."

The men pleaded with him not to go. But he said, "I have sworn an oath that I will never leave a man behind. If there is any way I can prevent this, I must. Farewell, dear friends."

It was dawn by the time Ulysses found himself among the oak trees near the castle and heard the first faint howling of the animals. As he walked through the rose and gray light, a figure started up before him. It was a slender youth in golden breastplate, golden hat, and golden sandals with golden wings on them. And he held a golden staff. Ulysses fell to his knees.

"Why do you kneel, sir?" said the youth. "You are older than I am, and a mighty warrior. You should not kneel."

"Ah," cried Ulysses. "Behind your youth I see time itself stretching to the beginning of things. I know you. You are Mercury, the swift one, the god of voyagers, the messenger god. I pray you have come with good tidings for me."

"I have come to warn you," said Mercury. "In that castle sits one who awaits you. Her name is Circe and she is a very dangerous person. A sorceress. A sea witch. A doer of magical mischief. And she is waiting for you, Ulysses. She sits at her loom, waiting. She has already bewitched your shipmates. She fed them, watched them make pigs of themselves, and finally helped them on their way. In short, they are now in a pig sty being fattened."

"I'm used to danger," said Ulysses. "I have faced giants and ogres but what can I do against magic?"

“I have come to help you,” said Mercury. “Neptune’s anger against you does not please all of us, you know. We gods have our moods but we must keep things in balance. Now listen closely... you must do exactly as I say...”

Mercury snapped his fingers and a flower appeared. It was white and very sweet-smelling, with a black and yellow root. He gave it to Ulysses.

“This flower is magical,” said Mercury. “So long as you carry it, Circe’s drugs will not work on you. Now go to the castle. She will greet you and feed you. You will eat the food, but it will not harm you. Then you must threaten to kill her. She will plead with you, and then try to enchant you with her voice, her face, her manner. You will not be able to resist them. No man can — nor any god either. And there is no counterspell that will work against her beauty.”

“What chance do I have then?” said Ulysses.

“The chance you give yourself. If you want to see your home again, and rescue your men from the sty, you must resist her long enough to make her swear the great oath of the immortals. She must swear that she will not do you any harm as long as you are her guest. That is all I can do. The rest is up to you. Farewell.”

The golden youth disappeared like a ray of sunlight. Ulysses shook his head, wondering whether he had really seen the god, or only imagined him. When he saw that he was still holding the curious flower, he knew that Mercury had indeed been there. So he marched on toward the castle, through the pack of lions and wolves, who leaped about him. They looked at him with their great intelligent eyes, trying to warn him in their snarling growling way. He stroked their heads as he passed among them, and went on into the castle.

And here he found Circe sitting at her loom, weaving and singing. She wore a white tunic and a flame-colored scarf, and was as beautiful as the dawn. She stood up and greeted him.

“Welcome, stranger.”

“Thank you, beautiful lady.”

“No. Thank *you*. I live here alone and seldom see anyone. I almost never have guests. So you are most welcome, great warrior. I know that you have seen battle and adventure, and have tales to tell.”

Circe's servants drew Ulysses a warm, perfumed bath and gave him clean garments to wear. When he came back, Circe gave him a red bowl full of the same food she had given his men. Its fragrance was intoxicating. Ulysses wanted to plunge his face into the bowl and grub up the food like a pig. But he held the flower tightly, and kept control of himself. He ate slowly, and did not quite finish the food.

"Delicious," he said.

"Will you not finish?" she asked.

"I am not quite as hungry as I thought," Ulysses replied.

Circe turned her back to him as she poured the wine, and he knew she was putting a powder in it. He smiled to himself, then drank of the wine, and said, "Delicious. Your own grapes?"

"You look weary, stranger," she said. "Sit and talk with me."

"Gladly," said Ulysses. "We have much to talk about, you and I. I'm something of a farmer myself. I raise cattle on my own little island of Ithaca, where I'm king. Won't you show me your livestock?"

"Livestock? I keep no cattle here."

"Don't you? I thought I heard pigs squealing out there. I must have been mistaken."

"Yes," said Circe. "Badly mistaken."

"But you do have interesting animals. I was amazed by the wolves and lions outside your gates. They run in a pack like dogs — very friendly for such savage beasts."

"I taught them to be friendly," said Circe. "I'm friendly myself, and I like all the members of my household to share my good will."

"They have remarkable eyes," said Ulysses. "So big and sad and clever. You know, they looked to me like ... human eyes."

"Did they?" said Circe. "Well — the eyes go last."

Then she came to him swiftly, raised her wand, and touched him on the shoulder, saying: "Change, change, change! Turn, turn, turn!"

Nothing happened. Her eyes widened when she saw him sitting there unchanged, sniffing at the flower he had taken from his tunic. He took the wand from her and snapped it in two. Then he drew his sword, seized her by her long golden hair, and forced her to her knees.

"You have not asked me my name," he said. "It is Ulysses. I am an unlucky man, but not altogether helpless. You have changed my men into

pigs. Now I will change you into a corpse.”

Circe did not flinch before the sword. Her great blue eyes looked into his. “But I think living might be more interesting — now that I have met you,” she murmured.

Ulysses tried to turn his head, but he sank deeper into the blueness of her eyes.

“Yes, I am a sorceress,” she whispered. “A witch. But you are a sorcerer too, are you not? You have changed me more than I have changed your men. I changed only their bodies, you have changed my soul. It is no longer a wicked plotting soul, but soft and tender — full of love for you.”

“Listen to me, beautiful witch. Before there can be any love between us, I must ask you to swear the great oath that you will not harm me in any way as long as I am your guest. You must swear not to wound me or suck away my blood, as witches do, but treat me honestly. And that, first of all, you will restore my men to their own forms, and let me take them with me when I leave.”

“Don’t speak of leaving,” said Circe softly.

Circe swore the oath. She took Ulysses out to the sty, and as the pigs streamed past her, rushing to Ulysses, she touched each one on the shoulder with her wand, muttering:

Snuffle and groan,
Gasp and pant.
Muffle your moan,
I dis-enchant.

For your captain fine
I undo my deed,
And release you swine
As agreed.

As she spoke the spell, each pig stood up. His hind legs grew longer, his front hooves became hands. His eyes grew, his nose shrank, and his quills softened into hair. Each was himself once more, with his own form, his own face, but taller now and younger. The men crowded around Ulysses, shouting and laughing.

“Welcome, my friends,” he said. “You have gone a short but ugly voyage to the animal state. You have returned looking very well, but it is clear that

we are in a place of strong magic and must conduct ourselves with care. Our enchanting hostess, Circe, has become so fond of our company that she insists we stay a while longer. But I don't think we can accept the lady's hospitality."

Circe seized Ulysses by the arm, and drew him away from the others.

"You don't understand," she said. "I don't want you as a guest. I want you to be my husband."

"I am much obliged, dear lady. But I am already married."

"Only to a mortal. That doesn't count. I am a goddess — an immortal. We can have as many husbands as we like."

"How many have you had?" cried Ulysses.

"Ah, don't say it like that," said Circe. "I have been a widow quite often, it is true. But please understand. I am immortal. I cannot die. I have lived since the beginning of things."

"How many husbands have you buried, dear widow?"

"I do not let them die," replied Circe. "I cannot bear dead things — especially if they are things I have loved. I turn them into animals, and they roam this beautiful island forever."

"That explains the wolves and lions outside the walls then," said Ulysses.

"Ah, they are only the best!" cried Circe. "The mightiest warriors of ages gone. I have had lesser husbands. They are now rabbits, squirrels, boars, cats, spiders, frogs — and snails. See that little monkey on the wall trying to pelt us with walnuts? He was very jealous, very bossy and jealous and still is. I pick their animal forms to match their dispositions, you see. Isn't that thoughtful of me?"

"Tell me," said Ulysses. "When you tire of me, will I be good enough to join the lions and wolves — or will I be something less? A toad, perhaps, or a snail?"

"A fox, of course," said Circe. "With your red hair and your swiftness and your cunning ways — oh, yes, a fox. You are the only man who has ever withstood my spells, Ulysses. I beg you, stay with me."

"I have told you I cannot."

"I can teach you to wipe out of your mind all thoughts of home, all dreams of battle and voyage. And I will do for you what I have done for no other mortal. I will teach you to live forever. Yes, I can do that, Ulysses. We can live together always, and never grow old."

“Can such a thing be?” whispered Ulysses whose one fear in the world was of growing too old for voyages and adventure. “Can you actually keep me from growing old?”

“I can,” said Circe. “If you want me to. The decision is yours. You can stay here with me, and make this island your home. Or you can resume your voyage and meet dangers more dreadful than any you have yet seen. You will encounter sea monsters and land monsters, giant cannibals and rocks that will try to crush your ship between them. Neptune’s anger will grow each day. If you leave this island, Ulysses, you will see your friends die before your eyes. Your own life will be imperiled a thousand times. You will be battered, bruised, torn, wave-tossed — all this if you leave me. It is for you to decide.”

Ulysses stood up and walked to the edge of the terrace. He could see the light dancing on the blue water. He could hear the wolves and lions beyond the wall. Near the empty sties, he saw his men, healthy and tanned. Some were wrestling, some were practicing with spears and bows. Circe had crossed to her loom and was weaving. He thought of his wife at home in Ithaca when she would sit and weave. Her hair was not the color of burning gold. It was black. And she was much smaller than Circe, and did not sing. Certainly she was no goddess. She was very human, and did not have the power to keep him young forever. He went to Circe.

“I have decided,” he said. “I must go.”

“Must you?”

“Yes.”

“I have read the future for you, Ulysses. You know what lies in store for you if you leave this place. When disaster strikes, remember that the choice was yours.”

“I am a voyager, Circe. And danger is my destiny. Toil. Battle. Uncertainty. That is my destiny, and the nature of voyages.”

“Go quickly, then! If you stay here any longer I shall break my oath. I shall keep you here by force and never let you go.”

Ulysses left the castle at once and called to his men. He led them back to the beach where they arrived just before sunset. They piled into the skiffs and pushed off for the anchored ship. They stepped the mast, rigged the sails, and scudded away. They caught a northwest wind. The sails filled, and the black ship ran out of the harbor. Ulysses’ face was wet with Circe’s

tears, and his heart was heavy. But then the salt spray dashed into his face, and he laughed.

The lions and wolves had followed the men down to the beach, and stood breast-deep in the surf. They gazed after the white sail. Their lonesome howling was the last sound the men heard as the ship ran for the open sea.

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Keeper of the Winds

For three sunny days the black ship sped southward from Circe's island. Ulysses began to hope that Neptune's anger had cooled enough to allow fair sailing the rest of the way home. He took the helm himself, and kept it night and day, although his sailors pleaded with him to take some rest. But he was wild with longing to get home to his wife and young son, and the dear land of Ithaca that he had not seen for many years.

At the end of the third night, just as the first light of day was staining the sky, Ulysses saw something very strange. At first he thought it was a trick of the light, and he rubbed his eyes and looked again. But there it was, a towering bright wall of beaten bronze floating on the sea and blocking their way.

"Well," he thought to himself. "It cannot stretch across the sea. There must be a way around it."

He began to sail along the wall, trying to find his way around it. Ulysses had no way of knowing this, but the vengeful sea god had guided his ship to the island fortress of Aeolus, keeper of the winds.

When the world was very new, the gods had become wary of the terrible strength of the winds, and had decided to tame them. Zeus and Neptune, working together, had floated an island out onto the sea, and then encircled it with a mighty bronze wall. Then they raised a mountain on the island, and hollowed it out until it became a huge stone dungeon. Into this hollow mountain they stuffed the struggling winds, and made Aeolus their jailer. Whenever the gods wanted to stir up a storm and needed a certain wind, they sent word to Aeolus. He would draw his sword and stab the side of the mountain, making a hole big enough for the wind to fly through. If the North Wind were wanted, he stabbed the north side of the mountain. For the

East Wind he stabbed the east slope, and so on. When the storm was done, Aeolus would whistle the wind home again. Then the huge brawling gale would crawl back whimpering to its hole.

Aeolus was an enormously fat little god with a long wind-tangled beard and a red wind-beaten face. He loved to eat and drink, play games, and hear stories. He had twelve children, six boys and six girls. He sent them out one by one to ride the back of the wind and manage the weather for each month.

It happened that just as Ulysses was sailing southward, Aeolus decided to punish his winds. On a night of mischief they had howled around his castle, shattering the great crystal windows, lifting the tiles from the roof, and uprooting a thousand-year-old oak that was his pride. “Break my windows, would you?” bellowed Aeolus. “Blow the cows into the next field and uproot my beautiful oak—very funny. Well, you’ll bake in your mountain until I cook the mischief out of you!” And with this he hurled the winds headlong into their prison cave.

Since the winds were walled up, a great calm fell upon the seas just as Ulysses was trying to find a way around the bronze wall. The water was oily and still. The ship’s sail drooped. They were becalmed. For a day and a night the ship bobbed on the water waiting for a breeze. Ulysses stared helplessly at the bronze wall towering before him. Food and water were running desperately low.

“All right, men!” Ulysses shouted. “Haul sail! Out oars! We must row for it!”

The men bent to the oars and the ship crawled around the bronze wall. Finally they came to a huge gate. As Ulysses gazed upon it in amazement, the gate swung open. The water ruffled darkly, and a gale struck. The shrouds snapped, the sails bulged, the mast groaned, and the ship was blown through the gate, which immediately shut behind them. Once within the wall, the wind fell off, and Ulysses found his ship drifting toward a beautiful hilly island. Suddenly there was another great howling of wind. The sun was blown out like a candle. Darkness fell. Ulysses felt the deck leap beneath him as the ship was lifted halfway out of the water and hurled through the blackness. He tried to shout, but the breath was torn from his mouth and he was thrown to the deck, unconscious.

When they finally awoke, Ulysses and his men found themselves in the great castle of Aeolus. Invisible hands held torches for them, guided them to

their baths, and gave them fresh clothing. Then the floating torches led them to the dining hall, where they were greeted by Aeolus and his twelve handsome children. A mighty banquet was laid before them, and they ate like starved men.

Finally Aeolus spoke: “Strangers, you are my guests. Uninvited, but guests all the same. By the look of you, you have had more than your share of adventures and should have fine stories to tell. I love a story full of fighting and danger and tricks. If you have any to tell then I shall entertain you royally. But if you are the kind of men who use your mouths only to stuff food into, then you are apt to find things a little unpleasant...”

“You, captain!” Aeolus roared, pointing at Ulysses. “You, sir. I take you to be the leader of this ragged crew. Do you have a story to tell?”

“For those who know how to listen, I have a tale to tell,” said Ulysses.

“Your name?”

“Ulysses — of Ithaca.”

“Mmm...yes,” said Aeolus. “I seem to remember that name. Near Troy I think it was... a little quarrel. Yes... were you there?”

“I was there, dear host, and indeed took part in that petty quarrel that will be remembered by men when this island, and you and yours have vanished under the sea and been forgotten for a thousand years. I am Ulysses. My comrades before Troy were very mighty heroes, and in modesty I did no less than they.”

“Yes,” said Aeolus. “You are bold enough. Too bold for your own good, perhaps. But you have caught my attention. Tell on, captain.”

Then Ulysses told of the Trojan War — of the great battles, the attacks and retreats, the hand-to-hand fighting. He told of friends and enemies. Of men killing and dying. Of heroes and cowards, and those in between.

Then he told of his own great trick which had ended the war. How he had made a hollow wooden horse of enormous size, and how the Greek army had hidden in the belly of the horse. He told how the Trojans, amazed by this gigantic statue, had dragged the horse inside their gates, and how the Greek warriors had crept out at night and taken the city and killed the Trojans.

Aeolus shouted with laughter. His face blazed and his body shook. “Ah, that’s a trick after my own heart!” he cried. “You’re a sharp one, you are. I knew you had a foxy look about you with that red hair and red beard.

Wooden horse... ho ho...But tell me, is it true what they say about Troy? Was it a rich city?"

"Quite true," said Ulysses. "It was a wonderfully rich city."

"And you sacked it," Aeolus said. "You must be sailing home with a pretty piece of loot under your deck, eh?"

Ulysses smiled to himself. From his first glimpse of Aeolus he had recognized the wind god's greed, and he was prepared now to use it to his own advantage. "Yes," said Ulysses. "There was some very pleasant looting at Troy. I picked up this little curio in the royal palace — in the king's own chamber."

Ulysses opened a soft leather pouch at his belt, took something from it, and handed it to Aeolus.

"What is it?" asked Aeolus. "It looks like a frog made of green stone."

"That frog," said Ulysses, "is the largest emerald in the world."

"Is it, indeed?" murmured Aeolus. "Largest in the world, eh? Interesting..."

"More interesting than you think. Its jaw is hinged. See? Now ask it a question."

"You want me to question this toy? Foolishness!"

"Try it and see," said Ulysses. "I'll tell you this. It was made by Vulcan himself who can do some very ingenious things, as you know. Go ahead, ask it a question. Any question."

"Very well," said Aeolus. "Frog, frog, answer true — the strongest god is — who?"

"You," said the frog.

"Me?"

"You." And then the frog sang,
 Gods they come,
 Gods they go,
 But the winds of Aeolus
 Always blow...
 Blowing late and soon
 They quench the moon—
 Gentle breeze
 And wild typhoon...

"A marvelous song!" cried Aeolus. "Well sung too!"

“Know this, oh Aeolus,” said the frog. “The earth was born when a wind, blowing starfire upon starfire, shaped it into a flaming ball. And the earth will die when foolish men — wise in evil — will hurl that flame upon each other. They will start a blaze that will turn the seas to steam and the mountains to cinder. And you alone will be left, Aeolus, master of winds, the last god.”

“A most remarkable frog!” roared Aeolus. “A wise and musical frog, Ulysses. Truly a fine piece of booty to take from Troy.”

“It is yours, Aeolus.”

“Mine?”

“Yours, dear host,” said Ulysses. “A slight return for your hospitality.”

“By the gods, this is most generous of you, captain. In return you may have any favor within my power. Speak out, Ulysses. Ask what you will.”

“There is only one thing I seek, great Aeolus. Your help. I need your help in getting home. It has been a long time since we saw our homes and families. We thirst for the sight of Ithaca.”

“No one can help you better than I,” Aeolus assured him. “You sail on ships, and I am keeper of the winds. Come with me.”

He led Ulysses into the night. A hot orange moon rode low in the sky so they could see without torches. Aeolus led Ulysses to the mountain. He was carrying a sword in one hand and a great leather bag in the other. “Stand back,” said Aeolus. “They come out with a rush.”

“Who does?”

“The winds, man, the winds,” said Aeolus. “They hate to be penned in that mountain. They are like caged beasts, but wilder and stronger than all the beasts in the world combined. They want to run free over land and sea, kicking up storms. But I alone can set them free. And let me tell you, friend, you are the first mortal ever to be granted use of the winds.”

“I thank you, Aeolus.”

“They are a tricky loan, though, these winds. They could mean your death unless you do whatever I tell you.”

“I will do whatever you say,” Ulysses promised.

“Stand back, then.”

Ulysses stepped back as Aeolus stood tall before the mountain, chanting,

Winds, winds, sally forth —

South and East and surly North.

Hurry, hurry, do not lag —
Get inside this leather bag.

Then Aeolus stabbed the side of the mountain. There was a rushing, sobbing sound. He clapped the leather bag over the hole and Ulysses, amazed, saw the great bag flutter and fill. Aeolus held it closed, strode to the east face of the mountain and stabbed again. As the East Wind rushed out, he caught it in the sack. Then very carefully he wound a silver wire about the neck of the sack. It was full now, swollen, tugging at his arm like a huge leather balloon trying to fly away.

“In this bag,” said Aeolus, “are the North Wind, the South Wind, and the East Wind —”

“What of the West Wind?” said Ulysses.

“He’s for sailing.” Aeolus strode now to the west slope of the mountain and chanted,

Hurry now from stony lair,
Wind that blows when sky is fair —
Of all my winds the very best,
Sailors’ friend, the wind called West.

“But if the West Wind will bear me home,” said Ulysses, “why do I need the other winds in the bag?”

“Need, indeed,” said Aeolus. “You of all people should know how changeable the sea can be. In this bag are the three winds, North, South, and East, and you must keep them prisoner. But if you wish to change course — if a pirate should chase you, say, or a sea monster, or if an adventure beckons — then you open the bag very carefully, you and you alone, captain, and call up the wind you wish. Let just a breath of it out, then close the bag quickly and tie it tight. Winds grow swiftly, that is their secret. So they must be carefully guarded.”

“I shall not change course,” said Ulysses. “No matter what danger threatens or what adventure calls, I will sail straight for Ithaca. I shall not open your bag of winds.”

“Good,” said Aeolus. “But just in case, tie it to the mast, and guard it yourself. Let none of your men approach, lest they open it accidentally. And I will send the gentle West Wind to follow your ship and fill your sails and take you home. When you are safely home, then you can open the bag and I will call the winds home.”

“Thank you, great Aeolus. Thank you, kindly Keeper of the Winds. I know now that the gods have answered my prayers. I shall be able to cease this weary heartbreaking drift over the face of the sea. I shall never stop thanking you, Aeolus, till the day I die.”

“May that sad day be far off,” said Aeolus politely. “Now, sir, much as I like your company, you had better gather your men and be off. I shall be uneasy until my winds return to me and I can shut them in the mountain again.”

Ulysses went back to the castle and called his men together. Gladly they trooped down to the ship and went aboard. Ulysses bound the great leather sack to the mast, warning his men that no one must touch it on pain of death. Then he himself, armed with his sword, stood under the mast, guarding the sack.

“Up anchor!” he cried.

The West Wind rolled off the mountain and filled their sails. The black ship slipped out of the harbor, away from the island toward the wall of bronze. When they reached the wall, the great gate swung open and they sailed eastward over water oily with moonlight. Eastward they sailed for nine days and nine nights. In perfect weather they skimmed along, the West Wind hovering behind them, filling their sails, pushing them steadily home.

And for nine nights and nine days, Ulysses did not sleep. He did not close his eyes or sheathe his sword. He kept his station under the mast and had food and drink brought to him there. He never, for an instant, stopped guarding the sack.

Then on the morning of the tenth day, he heard the lookout cry, “Land ho!” Ulysses strained his eyes to see. What he saw made his heart swell. Tears ran down his face, but they were tears of joy. For he saw the dear familiar hills of home. He saw the brown fields of Ithaca, the twisted olive trees. And as he watched, he saw the white marble columns of his own palace on the cliff. And his men saw the smoke rising from their own chimneys.

When Ulysses saw the white columns of his palace, he knew that unless the West Wind failed, they would be home in an hour. And the friendly wind was blowing as steadily as ever. Ulysses heaved a great sigh. “I thank you, gods,” he whispered. The terrible responsibility that had kept him

awake for nine days and nights was over. He put up his sword, raised his arms, and yawned. Then he leaned against the mast, just for a moment.

Two of the men, standing in the bow, saw him slump at the foot of the mast, fast asleep. Their eyes slid up the mast to the great leather bag, plump as a balloon, straining against its bonds as the impatient winds wrestled inside.

And now it was that Neptune, swimming invisibly alongside the ship, saw the chance he had been waiting for. He clinked the heavy golden bracelets on his arms.

He heard one man say to the other, “Do you hear that? Those are coins, heavy golden coins clinking against each other. There must be a fortune in that sack.”

“Yes,” said the other man. “A fortune that should belong to all of us by rights. We shared the dangers and should share the booty.”

“He has always been generous,” said the first. “He shared the spoils of Troy.”

“Yes, but that was then. Why doesn’t he divide this great sack of treasure? Aeolus gave it to him, and we know how rich Aeolus is. He gave it to him as a guest gift, and he should share it.”

“He never will. Whatever is in that bag, he does not want us to know about it. He has been guarding it all these nights and days, standing there always under the mast, eating and drinking where he stands. He never put up his sword.”

“It is in its sheath now,” said the second sailor. “And his eyes are closed. Look, he sleeps like a baby. I doubt that anything would wake him.”

“What are you doing? What are you going to do with that knife? Are you out of your mind?”

“Yes, out of my mind with curiosity. Out of my mind with gold fever, if you must know. I mean to see what is in that bag.”

“Wait — I’ll help you. But you must give me half.”

“Come then.”

Swiftly and silently the two barefooted sailors padded to the mast. They slashed the rope that held the bag to the spar, and carried it away.

“Hurry — open it!”

“I can’t. The wire’s twisted in a strange knot. Perhaps a magic knot. I can’t untie it.”

“Then we’ll do it this way!” cried the sailor with the knife, and he slashed at the leather bag. He was immediately lifted off his feet and blown like a leaf into the sea. The winds rushed howling out of the bag. They began to chase each other around the ship, screaming and laughing, jeering and growling and leaping, reveling in their freedom, roaring and squabbling, screeching around and around the ship. They fell on their gentle brother, the West Wind, and cuffed him mercilessly until he fled. Then they chased each other around the ship again, spinning it like a cork in a whirlpool.

When they heard the far faint whistle of the Keeper of the Winds, they snarled with rage and roared homeward to the isle of the winds, far to the west of Ithaca. As they rushed away, they snatched the ship along with them, ripping its sail to shreds, snapping its mast like a twig, and hurling the splintered hull westward over the boiling sea.

Ulysses awoke from his sleep to find the blue sky black with clouds, and his home dropping far astern. He saw his crew flung about the deck like dolls, and he saw the tattered sails and the broken spars, and he did not know whether he was asleep or awake. Was this some frightful nightmare, or was he awake now and asleep before, dreaming a fair dream of home?

With the unleashed winds screaming behind them at gale force, the trip back to Aeolus island took them only two days. Once again the black ship was hurled onto the island of the winds. Ulysses left his crew and went to the castle. He found Aeolus in his throne room, and he stood before him, bruised, bloody, clothes torn, eyes like ashes.

“What happened?” cried Aeolus. “Why have you come back?”

“I was betrayed,” said Ulysses. “Betrayed by sleep — the most cruel sleep of my life — and by a wicked, foolish, greedy crew who let the winds escape. We were snatched back from happiness even as we saw the smoke rising from our own chimneys.”

“I warned you,” said Aeolus. “I warned you not to let anyone touch that bag.”

“And you were right, a thousand times right!” cried Ulysses. “Be generous once again. You can heal my woes, you alone. Renew your gift. Lend me the West Wind to bear me home again and I swear to you that I shall do everything you bid.”

“I can’t help you,” said Aeolus. “No one can help whom the gods hate. And Neptune hates you. What you call bad luck is his hatred. And bad luck is very catching. So please go. Get on your ship and sail away from this island, and never return.”

“Farewell,” said Ulysses, and strode away.

He gathered his weary men and made them board the ship again. The winds were penned up in their mountain. The sea was sluggish. A heavy calm lay over the harbor. The crew had to row on their broken stumps of oars, crawling like beetles over the gray water. They rowed away from the island, through the bronze gate, and out upon the sullen sea.

Ulysses, heartbroken, almost dead of grief, tried to hide his feelings from the men. He stood on deck, barking orders, making them mend sail, patch hull, rig new spars, and keep rowing. He took the helm himself, and swung the tiller, pointing the bow eastward toward home, which once again lay at the other end of the sea.

Cupid and Psyche

There was a king who had three daughters. The youngest, named Psyche, was the most beautiful. She was so lovely, in fact, that kings and princes and warriors from all the countries around poured into her father's castle to ask for her hand in marriage.

"If we don't marry that girl off," the king said to his wife, "I'll have a war on my hands. But what are we going to do about her sisters?"

It was the custom, at that time, that daughters be married in the order of their age — the oldest one first, then the next oldest, and so on down to the youngest.

"We'll just have to break the rule," said the queen. "The palace grounds are beginning to look like a battlefield. They're killing each other and trampling my peonies. I'll speak to her tonight."

But Psyche was not ready to get married. She was a kind girl and did not wish to make her sisters more jealous than they already were. Besides, there was no one she wanted to marry. She went off by herself to a grove in the woods, and there whispered a prayer to Cupid.

"Oh, archer of love," she said. "Please do this for me. Aim your golden arrows at two of those who seek to marry me. But make them love my sisters instead."

Cupid thought this the oddest prayer he had ever heard.

"It's usually the other way around," he said to himself. "The girl who prays to me usually wants me to help her *steal* her sister's suitor. This Psyche must be the most unselfish girl in the world."

Cupid was so curious about Psyche that he flew down to take a look for himself. When he saw her, it was just as though he had scratched himself with one of his own arrows. He hovered invisibly in the air above the grove

where Psyche was praying. He began to feel the sweet poison spread in his veins, and he grew dizzy with joy and strangeness. Cupid had spread love, but never felt it. He had shot others, but never been wounded himself. He did not know himself this way.

He immediately flew to the castle, and just as Psyche's sisters were coming into the courtyard, he aimed his golden arrows at the first two suitors he saw. That very evening the king and queen were delighted to receive offers of marriage for their two eldest daughters.

"Now Psyche can marry," they said to each other joyfully. "And peace will return to the kingdom." Peace came, but not in the way they expected.

Cupid did not want anyone to court Psyche. He cast an invisible hedge of thorns around the girl so that no suitor could come near. Psyche welcomed being alone. No man or boy she had ever met matched her secret idea of what a husband should be. Now, behind the hedge of thorns, she could dream about him.

But the king and queen were very troubled. They could not understand why no one was asking to marry their most beautiful daughter. They understood even less why she didn't seem to care. They went to an oracle, who said:

"Psyche is not meant for mortal man. She is to be the bride of the one who lives on the mountain and conquers both man and god. Take her to the mountain, and say farewell."

When the king and queen heard this they thought their daughter was meant for some monster. They feared that she would be devoured, as so many other princesses had been devoured, to feed the mysterious appetite of evil. But they had to obey the oracle, and so they dressed Psyche in bridal garments, hung her with jewels, and led her to the mountain. The whole court followed, mourning as though it were a funeral instead of a wedding.

Psyche herself did not weep, but had a strange dreaming look on her face. She spoke no word of fear, wept no tear, as she kissed her mother and father good-bye. She stood tall on the mountain, her white bridal gown blowing about her, her arms full of flowers.

Soon the wedding party returned to the castle. When the last sound of their voices faded, Psyche stood alone listening to a great silence. Then the wind blew so hard that her hair came loose. Her gown was whipped about

her like a flag and she felt a great pressure that she did not understand. She heard the wind itself whispering in her ear, saying: "Fear not, princess. I am the West Wind, the groom's messenger. I have come to take you home."

Psyche listened to the wind and believed what she heard. She was not afraid, even though she felt herself being lifted off the mountain and carried through the air like a leaf. She felt herself gliding down steps of air. She was carried through the failing light, through purple clumps of dusk, toward another castle, gleaming like silver on a hilltop. She was set down gently within the courtyard. It was empty, and there were no sentries, no dogs, nothing but shadows and the moon-pale stones of the castle. A carpet unreeled itself and rolled out to her feet. She walked over the carpet and through the doors. They closed behind her.

A torch burned in the air and floated in front of her. She followed it. It led her through a great hallway into a room. The torch whirled. Three more torches whirled in to join it, then stuck themselves in the wall and burned there, lighting the room. It was a smaller room, beautifully furnished. Psyche stepped onto the terrace which looked out over the valley toward the moonlit sea.

A table floated into the room, and set itself down solidly on its three legs. A chair placed itself at the table. Invisible hands began to set the table with dishes of gold and goblets of crystal. Food appeared on the plates, and the goblets were filled with purple wine.

"Why can't I see you?" she cried to the invisible servants.

A courteous voice said, "It is so ordered."

"And my husband? Where is he?"

"Journeying far. Coming near. I must say no more."

Psyche was very hungry after her windy ride, and she finished the delicious meal. The torch then led her out of the room to another room that was an indoor pool full of fragrant warm water. After she bathed herself, fleecy towels were offered to her, and a flask of perfume that smelled like a summer garden at dawn. Then Psyche went back to her room, and awaited her husband.

Presently she heard a voice in the room. A powerful voice speaking very softly, so softly that the words were like her own thoughts.

"You are Psyche. I am your husband. You are the most beautiful girl in the world, beautiful enough to make the goddess of love herself grow

jealous.”

Psyche could not see anyone. She felt the voice press hummily upon her as if she were in the center of a huge bell.

“Where are you?”

“Here.”

Psyche reached out her arms and heard the voice speak again. “Welcome home.”

When she awoke next morning, Psyche was alone, but she was so happy she didn’t care. She went dancing from room to room, exploring the castle, singing as she went. She explored the courtyard, and the woods nearby as well, and found only one living creature — a silvery greyhound, dainty as a squirrel and fierce as a panther. Psyche knew it was hers. The greyhound went exploring the woods with her, and showed her how he could outrace the deer. Psyche laughed with joy to see him run.

At the end of the day she returned to the castle. Her meal was served by the same invisible servants. She again bathed and put on fresh clothes. At midnight her husband came to her again, and she wondered how it was that of all the girls in the world she had been chosen to live in this magical place.

Day after day went by like this, and night after night. And each night he asked her, “Are you happy, lovely girl?”

“Yes, but I want to see you. I know you are beautiful, but I want to see for myself.”

“That will be, but not yet. It is not yet time!”

“Whatever you say, dear heart. But then, can you not stay with me by day as well, invisible or not?”

“That too will change, perhaps. But not yet. It is too soon.”

“But the day grows so long without you.”

“You are lonely. You want company. Would you like your sisters to visit you?”

“My sisters! I had almost forgotten them. How strange.”

“Shall I send for them?”

“I don’t really care. It is you I want. I want to see you.”

“You may expect your sisters tomorrow.”

The next day the West Wind bore Psyche’s two sisters to the castle, and set them down in the courtyard, windblown and bewildered. They were

fearful, having been snatched away from their own gardens, but were relieved to find themselves floating so gently to this strange courtyard. How amazed they were then to see their own sister, whom they thought long dead, running out of the strange castle. She was more beautiful than ever — blooming with happiness, and more richly garbed than any queen. Psyche swept her sisters into her arms. She embraced and kissed them, and made them greatly welcome.

Then she led them inside. The invisible servants bathed them and helped them dress, then served them a delicious meal. With every new wonder they saw, with every treasure their sister showed them, they grew more and more jealous. They, too, had married kings, but little local ones. This castle made theirs look like dog kennels. They did not eat off golden plates and drink out of jeweled goblets. And their servants were the plain old visible kind. As they ate and drank, with huge appetites, they grew more and more displeased with every bite.

“Where is your husband?” asked the eldest sister. “Why is he not here to welcome us? Perhaps he didn’t want us to come?”

“Oh, yes he did,” cried Psyche. “It was his idea. He sent his servant, the West Wind, for you.”

“Oho,” sniffed the second sister. “So he’s the one we have to thank for being taken by force and hurled through the air. A rough way to travel.”

“But so swift,” said Psyche. “Don’t you like riding the wind? I love it.”

“Yes, you seem to have changed in many ways,” said the eldest. “But you’re still not telling us where your husband is. It is odd that he doesn’t want to meet us — very odd.”

“Not odd at all,” said Psyche. “He — he is rarely here by day. He — has things to do.”

“What sort of things?”

“Oh, you know. Wars, peace treaties, hunting ...you know the things men do.”

“Is he often away then?”

“Oh, no. That is, only by day. At night he returns.”

“Ah, then we shall meet him tonight. At dinner, perhaps.”

“No... well... he will not be here. I mean — he will, but you will not see him.”

“Just what I thought,” cried the eldest. “Too proud to meet us. My dear, I think we had better go home.”

“Yes, indeed!” said the second sister. “If your husband is too high and mighty to let himself be seen, then we are plainly not wanted here.”

“Oh, no,” said Psyche. “Please listen. You don’t understand.”

“We certainly do not.”

And poor Psyche, unable to bear her sisters’ cruel words, told them how things were. The two sisters sat at the table, listening. They were so fascinated they even forgot to eat, which was unusual for them.

“Oh, my heavens!” cried the eldest. “It’s worse than I thought.”

“Much, much worse,” said the second. “The oracle was right. You *have* married a monster.”

“Oh, no, no,” cried Psyche. “Not a monster! But the most beautiful creature in the world!”

“Beautiful creatures like to be seen,” said the eldest. “It is the nature of beauty to be seen. Only ugliness hides itself away. You have married a monster.”

“A monster,” said the second. “Yes, a monster — a dragon — some scaly creature with many heads that devours young maidens once they’re fattened. No wonder he feeds you so well.”

“That’s it!” said the elder. “He’s trying to fatten you up. You’d better eat lightly.”

“Poor child — how can we save her?”

“We cannot save her. He’s too powerful, this monster. She must save herself.”

“I won’t listen to another word!” cried Psyche, leaping up. “You are wicked, evil-minded shrews, both of you! I’m ashamed of you. Ashamed of myself for listening to you. I never want to see you again. Never!”

Psyche struck a gong and the table was snatched away. A window flew open and the West Wind swept in. He curled his arms about the two sisters and swept them out of the castle and back to their own homes. Psyche was left alone, frightened, bitterly unhappy, longing for her husband. But there were still many hours till nightfall. All that long hideous afternoon she brooded over what her sisters had said. The words stuck in her mind like poison thorns. They festered in her head, throwing her into a fever of doubt.

She knew that her husband was good. She knew he was beautiful. But still — why didn't he let her see him? What did he do during the day? Other words of her sisters came back to her: "How do you know what he does when he's not here? Perhaps he has a dozen castles scattered about the countryside, a bride in each one. Perhaps he visits them all."

Then jealousy, more terrible than fear, began to gnaw at Psyche. She was not really afraid that her husband was a monster. Nor was she at all afraid of being devoured. If he did not love her, she wanted to die anyway. But the idea that he might have other brides, other castles, clawed at her. It sent her almost mad. She knew she had to settle her doubts once and for all.

So as soon as dusk began to fill the room, she took a lamp, trimmed the wick, and poured in the oil. Then she lit the lamp, and hid it in a niche of the wall, where its light could not be seen.

Late that night, when her husband had fallen asleep, Psyche crept out of bed and took the lamp out of its hiding place. She tiptoed back to where he slept and held the light over him. There in the dim wavering glow she saw a god sleeping. It was Cupid himself, the archer of love, youngest and most beautiful of the gods. He wore a quiver of golden darts even as he slept. Her heart sang at the sight of his beauty. She leaned over to kiss his face, still holding the lamp, and a drop of hot oil fell on his bare shoulder.

He started up and seized the lamp, dousing its light. Psyche reached for him, but she felt him push her away. She heard his voice saying:

"Wretched girl, you are not ready to accept love. Yes, I am love itself, and I cannot live where I am not trusted. Farewell, Psyche."

The voice was gone. Psyche rushed into the courtyard, calling after him, calling, "Husband! Husband!" She heard a dry crackling sound, and when she looked back the castle was gone too. The courtyard was gone. Everything was gone. Psyche stood among weeds and brambles. All the good things that had belonged to her had vanished with her love.

From that night on, she roamed the woods, searching. And some say she still searches the woods and the dark places. Some say that Venus, the goddess of love, turned her into an owl who sees best in the dark, and cries, "Who...? Who...?"

Others say she was turned into a bat that haunts old ruins and sees only by night.

Others say that Cupid forgave her, finally. That he came back for her, and took her up to Mount Olympus. It is Psyche's special task, they say, to undo the mischief done to a marriage by the families of the bride and groom. When they visit, and say, "This, this, this...that, that, that... better look for yourself...seeing's believing, seeing's believing," then Psyche calls the West Wind who whisks the in-laws away — and she herself, invisible, whispers to the bride and groom that only those who love know the secret of love, that believing is seeing.

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The Man Who Overcame Death

Orpheus was a young poet with the most beautiful singing voice in the memory of man or god. He had been taught to play the lyre by Apollo, god of music, and there were those who said that the pupil played better than the teacher.

Orpheus wrote his own songs, both words and music. The fishermen used to coax him to go sailing with them, for the fish would come up from the depths of the sea to hear him. They would sit on their tails and listen to him play, and so they became easy for the fishermen to catch. But they were not always caught, for as soon as Orpheus began to play, the fishermen forgot all about their nets. They sat on deck and listened, their mouths open — just like the fish. And when Orpheus had finished, the fish dived, the fishermen awoke, and all was as before.

When Orpheus played in the fields, animals followed him — sheep and cows and goats. Not only the tame animals, but the wild ones too — the shy deer, and wolves and bears. They all followed him. They streamed across the fields, so busy listening that the bears and wolves did not think of eating the sheep until the music had stopped, and it was too late. Then they went off, growling to themselves about the chance they had missed.

The older he grew, the more beautifully Orpheus played. Soon not only animals but trees followed him as he walked. They wrenched themselves out of the earth and hobbled after him on their twisted roots. Where Orpheus played you can still see circles of trees that stood listening.

People followed him too, as he strolled about playing and singing. Men and women, boys and girls — especially girls. But as time passed and faces changed, Orpheus noticed that one face was always there. It was always there in front, listening when he played. The girl not only came to listen

when he played for people, she also appeared among the animals and trees that followed him as he played. Finally he knew that wherever he might be, wherever he might strike up his lyre and raise his voice in song — whether among people, or animals, or trees and rocks — she would be there, very slender and still, with huge dark eyes and long black hair and a face like a rose.

One day Orpheus took her aside and spoke to her. Her name was Eurydice. She said she wanted to do nothing but be where he was, always. She said she knew she could not hope for him to love her, but that would not stop her from following him and serving him in any way she could.

Now this is the kind of thing any man likes to hear in any age, particularly a poet. And although Orpheus was admired by many women and could have had his choice, he decided that he must have Eurydice. And so he married her.

They lived happily, very happily, for a year and a day. They lived in a little house near the river in a grove of trees, and they were so happy that they rarely left home. People began to wonder why Orpheus was never seen about, why his wonderful lyre was never heard. They began to gossip, as people do. Some said Orpheus was dead, killed by the jealous Apollo for playing so well. Others said he had married a river nymph, and lived now at the bottom of the river, coming up only at dawn to blow tunes upon the reeds that grew thickly near the shore. Still others said that he had married dangerously, that he lived with a sorceress, who made herself so beautiful that Orpheus was chained to her side, and would not leave her even for a moment.

It was this last rumor that people chose to believe. Among them was a stranger, a young prince of Athens, who was a mighty hunter. The prince decided that he must see this beautiful enchantress, and stationed himself in a grove of trees to watch the house. At last he saw a girl come out of the house and make her way through the trees and down the path to the river. He followed. When he got close enough to see how beautiful she was, he hurtled toward her, crashing like a wild boar through the trees. Eurydice looked up, and saw a stranger charging toward her. Swiftly she ran toward the house, but she could hear the stranger close behind her. She doubled back toward the river and ran. Heedless of where she was going, she stepped full on a nest of coiled and sleeping snakes. They awoke

immediately and bit her leg in so many places that she was dead before she fell. The prince, rushing up, found her lying in the reeds.

He left her body where he found it. There it lay until Orpheus, looking for her, came at dusk and saw her glimmering whitely like a fallen birch. By this time, Mercury had come and gone, taking her soul with him to the land of the dead, called Tartarus. Orpheus stood looking down at Eurydice. He did not weep. He touched a string of his lyre once, and it sobbed. He did not touch it again. He kept looking at his dead wife. She was pale and thin, her hair was tangled, her legs streaked with mud. She seemed so childlike. She did not belong dead. He would have to correct this. He turned abruptly, and set off across the field.

He entered Tartarus, the place of the dead, at the nearest point, a secret cave in the mountains. Orpheus walked through a cold mist until he came to the River Styx. He saw a horde of ghosts waiting there to be ferried across. But he could not find Eurydice. The ferry came back and put out its plank. The ghosts went on board, each one reaching under his tongue for the penny to pay the fare. But the ferryman, huge and swarthy and scowling, stopped Orpheus when he tried to embark.

“Stand off!” he cried. “Only the dead go here.”

Orpheus touched his lyre and began to sing about streams running in the sunlight, and how good the river smells in the morning when you are young, and about the sound of oars dipping.

The old ferryman felt himself carried back to his youth — to the time before he had been taken by Hades and put to work on the black river. He was so lost in memory that the oar fell from his hand. He stood dazed, tears streaming down his face, and Orpheus took up the oar and rowed across.

The ghosts filed off the ferry and through the gates of death. Orpheus followed them until he heard a hideous growling. An enormous dog with three heads, each one uglier than the next, was stalking toward him, slavering and snarling. It was the savage three-headed dog, Cerberus, who guarded the gates.

Orpheus unslung his lyre and played a hunting song. In it could be heard the faint far yapping of happy young hounds finding a fresh trail — dogs with one graceful head in the middle where it should be. He sang of dogs that are free to run through the light and shade of the forest chasing stags and wolves, not forced to stand forever before dark gates barking at ghosts.

Cerberus lay down and closed his six eyes. He went to sleep and dreamed of the days when he had been a real dog, before he had been captured and changed into a monster and trained as a watchdog for the dead. Orpheus stepped over him, and went through the gates.

He walked through the Flowery Fields singing and playing. The ghosts there twittered with glee. Then he came to the Place of Torment, where sinners are specially punished. He saw the ghost of a wicked king named Sisyphus who was forced to spend eternity trying to roll a huge stone up a hill. Each time, just as Sisyphus reached the top of the hill, the stone rolled back, and he had to start pushing it up the hill again. But when Sisyphus heard Orpheus singing, he stopped pushing the stone. And the stone itself, poised on the side of the hill, listened and did not fall back.

Orpheus saw the ghost of another wicked king, Tantalus, who was tormented by an awful thirst. He stood waist-deep in a pure cool stream of water, but every time he stooped to drink, the water shrank away from his lips. That was his punishment; always to thirst and never to drink. Now, as Orpheus played, Tantalus listened and stopped ducking his head at the water. The music quenched his thirst.

Orpheus passed through the Place of Torment to the Judgment Place. When the three great judges of the dead heard his music, they fell to dreaming about the time when they had been young princes. They remembered the land battles and the sea battles they had fought, the beautiful maidens they had known, and the flashing swords they had used. They remembered all the days gone by. They sat there listening to the music, their eyes blinded with tears, forgetting to pass judgment.

But Hades, king of the underworld, lord of the dead, knew that the work of his kingdom was being neglected. He waited sternly on his throne as Orpheus approached.

“No more cheap minstrel tricks!” he cried. “I am a god. My rages are not to be calmed nor my laws broken. No one comes to Tartarus without being sent for. No one has before, and no one will again when the story is told of the torments I have invented for you.”

Orpheus touched his lyre, and sang a song that made Hades remember a green field and a grove of trees and a slender girl painting flowers. The light about her head was of that special clearness that the gods saw when the world had just begun.

Orpheus sang of how pleasing that girl looked as she played with the flowers. And how the birds overhead gossiped about this, and the moles underground too, until the word reached down to gloomy Tartarus, where Hades heard and went up to see for himself. Orpheus sang of death's king seeing the girl for the first time in a great wash of early sunlight, and how he felt when he saw that stalk-slender girl in her tunic and green shoes among the flowers. Orpheus sang of the love that Hades felt when he put his mighty arm about the girl's waist, and drank her tears, and knew that at last he had found his bride.

That girl, Persephone, was queen now, and she sat at Hades' side. She began to cry. Hades looked at her, and she leaned forward and whispered to him. The king then turned to Orpheus. He did not weep, but no one had ever seen his eyes so brilliant.

"Your song has moved my queen," he said. "Speak. What is it you wish?"

"My wife."

"What have we to do with your wife?"

"She is here. She was brought here today. Her name is Eurydice. I wish to take her back with me."

"It is impossible," said Hades. "Whoever comes here does not return."

"Not so, great Hades," said Orpheus. "The gods can do what is impossible. Give me my wife again, oh king, for I will not leave without her — not for all the torments on earth, or below."

Orpheus touched his lyre again. The Furies, hearing the music, flew in on their hooked wings, their brass claws tinkling like bells. They poised in the air above the throne. The terrible hags cooed like doves, saying, "Just this once, Hades. Let him have her. Let her go."

Hades stood up then, black-caped and towering. He looked down at Orpheus and said, "I leave the poetry contests and loud celebrations to my nephew Apollo. But I, yes, even I of such gloomy habit, can be touched by music like yours. Especially when I hear my dread servants plead your cause. The Furies haven't had a good word to say for anyone since the beginning of time.

"Hear me then, Orpheus. You may have your wife. She will be given into your care, and you will lead her out of Tartarus to the upper world. But if

during your journey you look back just once — then my mercy is withdrawn and Eurydice will be taken from you again — and forever. Go!”

Orpheus bowed once to Hades, once to Persephone, and lifting his head, smiled a half-smile at the hovering Furies. Then he turned and walked away. Hades gestured and as Orpheus walked through the fields of Tartarus, Eurydice fell into step behind him. He did not see her. He thought she was there, he was sure she was there. He thought he could hear her footfall, but the black grass was thick. He could not be sure. He thought he recognized her breathing — that faint sipping of breath he had heard so many nights near his ear. But the air was full of the howls of the tormented, and he could not be sure.

But Hades had given his word. Orpheus had to believe. And so he pictured the girl behind him, following as he led. He walked steadily through the Flowery Fields toward the brass gates. The gates opened. The three-headed dog still slept in the middle of the road. Orpheus stepped over him. Surely he could hear her now, walking behind him. But he could not turn around to see, and he could not be sure because of the cry of vultures which hung in the air above the River Styx. Then on the gangplank of the ferry, he heard a footfall behind him. Surely... why, oh why, did she step so lightly? He had always loved her lightness, but now he wished she was more heavy-footed.

Orpheus went to the bow of the ferry and gazed ahead. He clenched his teeth, and tensed his neck until it became a thick halter of muscle so he could not turn his head. When he left the ferry on the other side of the river, he climbed toward the cave. The air was full of the roaring of the great waterfall that fell chasm-deep toward the River Styx. He could not hear her footsteps, and he could not hear her breathing. But he kept a picture of her in his mind, seeing her face grow more and more vivid with excitement as she neared the upper world. Finally Orpheus saw a blade of light cutting the gloom. He knew it was the sun falling through the narrow cave. And he knew that he had brought his wife back to earth.

But had he? How did he know she was there? Hades might have tricked him after all. No one can call the gods to judgment. Who can accuse them if they lie? And he was dealing with cruel Hades, who had murdered a great doctor for pulling a patient back from death. Hades, whose demon mind had designed the landscape of Tartarus, the bolts of those gates, and a savage

three-headed dog. Could such a mind be turned to mercy by a few notes of music, a few tears? Would Hades, who made the water always shrink from the thirst of Tantalus, and who rolled the great stone back on Sisyphus, allow a girl to return to her husband just because the husband had asked? Had Eurydice been following him through the Flowery Fields, through the paths of Tartarus, through the gates, over the river? Had it been Eurydice or only the echo of his own longing? Had he been tricked into coming back without her? Was it all for nothing? Or was she there?

Swiftly Orpheus turned and looked back. She was there. Eurydice was there. He reached out to take her hand and draw her into the light. But her hand turned to smoke. The arm turned to smoke. Her body became mist, a spout of mist. And her face melted. The last to go was her mouth with its smile of welcome. But it too melted. The bright vapor blew it away in the fresh current of air that blew through the cave from the upper world.

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Afterword

The Romans conquered ancient Greece but were conquered in turn by Greek ideas, especially by the Greek religion. The Romans simply took over the Greek gods, gave them Latin names, and worshipped them as their own. No one worships the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus today, but they live on in wonderful stories that have been told and retold for 3,000 years, stories that we call myths.

In the tales in this book, we have used the names of the gods and goddesses that are most often heard or are easiest to pronounce. Sometimes we use the Greek name, sometimes the Latin, or Roman, name.

Here is a list of the most important gods and goddesses with their Greek and Latin names, and their titles.

<i>Greek</i>	<i>Roman</i>	<i>Title</i>
Zeus	Jupiter	King of the gods
Hera	Juno	Queen of the gods
Poseidon	Neptune	God of the sea
Hades	Pluto	God of the underworld

Apollo	Apollo	The sun god, <i>also</i> god of music and medicine
Artemis	Diana	Goddess of the moon
Athena	Minerva	Goddess of wisdom
Aphrodite	Venus	Goddess of love and beauty
Eros	Cupid	God of love
Hermes	Mercury	The messenger god
Hephaestus	Vulcan	God of fire and metal
Ares	Mars	God of war
Persephone	Proserpine	Queen of the underworld
Demeter	Ceres	Goddess of agriculture
Hestia	Vesta	Goddess of hearth and home
Dionysus	Bacchus	The wine god

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THE TROJAN WAR



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THE PEDDLER

THE MAN STOOPED UNDER a huge bale. He passed through the castle gates and climbed the broad stone stairs that led to the women's quarters. The brass-helmeted sentries stood silently watching him go. Ordinarily they did a little playful torturing of peddlers before allowing them in—beat them a bit about the shoulders with their spear-shafts, plucked their beards, and scattered their wares. They weren't really cruel, these sentries, they were fighting men, but it had been a long time between wars, and they were bored. For some reason they had not bothered this red-headed fellow. Perhaps it was that his shoulders were so broad and his arms so knotted with muscle—and he had lifted the great bale of goods so easily off his white donkey. His grin was servile enough, and he had tipped them a greasy little bow like all peddlers. Nevertheless, they let him pass through the gates and across the courtyard without tormenting him.

And it was strange, too, that the great guard dogs, the brindle mastiffs with their spiked brass collars, did not charge the stranger, nor even growl.

The peddler flung down his bale and knelt on the stone-flagged floor, pulling out garment after shining garment as the tall daughters of King Scyros crowded about him, chattering and laughing and shrieking with greed. For they loved clothes, these

daughters of the king, and Scyros was such a remote island, they felt themselves falling far behind the fashions. Besides ... they had a visitor to impress: the tall yellow-headed silent girl—a country cousin who had been with them for three months now without ever telling them anything about herself. She listened to all they had to say, smiling her curious thin-lipped smile, but never told any secrets in return.

“Spread out your wares, man,” cried Calyx, the eldest princess. “Don’t pull them out one by one. Spread them so we can see them all.”

“Yes, princess,” said the peddler.

With a sweep of his arm he spread his goods upon the stone floor. Silks and furs and garments of wonderfully woven flax, dyed with the colors of mountain sunset. Jewels flashed—rings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces. And, on a long cloak of black wool, were couched a lance and a sword. Unjewelled were these weapons, made for battle use not ceremony; their blades were heavy and sharp, newly honed. The hilt of the sword was bull-horn; the haft of the throwing lance of polished ash, its head of bronze. With gull-cries of greed the girls fell upon the garments—all except their visitor. She leaped across the chamber and snatched up the weapons. Flexed her long legs in a fighting stance, and whipped the sword through the air, decapitating a horde of imaginary foes.

The princesses fell silent, stared at their cousin, eyes huge. The peddler smiled. He arose. His stoop was gone, gone the little

servile selling-grin. He stood there massively, smiling, and watched as the princesses' yellow-headed cousin shadow-duelled—whirling, ducking, stabbing.

“It is well,” said the peddler. And his voice was different too. “By your choices shall you be known. I have come a long way for you, Achilles. And now you must come back with me.”

“Achilles!” shrieked the maidens.

“Achilles,” said the peddler.

He approached the tall girl, seized the shoulder of her tunic, and ripped it away, baring her to the waist, and disclosing not another maiden, but a young man muscled like the statue of a god.

“A man,” murmured the princesses. “She’s a man.”

The young man said nothing, but seized the peddler by the beard and raised his sword.

“Softly, Achilles,” said the peddler. “I too am unlike what I seem. We are kinsmen far back, you and I. I am Ulysses, King of Ithaca.”

“Ulysses? You?”

Achilles let his hand fall.

“Ulysses,” echoed the princesses.

And, indeed, even before the Trojan War was fought this name was known the length and breadth of Hellas as that of the boldest pirate-king of the Inner Sea, a master of strategy on land and water.

“But why do you seek me, cousin?” said Achilles. “My mother bade me dress in maiden’s garb and hide myself in this

court in obedience to some oracle or other. She said she would call me back when the Fates had been satisfied—a matter of weeks. But now you come first to fetch me away. By what right?”

“Oh, you may abide here among the maidens and wait for your mother,” said Ulysses. “But I think I should tell you that there’s a war on.”

“A war?” shouted Achilles, snatching up his sword. “A real war?”

“Very real. With Troy. Against some of the most fearsome warriors of this age or any other.”

“Why do we stand here conversing?” cried Achilles. “Let’s go!”

Ulysses bowed to the princesses. “You may keep these garments, fair maidens. They are my gift to you. Accept too my apologies for the slight deceit I was forced to practice.”

“Farewell, cousins,” said Achilles. “Gentle maids, farewell. After this war is over, I shall return—in my own guise, and attempt to thank you for your hospitality.”

The two men passed from the chamber, and left the courtyard. The princesses watched from the embrasures; saw them disappear through the gates and then appear again around the corner of the cliff where the road dipped to the sea. And that night nine of them dreamed of Achilles, and three, of Ulysses. But in the middle darkness their dreams crossed, and by dawn there was no counting.

Ulysses led the young man aboard his ship. They lifted anchor and set sail for Aulis where the war fleet was gathering. They sat on deck in the golden weather, and Ulysses told of how enmity was born between Greece and Troy.

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SEEDS OF WAR

“ACTUALLY, YOU AND THIS war were meant for each other,” he said to Achilles. “Your seeds were planted on the same night—the night your mother and father were wed—at a wedding feast given by the gods themselves on Mt. Olympus. Know you, Achilles, that your father, Peleus, was the most renowned warrior of his day, and your mother, Thetis, the most beautiful naiad who ever rose naked and dripping from the tides of the moon to trouble man’s sleep?”

“I’m aware of my own pedigree, man,” snapped Achilles. “Get to the war.”

“Patience, young friend, the war comes soon enough. Now, whoever it was of the High Ones who made out the invitation list to the wedding feast, neglected to include the Lady of Discord herself. Eris, queen of Harpies, sister to the War-god, who rides beside him in his chariot delighting in the cries of the wounded and the smell of blood, was not invited to the feast and, oh, Achilles, what a terrible omission it was.

“When the rejoicing was at its height and the stars reeled on their crystal axes, shaken by the laughter of the gods, then it was that Eris made herself invisible, entered the great banquet hall, and rolled upon the table a gleaming, heavy apple of solid gold. Upon the apple were written the words: ‘To the most beautiful.’ It glowed there like the heart of flame, and was immediately claimed by

Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. The festivities were immediately rent by their quarreling as they shrieked like fishwives over a beached mackerel. The feast was ruined. Gentle Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth, and protector of feasts, wept great tears. Eris stood among the shadows, chuckling. Hestia begged Zeus to settle things by awarding the apple to whoever he considered to be the most beautiful. But Father Zeus was much too wise to be caught in a trap like that. Hera happened to be his sister and his wife, Athena his daughter, and Aphrodite a kind of half-sister—and, it is said, even more.

“ ‘Peace, good company!’ boomed Zeus. ‘The question of choosing among three such enchanting beauties is too difficult to be undertaken by anyone who knows them well and has been exposed to their potent charms. We must therefore seek beyond our own small circle for a just decision. I shall search among the mortals of the earth for him of coolest judgment and most exquisite taste. Give me a few days to find him. In the meantime, I bid you cease your quarreling, my three fair claimants, and let the festivities resume. As for this little gem of contention, I shall just keep it myself until judgment is made.’ And his huge hand closed lovingly about the golden apple.”

“The war, man! The war!” cried Achilles. “Enough of parents, weddings, and high vanities! When will your tale tell of war?”

“Hark, now. These events I relate are the living seeds, and they will bear bloody fruit, I promise. And you, my boy, will be

there for the harvesting. Where was I?”

“Zeus was seeking one wise among mortals to give judgment upon the claims of the goddesses.”

“He chose Paris. Paris, secret prince of Troy, Priam’s youngest son, thought to have been killed at birth because an oracle had warned that his deeds would destroy Troy.”

“Reason enough for the king to drown him like a kitten. How is it he survived?”

“Oh, some plot of Hecuba’s, no doubt. A mother’s heart cherishes her sons, even those who endanger the state. It is said Queen Hecuba instructed her serving man to smuggle the babe out of the castle and give it to a certain shepherd to raise as his own. He grew up to be very beautiful. It’s a handsome family anyway, and he is the fairest by far, they say, of Priam’s fifty sons. The shepherd maids trailed him up and down the slopes. But he was too young; he spurned the maidens. And this, of course, recommended him to uneasy husbands and lovers, giving them a great opinion of his wisdom and moderation. So it was that he was called upon to mediate their disputes, to fix grazing rights, judge the points of cattle, and so forth. When Zeus bent his ear to earth to hear of a man of judgment, why the strongest word came from Mt. Ida, speaking the name, Paris ...”

The hot silver of a flying fish scudded suddenly out of the water followed by the black-silver hump of a breaching dolphin. For half a breath they hung in the air—long enough for Achilles to

uncoil from the deck with a fluency that delighted the warrior heart of Ulysses. Swiftly, Achilles hurled a short lance through the air transfixing the winged fish so that it fell heavily before the dolphin—which drew out the lance, swam to the boat, and tossed the weapon aboard with a flick of its head, grinning up at the men like a dog. Then it turned and swam back for its meal.

“Well thrown,” said Ulysses.

“It thirsts for blood,” said Achilles, wiping his lance-head. “I must appease it with hunting till it can drink of the enemy upon the beaches of Troy. Unless, of course, I am lucky enough to fall in with a private quarrel.”

“Strictly forbidden,” said Ulysses. “There’s a war on. Private quarrels must wait. We have all taken an oath, and you must too.”

“Tell the tale, King of Ithaca. It shortens the journey.”

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THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

THEY WERE FIGHTING A headwind out of Scyros, and Ulysses saw that it would take some days to reach Aulis. So he told the story in the old bardic way with many a trill and flourish, and taking every byroad. But we will shorten it ...

In those days it was customary to bribe judges, which shows how far we have come since. And so Paris was offered bribes.

Hera offered him power. "Great fleets shall sail at your nod," she told him. "Armies shall march when you raise your hand. Dominion shall be yours over land and sea. All men shall be as slaves to you. Your smile will quicken them, your frown kill. And power is wealth. Your slaves will delve the earth for gold and jewels. Your galleys will plunder far places and sail back with cargoes beyond dreams of piracy to stuff your vaults. All this shall be yours if you award me the apple.

"Reverence, you will agree, is the highest wisdom. How can you judge more wisely than by conforming to the judgment of Father Zeus, master of choices, who of all living creatures chose me, me, me as his wife? A more serious choice, you understand, than among you mortals, for neither of us can die and he must keep me to wife through all eternity.

"Be reverent then, Paris. Be rich and powerful. Choose me, Hera. Let the apple be mine."

Athena spoke next. “Father Zeus, remember, has appointed you judge, meaning that he throws his own divine power behind your judgment. Otherwise he would have judged for himself. As for Hera’s argument, it signifies nothing. Anyone acquainted with affairs on Olympus knows that it is godly to keep titles within the immediate family—that is the only reason Zeus married his sister. And it has been amply proved that he finds others more attractive than his wife.

“As for her offer, I can overbid that too. I offer you wisdom. Born from Zeus’ head, I am Patroness of Intellectual Activities, you know, and wisdom is uniquely mine to offer. And without wisdom power loses its potency and wealth grows poor. I can teach you to know, to penetrate the innermost secrets of man’s soul, and disclose to you certain divine secrets which men call nature. With such knowledge you will have mastery over other men and, more important, mastery over yourself. As for Hera’s glittering promises, remember this: I am also Mistress of Strategy. Before battle, captains pray to me for tactics. Give me that apple and I will make you the greatest soldier of the age—and everyone knows that power and wealth depend finally on victory in war. Be wise, Paris, choose the Goddess of Wisdom.”

All Aphrodite said was: “Come closer ...”

When he approached, she touched him, and the world changed. The sun dived into the sea and made it boil, and his blood boiled too. He felt himself going red-hot like a poker in the fire.

Then she touched him with her other hand and a delicious icy coolness washed over him. He forgot everything but the touch of her hands, her fragrance, the music of her voice, saying:

“I am Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. I give you the first of two gifts now, and ask no promise. This gift is your own body, instrument of pleasure, wherein is contained the only true wealth, the only true power, the only wisdom. You shall receive the second gift after you have delivered judgment. There is a mortal woman on earth said to rival me in beauty. She is Helen, Queen of Sparta, and I hereby promise her to you.”

Without hesitation, Paris awarded the apple to Aphrodite.

Screaming like Harpies, Athena and Hera flew back to Olympus and flung themselves before Zeus, trying to get Aphrodite disqualified for illegal use of hands. But Zeus laughed at them. He agreed with Paris' choice, and was thankful that it would be the young shepherd prince, and not himself, who would attract the savage reprisals of the goddesses.

Aflame with Aphrodite's touch, drunk with her promise, Paris dropped his role of shepherd and returned to Troy. He stormed into the great throne-room and swept the astounded Priam and Hecuba into his embrace, demanding they recognize him as their son. All their hesitations and fears were burned away in the blaze of his beauty, and they received him with great joy. His forty-nine brothers were a bit more dubious, remembering what the oracle had warned, but Priam was king and his wish was law. Besides, things

had been dull and peaceful for some time and the prospect of danger was not unwelcome.

Then Paris asked that a ship be fitted out so that he might make an embassy to the kingdom of Sparta.

“I can tell you no more, Venerable Majesty. I must speak no further, brothers. The purpose of my voyage is a secret between me and the gods. But I promise you this: When I return I shall bring with me a cargo such as no ship has ever carried—and with it undying fame for us all. Thus a goddess has assured me in secret, and that secret is my destiny.”

A small fleet was fitted out, and Paris sailed away for Sparta. In a few weeks' time he returned, bringing Helen with him. There, before all Troy, he declared her his wife, admitting that she was encumbered with a prior husband, but considering this detail beneath consideration. When Menelaus came to Troy, as come he must, then he, Paris, would engage the husband in single combat, and with one thrust of his spear make Helen half a widow and wholly a wife.

Priam and Hecuba, and Paris' forty-nine brothers and fifty sisters fully understood what was happening: Paris had not only stolen another man's wife but, even worse, committed a breach of hospitality, a much more serious sacrilege. They knew Troy would shortly be plunged into a bloody war with the most powerful chieftains of Achaea, Helles, Boetia, Sparta, Athens, and that entire warlike peninsula not yet called Greece.

But when Helen smiled at them they forgot all their fears. “It’s true,” they whispered to each other. “She’s as beautiful as Aphrodite. Surely the gods will allow us to protect such a treasure.”

The only dissenting voice was that of Cassandra, Priam’s youngest daughter. Apollo had wooed her one summer past. His sunstroke caress left her with visions; the future painted itself in smoky pictures for her to read. But she had tired of the sun-god’s touch, and Apollo, maddened, had said:

“Wicked girl, you shall choke with frustration even as I do now. I have given you the gift of prophecy, and now I make that gift a punishment. The more accurate your prediction, the less you shall be believed. And the colder the disbelief, the more ardent your forecast.”

Now, even as Paris introduced Helen to the court, and the tall lovers stood in a blaze of acceptance and love, with Priam’s fifty sons beating their spear-shafts on their shields and bawling defiance at the Greeks, even then Cassandra lifted her voice in prophecy:

“Hear me, Trojans, hear me. Return Helen; she brings death. Your fair city will be rent stone from stone, your young men slaughtered, your ancients shamed, and your women and children taken into slavery. Ship her back to Sparta before it is too late ... too late ... too late ...”

Helen, hearing only her name spoken, smiled at the girl. And the crowd, seeing her smile, went wild with enthusiasm.

Cassandra's words were heeded no more than if they had been the small wind rattling the leaves. The girl fell silent, moaning softly as the thwarted vision dug its fangs into her head.

"And that is why we're off to Troy now," said Ulysses to Achilles. "The events I have related to you, young falcon, are the roots of this war."

"All this to retrieve a runaway bride?" said Achilles. "One reason to fight is as good as another, so long as you fight, but I would have expected a great war to have a greater cause."

"You haven't seen the lady," said Ulysses.

"Oh, I understand what you tell me, that she's enough to send the Trojans mad. But then they're half-mad to begin with."

"I repeat, you haven't seen the lady, or you wouldn't talk like that. She's enough to send more than Trojans mad. She's maddened some very hard-headed Greeks that I know of ... all of us, to be sure. We were all her suitors—every prince and chieftain of the Peloponnese and its islands—so many of us and such a fierce brawling crew that her foster father, Tyndareus, didn't dare give her to any one for fear he might offend the others. So he kept fobbing us off with one excuse after another until we were all ready to fly at each other's throats. Finally, I came up with a little plan: that each suitor take an oath to abide by Helen's own choice of husband and forbear from attacking the lucky man—or Tyndareus. Further, we would all swear to a binding alliance, so that if anyone else attacked her husband and attempted to rob him of Helen, we would

band together and punish the interloper. We swore a most sacred oath on the quartered carcass of a horse. And that is why we must all go now to the aid of Menelaus, and pursue Paris even into Troy itself.”

“Are they good fighters, the Trojans?” asked Achilles.

“The best—next to us. And, in their own minds, they have no such reservation. There will be keen fighting, never doubt it. We all wish to help Menelaus, of course, but each of us also sees something in it for himself. Fame. A chance to use our swords before they grow rusty. Also slaves. And mountains of loot. Troy is a very rich city, far richer than any of ours. And there is something else. The city stands upon a headland commanding the straits which lead into the Black Sea and to the rich land of Scythia, where there are boundless opportunities for trade and slave-raids, piracy, and other commercial traffic. But while Troy stands, our fleets can never enter those straits, nor can we penetrate the lands of the Black Sea nor the further mysterious reaches of Asia, whose east winds fairly reek of wealth. These are considerations too, lad.”

“All I want to do is fight,” said Achilles. “I’ll leave the reasons to you.”

“Well, you should get your stomachful. Our forces are to be led by Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, and brother to Menelaus. He is a bold, practical leader, very aggressive, very ruthless. He is married to Helen’s elder sister, Clytemnestra, and so has a double

motive for adopting his brother's blood-feud with the royal family of Troy.”

What Ulysses did not tell Achilles was that he himself had tried a little draft-dodging before coming to Scyros. An oracle had said that if Ulysses went off to fight at Troy it would be twenty years before he could come home and, when he did so, it would be as a penniless vagabond, recognized by no one. So, when Agamemnon and Palamedes, King of Euboea, came to Ithaca to demand his aid against Troy, he tried to evade his vow by feigning madness. He put on a tall, pointed fool's hat and harnessed a bull and a goat to his plow, sowing his furrow with salt instead of seed. But, after watching him for a bit, Palamedes, who was almost as crafty as Ulysses, decided to give him a sanity test. He plucked Ulysses' infant son from his nurse's arms and set him on the ground in the path of the oncoming plow. Ulysses reined his animals short, and snatched the babe out of danger.

“You're fit for fighting,” said Palamedes. “Drop the bluff, and come along.”

“A parent's instinct is stronger than reason—I mean unreason,” said Ulysses. “But I assure you my wits are deranged.”

“Nonsense,” growled Agamemnon. “How sane do you have to be to make war? In this affair a touch of madness may help. You have the right sort of wits for us, Ulysses. So keep your oath, and come away.”

THE EVENTS AT AULIS

THEY FOUND A THOUSAND ships at Aulis and the greatest gathering of heroes since the beginning of time. Their commander was Agamemnon, an angry bull of a man, burly as the stump of an oak, with a dark red face and eyes as cold and hard as chunks of lava—until he became enraged, when they glowed like hot coals. His voice of command was like the bellowing of a bull.

Now when Achilles smelled a fight his blood did not heat, nor did excitement take him. A delicious chill prickled over all his body, sweet cold airs wrapped themselves about his limbs, cool fingers stroked his hair, and in his mouth was a taste like honey. He fought with gleaming chest and flashing arm and marvellously thewed leg, and he smiled his lipless smile all the while. He did not shout, except when summoning his men, but uttered a low crooning sound like a love song. Men, fighting him, felt his blade at their throats like an act of deliverance.

Now when he saw the bull-man, Agamemnon, he felt that delicious chill touch his neck, and he knew that in all the world this man was his archenemy, even though they were fighting on the same side, and that his main problem in the war to come would be how to refrain from attacking his Commander.

And Agamemnon gazed at Achilles with no great favor when Ulysses led the young man over to present him.

“Hail, great Agamemnon,” said Ulysses. “I wish you to meet Achilles, and to value him as I do. For, according to prophecy, it is his courage and skill that will bring us to victory in the war to come.”

“Oracles take delight in riddling,” said Agamemnon. “They never speak straight any more. I welcome you, young man, and look forward to seeing you display that courage and skill of which the oracle speaks.”

“Thank you,” said Achilles.

“The oracle holds also that you will not survive this war,” said Agamemnon. “I suppose that is why your mother hid you away among the maidens of Scyros.”

“I suppose so,” said Achilles. “But you know how parents are. How devouring their love can be.”

Ulysses snorted with laughter. The blood flamed in Agamemnon’s face. This was a shrewd rejoinder of Achilles’ relating to a scandal in Agamemnon’s family. Agamemnon’s father, Atreus, had committed one of the most unsavory crimes in history. He had butchered his nephews and served them up in a stew to their father, his brother, Tryestes, all so that he could seize the throne of Mycenae and rule unchallenged, the same throne that Agamemnon had inherited.

Ulysses eyed Agamemnon closely. He knew that the man was seething with rage, and was only a hairbreadth from striking out at Achilles.

And he saw that Achilles, lightly balancing on the balls of his feet, ready to move in any direction, was smiling his little lip-less smile.

But Agamemnon mastered himself, and said: “Truly, Achilles, if your sword is as sharp as your tongue you should do great damage to the Trojans. In the meantime—welcome. We shall converse again when your Myrmidons arrive. Then you may report for instructions about their quartering, forage for the horses, sailing order, and so forth.”

“Very good, sir,” said Achilles. “Thank you for your courtesy.”

Thus, bloodshed was averted upon that first meeting. But the note of hatred struck between them was to devil the efforts of the Greeks and almost lead to their defeat.

Next, Ulysses took the young man about the encampment and introduced him to the other great chieftains. He met Palamedes, King of Euboea, most skilled artificer since Daedalus; and Diomedes, King of Argos, a man, it was said, who had never known fear. He was presented to the two warriors named Ajax. One was Ajax of Salamis, strongest mortal since Hercules, head and shoulders taller than Achilles. And again, the young man, measuring the giant with his eyes, felt a breath of that sweet combative chill. But he could work up no fighting wrath. For the huge man grinned down at him, and said: “Stop puffing your chest like a rooster. You and I are going to be friends, and fight only Trojans.”

He clapped his great meaty paw on Achilles' shoulder—a blow hard enough to cripple an ordinary man. Achilles accepted it as a friendly tap, and nodded gravely back at Ajax.

Now all the tested warriors received the young man with marks of esteem even though he had not yet proved himself in battle. They had heard startling reports of him from his old tutor, Phoenix—a man much feared by foemen—who was there at Aulis as a member of the War Council. Phoenix had told how he had managed the education of the young Achilles. He had taken him and his elder cousin, Patroclus, onto the wild slopes of Mt. Pelion, Achilles being seven years old then, and Patroclus twelve. He had fed the younger boy on the bloody meat of courage itself, restricting his diet to the entrails of bear and wolf and lion, which Achilles had eaten greedily, but Patroclus had refused. He told how he had recruited the centaur, Cheiron, to help raise the boys, and how Cheiron had taught Achilles to run more swiftly than a staghound, how to hunt down the wild boar without the use of hounds, and to split a willow wand with his spear at a hundred yards.

Patroclus he had tutored in the softer arts, the use of herbs and music in healing, and how to play the pipe and psaltery. At the age of thirteen, Achilles had singlehandedly slaughtered a robber band that, for years, had terrified the villagers on Mt. Pelion. He had been wounded in thigh and shoulder in this fight, and Patroclus had tended him and nursed him back to health. With such tales had

Phoenix stuffed the other leaders at Aulis, so it was little wonder they were ready to extend a hearty welcome to Achilles.

And the young warrior was overjoyed to meet his old tutor in this place, and was even happier to learn that his dear cousin and playmate, Patroclus, was sailing toward Aulis at the head of the Myrmidons.

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THE SIEGE BEGINS

ULYSSES HAD WARNED THAT the war would be a long one, but Agamemnon, who always preferred to believe what was most convenient, was confident of a quick victory. When the Greeks landed on the Trojan beaches they met stiff resistance. A Trojan hero, Cycnus—son of Poseidon—a man who could not be wounded by sword or spear, captained the beach party and fought like a demon, almost driving the Greeks into the sea. Achilles it was who finally killed him without weapon, by twisting Cycnus' helmet so that he was strangled by his own chinstrap.

Then the Greeks rallied and fought their way to the Trojan wall but met so savage a defense that they had to withdraw.

At the War Council, Ulysses said: "I was right, unfortunately. It will be a long war. Their walls are huge, their men brave, and they have at least three magnificent warriors, Prince Hector, his young brother Troilus, and his cousin Aeneas. Sheltered by such walls, led by such heroes, they are too powerful for direct assault. We shall have to lay siege. But in the meantime, by using our sea-power, we can raid the nearby islands one by one. This will strip Troy of her allies, and provide us with food and slaves."

It was agreed, and Achilles was named commander of the raiding parties. During the next eight years he attacked the home islands of Troy's allies one by one, sacked their cities and took

much loot and many slaves. All this time the main body of the Greeks encamped on the beach behind a stockade of pointed stakes and laid siege to the mighty city.

But a siege is a tedious business, and quarrels flared among the men who had grown tired of the war and longed for home. The bitterest squabbles were provoked by the division of slaves. One of these almost sent the Greeks home in defeat.

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THE QUARREL

ON ONE RAID ACHILLES captured Cressida, one of the loveliest young maidens of Troy. She was a smoky-eyed, honey-skinned girl with a low hoarse voice. When Agamemnon heard her speak at the Dividing of the Spoils he felt her voice running over the nerve-ends of his face, like a cat's tongue licking him. He immediately claimed her as his share of the booty. Ordinarily, Achilles would have disputed this claim, and an ugly squabble would have flared, but upon this raid Achilles had captured a girl he fancied even more, a tall green-eyed maiden named Briseis. So Agamemnon's claim was allowed and he took Cressida for his slave. She was hard to handle at first, but Agamemnon had a way with girls and soon she was content.

But her father was not happy. His name was Chryse; he was a priest of Apollo, and a soothsayer. He came under a truce to Agamemnon's tent and begged the release of his daughter, offering a generous ransom. But Agamemnon would have none of it. He drove her father away with harsh words. The old man, furious and humiliated, prayed to Apollo as he hobbled back toward Troy.

“Oh, Phoebus, I implore you, curb that haughty spirit. Punish Agamemnon, who keeps my daughter in vile servitude. Today he insults your servant, Apollo, tomorrow he will insult your holy self.

For he is a most arrogant Greek, overbearing and imperious, ready to affront a god should his will be questioned.”

It suited Apollo to hear this prayer. He favored the Trojans in the war, and felt it was time to do the Greeks a mischief. So he descended that night and stood between the great wall and the Greek encampment on the beach. He shot arrows of pestilence among the tents. They were tipped with fever; they ignited the camp refuse; foul vapors caught fire. Again and again Apollo shot his arrows. Where they struck, plague burned. Man and beast sickened. In the morning they awoke to die. Horses died, and cattle. In three days the Greeks had lost half as many troops as they had in nine years of fighting.

Ulysses urged Agamemnon to call a council. The oracle, Calchas, was consulted—because it was known that plague is sent by the gods in punishment for some affront, real or fancied, and it is always necessary to find out which god, so that the insult might be undone. But Calchas balked when he was called upon for interpretation.

“Pardon, great king,” he said to Agamemnon. “But I would far rather you called upon another oracle.”

“Why should we?” said Ulysses. “You’re the best we have, and the best is what we need.”

Agamemnon said: “Read the signs, O Calchas, and tell us true.”

“I have read the signs. And the truth will anger you. And who will protect me from your sudden wrath?”

“I will,” said Achilles, looking at Agamemnon. “I guarantee your safety.”

“Hear then the reason for this pestilence. Our high king and war-leader, Agamemnon, has angered Apollo by insulting his priest, Chryse, who seeks the return of his daughter, Cressida. Agamemnon’s angry refusal has kindled the radiant wrath of Phoebus who descended with a quiverful of plague darts which he flung into our tents so that we sicken and die.”

“I don’t believe it,” roared Agamemnon.

“It makes sense,” Achilles said. “Speak on, Calchas. Tell us how we can placate Apollo and avert this plague.”

“The remedy is obvious,” said Calchas. “Cressida must be returned to her father, without ransom. Then a clean wind will spring from the sea blowing away the pestilence.”

Agamemnon turned savagely upon Calchas.

“You miserable, spiteful, croaking old raven. You have never yet in all the years I have known you spoke me a favorable auspice. Whether studying the flight of birds, examining their entrails, or casting bones, by whatever secret contrivance you read the riddle of the future, it is always to my disadvantage. In your eyes I am always angering the gods, as if they had nothing to do but perch on Olympus watching me night and day and seeking cause for anger in

the actions of this one poor mortal, while they ignore everyone else on earth.

“At Aulis you said I had angered Artemis by not invoking her aid in some hunt or other, and that it was she who had sent the northeast gale to keep us penned in the harbor and prevent our fleet from sailing for Troy. And it was not until you prevailed upon me to sacrifice my own eldest, dearest daughter, Iphigenia, that you were satisfied. And now ... now ... you wish to rob me of even a greater prize, the smoky-eyed Cressida, so much more beautiful and skillful than my own wife, Clytemnestra. Now you seek to rob me of the one prize I value after nine years of bloody toil on these beaches, bidding me tear my very heart from my body to appease Apollo. And the Royal Council agrees with you. The Chiefs agree with you. Very well, so be it. But, by the easily angered Gods, know this: I will not be left without a prize. If you take Cressida from me, I will take someone else’s beautiful and clever slave girl.”

Achilles sprang to his feet. “And from what common pen of slaves do you expect to draw your compensation?” he cried. “In your blind and matchless greed you have forgotten that each man takes his own prize as divided according to your own unjust decrees—whereby you always get the lion’s share ... or should I say the swine’s share? No, you must give up Cressida without immediate compensation. For no man here, I believe, will give up what is his own. But when we raid another rich colony, or when

Troy itself finally falls, if ever it does, then you will be able to take booty that will glut even your greed.”

“You are a mighty warrior, Achilles,” said Agamemnon. “But your spear speaks more surely than your tongue. I am High King, chosen by all of you in a choice certified by the gods. To deprive me of any jot or iota of my rights is sacrilege. Not only foolish, but impious. It is my duty to take someone else’s slave to repay me for the loss of the lovely Cressida. For a king deprived is half a king, and half a king means defeat in warfare. If I want your slave, Achilles, or Ulysses’, or one of Diomedes’, or any creature I choose, all I have to do is reach my hand and take. But that will all be decided later. For the moment I consent. Cressida shall be returned so that the plague may end.”

“Why you great snorting hog!” cried Achilles. “You are more fit to king it over a pigpen somewhere than to try to lead a band of free men. So this is how you would arrange things—that the burden should fall always on me, while you grab the spoils for yourself. Well, I’ve had enough. I’m tired of fighting your battles, and those of your brother who wasn’t man enough to keep his wife at home. I’m taking my Myrmidons and sailing away. And we will see how you make out against Hector and his brothers.”

“Go where you will, you bragging brawler,” said Agamemnon. “You’re better at fighting friends than enemies anyway. Board your beaked ship and sail where you will—to

Hades I hope. But I swear by my crown that when you go you shall leave Briseis behind. And I shall take her to replace Cressida.”

Now the lion wrath of Achilles rose in his breast and choked him with its sulphurous bile. He could think of nothing but to kill Agamemnon where he stood. He drew his sword, but a strong hand caught his arm. It was Athena, heaven-descended, invisible to everyone but Achilles. She fixed him with eyes so brilliant that they seemed to scorch his face. An unearthly musk came off her white arms. But Achilles was too angry to be intimidated.

“Great goddess,” he said. “I love and venerate you. But if you have come to stop me from killing Agamemnon you are wasting your time. He has insulted me and must pay with his life.”

“Where life and death are concerned,” said Athena, “only the gods say ‘must.’ You are the greatest of mortals, Achilles, but I have come to tell you this! You are not to kill Agamemnon. Hera, Queen of the Gods, and I myself, are mightily interested in the victory of Greek arms. We can allow no squabbling among your leaders, no division among your troops. As for your wrath, it is justified, and I promise you this: Within a space of days, great Agamemnon will humble himself to you and offer the return of your slave girl and gifts more valuable than you can reckon. I promise you this. Hera promises it. But you must obey us.”

“I listen and obey,” said Achilles. “I will hold my hand from him, and he shall live—at least until the next time. But I shall never fight under his leadership again.”

“Yes ... tell him so,” said Athena. “Attack him in words as fiercely as you will. For the man has been blinded by greed to the detriment of his leadership, and he must be shaken up, or victory will elude you Greeks whom the best gods love. Tell him what you will, say what you will, but do not kill him.”

Athena disappeared. Achilles sheathed his sword again, saying: “You are a putrid cur, Agamemnon, unfit to lead men in battle. Only by the grace of heaven am I sparing your life now. But I shall not follow your example and squabble over a slave girl. Take her if you must, you besotted swine. But I tell you this. I will not fight against Troy. I will not contend against Hector and his brothers. Priam’s brave sons and the Trojan troops shall go unchecked for all of me. From now on I pay no heed to battle, but fit out my ships for the voyage home. And when Hector is winnowing your ranks like the man with the scythe among the September wheat—yes, when you see your troops falling by the dozens before that terrible sword—then, then will you eat out your heart in remorse for having treated Achilles so.”

Achilles stalked off, leaving the Council aghast.

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THETIS

BEFORE THE COUNCIL BROKE up, the ancient general, Nestor, who had led three generations of warriors, and was now Agamemnon's most trusted adviser, addressed the assembly. He tried to dissuade Agamemnon from the path he had chosen. But though the eloquence flowed sweet as nectar from his mouth, the high king could not be swayed. He sent two messengers to Achilles' tent to bear away the beautiful Briseis. And Achilles watched them take the girl and did not offer them harm, although they trembled at his shadow. But he was too fair-minded to blame Agamemnon's messengers for the king's own evil, and he was forced to hold his hand from Agamemnon because of Athena's command. But he wept as he saw Briseis being borne off. He turned to face the sea.

“O deep mother,” he prayed. “Thetis of the Silver Feet—you who rise from the tides of the moon to trouble man's sleep forever—you who led my father a chase through all the changes of beast and fish before you allowed yourself to be caught ... you, Thetis, my mother, most beautiful and generous of naiads, help me now. Or I shall strangle here of a choler I cannot lance with my good blade.”

Thetis was sporting then in the depths of the sea, fleeing Poseidon, allowing him almost to catch her, then escaping his

attentions by dodging behind a giant squid, which she tickled, making the great jellied creature cast a curtain of black ink between her and her pursuer. In the midst of her sport her son's voice drifted down to her, and she arose from the sea like a mist.

“Oh, my brave son,” she cried. “Why these tears? Tell your mother so that she may share your grief.”

“Welcome, gentle mother,” said Achilles. “Thank you for coming when I call. I suffer thus because Agamemnon, the High King, has offered me ignoble insult. Denied by the gods of his own slave girl, he has taken my beautiful Briseis, into his tent. And I am forbidden by Athena to draw my sword from its sheath, but must stand helplessly by and watch myself despoiled.”

“Ever-meddlesome Athena!” cried Thetis. “Powerful you are, but I have powers too.”

“Yes, mother, the owl-goddess has forbidden me vengeance. I must stand here choking back my wrath and, oh, mother, it is too bitter to swallow.”

“What would you have me do, my son? How can I help you?”

“You must intercede with father Zeus whose edict overbears Athena's, and all the gods'. Speak winningly to him, mother, as you alone can do. Warm his interest in my behalf. Let him nod toward Troy, infusing courage into the Trojan hearts, and strength into the Trojan arms. Let haughty Agamemnon find himself penned on the beaches while swift Hector and his brothers slaughter the

Achaean forces. Then, then, will he rend his beard and weep for Achilles.”

“I shall do so,” said Thetis. “Swiftly will I travel to the Bronze Palace of the All-High, and beseech his intervention in your behalf. Those two mighty hags, Hera and Athena, keep close watch upon him, seeing that he does not intercede for Troy. But he still has some measure of regard for me, no doubt, and I still own some powers of persuasion, I am told. So rest easy, son. Wrap yourself in your cloak and taste sweet dreamless repose as your mother does your bidding. And gladly will she do it. For, in truth, you are the loveliest, strongest son that any mother, mortal or goddess, was blessed with.”

She disappeared into the sea. Achilles lay down and went to sleep and did not dream.

Upon that same night Cressida was returned to her father.

Now, like a great white sea-bird, silver-footed Thetis flew to the Bronze Palace of Zeus, high on Mt. Olympus. She found him seated on a throne of black rock in his garden looking down upon the earth. He smiled when he saw her for she had long been a favorite of his. Then, remembering that Hera might be watching, his smile quickly changed to a frown. But Thetis had felt the first warmth of his smile, a warmth that melted snow out of season in the mountains of far-off Thessaly, and started an avalanche. She sank down beside him among the flowers that grew at his feet and

hugged his legs, and spoke to him. As she spoke she raised her long arm and stroked his beard and touched his face.

“Father Zeus,” she said, “I, Thetis, daughter of the Sea, present warmest greetings to mighty Zeus, King of the Gods, ruler of sky, air, and mountain. If I mention my name, oh heavenly one, it is because I fear you might have forgotten me. It has been many long painful hours since we last met.”

“I have not forgotten you,” said Zeus in a thunderous whisper. It was this unfortunate inability of his to whisper softly that upset so many of his nocturnes by catching Hera’s sharp ears—even when he was conducting his session in some secret place upon some remote marg of beach or shelf of cliff.

“Thanks be for that,” said Thetis. “For I think of you constantly.”

“Constantly, my dear? But I understand you have many distractions.”

“Oh, yes. I am a goddess, and grief does not become me. But even among the most sportive of my diversions my dreams shuttle your image like a girl weaving who, no matter what gray or blue threads embroider the detail of her design, still casts the strong scarlet flax which becomes the themeline of her tapestry. Thus does memory of you, my king, run its scarlet thread through the shuttling and weaving of my dreams.”

“Sweet words, Thetis, which your voice makes even sweeter. What favor do you seek?”

“All-knowing Zeus, you have read my heart. Pleasure and longing alone would bring me to you. But now, as it happens, I do have a petition. Not for myself, but for my son, Achilles, the son of Peleus, my mortal husband, whom you will remember no doubt. And you will remember too that Achilles’ days are briefly numbered. It has been decreed by the Fates that he could choose between brilliant fighting and death at Troy or a long life of peace and obscurity far from battle-cry and clash of spear. He chose Troy and death, of course. But since his days are to be so brief I do not wish them clouded by suffering. And Agamemnon makes him suffer brutal injustice.”

“I do not understand,” said Zeus. “Why does he not kill Agamemnon? Your son is no man to allow himself to be insulted.”

“Aye, his sword had leaped halfway from its scabbard when your daughter, Athena, intervened, bidding him swallow his wrath and allow Agamemnon to work his horrid will. He has obeyed her, because she is your daughter and her strength derives from yours, as does that of all the gods. But he wishes to pay out Agamemnon all the same.”

“What can I do at this juncture?” said Zeus.

“Inspire the Trojans to attack. Fire their hearts and strengthen their arms so that they are triumphant—so that Agamemnon must beg my son’s pardon, or face defeat. For as you know Achilles is the very buckler of the Greek forces; without him, they must surely lose.”

The frown on Zeus's face was darkening. Sable night itself seemed to flow from his beard and hair. Darkness thickened upon earth. Men groaned in their sleep, and the birds stopped singing.

"If I grant your favor, O Thetis, it means endless trouble for me. Night and day will Queen Hera rail and nag, haunt my pleasures and devil my repose. For she heavily favors the Greeks. And, knowing that I disagree, she has made me promise neutrality at least. But always she accuses me of secret partiality for the Trojans ... which is true, of course. Now, if I do this thing for you, her opinion stands confirmed, and she will reveal her aptitude as arch-crone of the Universe."

"Please," said Thetis.

"I cannot refuse you," said Zeus. "But now return to the sea quickly lest she spot us talking here, and her suspicions be prematurely aroused. One kiss, my salty minx, and then off you go."

"Here's a kiss with all my heart ... And you do promise?"

"I do," said Zeus. "We shall have another conversation, perhaps, after the Greeks lose their battle."

"Gladly ... Do not keep me waiting too long, dear Zeus."

Thetis left Olympus, and sank to the depths of the sea. Zeus went into the banqueting hall of his Bronze Palace where the gods were gathered. But Hera was not disposed to let him eat the evening meal in peace.

“King of Deceivers!” she cried. “You have been with Thetis. And she has been asking you for favors. To help the Trojans, no doubt, because her bumptious brawling son has cooked up a grievance against the great Agamemnon.”

“Good sister and wife,” said Zeus. “Hera of the Golden Throne—please shut your nagging mouth, and keep it shut, before I plant my fist in it.”

“Abuse me! Beat me! You have the power, and can do it. But you have not the power to make me stop telling you what you should hear. I know that deep-sea witch has been flattering you, getting you to promise this and that. She’s capable of anything, that one. Do you know how she spends her time? She hides behind reefs to capsize ships, so that she can swim off with her arms full of sailors—whom she keeps in a deep grotto. Then when they’re old and feeble she feeds them to the sharks, and makes necklaces out of their fingerbones. She probably tells you that she spends her time doing kind deeds, and pining away for one more glimpse of your august visage. And you, you with all your tremendous wisdom, your insight into men’s souls, you swallow this flattery like a green schoolboy, and promise her to do mischief to my Greeks.”

Zeus said no word, but frowned so heavily that the stone floor began to crack. His fingers tightened around his scepter, a radiant volt-blue zigzag shaft of lighting. For he was also known as the Thunderer, Lord of Lightning—and, when angered, he would fling that deadly bolt the way a warrior hurls his lance.

Hephaestus, the smith-god, lame son of Zeus and Hera, who in his volcanic smithy had forged these lightning bolts and knew their awful power, ran to his mother in fear, whispering:

“Mother, mother, say something pleasant. Smile! Stop nagging! Or you’ll get us all killed.”

“Never,” hissed Hera. “Let him flail about with his lightning bolt, let the brute do what he wishes. I shall never stop railing and howling until he disowns Thetis and her plots.”

“Nay, mother, you forget. He has reason to favor Thetis of the Silver Feet, whatever her habits. Do not forget her ancient loyalty to him. When you and Athena and Poseidon plotted against him and tried to depose him from his throne—taking him by surprise, and binding him with a hundred knots—was it not she who called the hundred-handed Briareus, his titanic gardener? Briareus rescued his master, each of his hundred hands untying a knot. Do you not remember? It was upon that terrible night too that he showed what his wrath could be—punishing us all, particularly you, chaining you upside down in the vault of heaven until your screams cracked the crystal goblets of the stars.”

“I remember,” muttered Hera hoarsely. “I remember.”

“Then appease him, mother. Say something gentle, quickly. For his wrath is brewing. I see it plain. And terrible will be the consequences.”

Hera arose then, and said: “Mighty Zeus, Lord of us all, I beg your pardon for causing you disquiet. It is only my concern for

your peace of mind that sometimes leads me to hasty words. For I know how strong your honor is, how you value your word, and how you would hate to do anything to breach the promise of neutrality that you have given to me and Athena. So forgive my undue zeal in fearing that the tricks of Thetis would seduce you from your vow. Forgive me now, dear Lord, and I say not another word no matter what your intentions in the war below.”

“Seat yourselves, all,” boomed Zeus. “Drink your mead. We shall quarrel no more upon this night—for it is the shortest of all the year, and filled with the perfumes of earth.”

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THE WAR COUNCIL

ZEUS SENT A MISLEADING dream to Agamemnon. The dream masqueraded as Nestor who came to the king's tent at dawn, and said:

“Awake! Awake! This is no time to be sleeping. Hera has persuaded Zeus to permit the fall of Troy. So you must move immediately to the attack. Awake! Rouse yourself from slumber, and advance upon Troy. For gods grow wroth when men waste their favor.”

Agamemnon arose immediately and called together his council. He related his dream. Nestor climbed to his feet, blushing with pride; it pleased him to appear in a dream sent by Zeus.

“It is a true auspice, O King, and must be obeyed. You know me well enough to realize I would never allow myself to appear in any dream that was not of the utmost authenticity.”

Agamemnon said: “Nine years we have fought. We have killed Trojans, but Troy still stands. We have looted her colonies, sacked the cities of her allies, but Troy herself still abides, fair and impregnable as the virgin goddess, Artemis—who, indeed, favors the Trojan cause.

“After nine years our men are disheartened. Many of our finest have fallen to deadly Hector and his brothers, many others to Apollo's plague arrows. Now, I fear, too many of those left are on

the point of mutiny or desertion. I have led men a long time; I know the signs.

“It is at this juncture that Zeus sees fit to promise me Troy. This means—and I interpret these matters not like an oracle but like a soldier—that he gives it to me if I can take it.”

“Exactly,” said Ulysses. “Therefore, let us take it.”

“Yes, brave Ulysses. But consider this: If our men desert us in the midst of a general assault when we have committed our reserves to a headlong attack—then, indeed, we shall meet disaster.”

“We must see that they do not desert,” said Diomedes.

“Precisely what I propose,” said Agamemnon. “What I mean to do is weed out the cowards and traitors beforehand. I shall call the men together, and address them in discouraging terms, indicating that I am ready to abandon the war and sail back to Greece.”

“Dangerous, very dangerous,” said Ulysses. “They will welcome your words and stampede to the boats.”

“And that will weed out the cowards and traitors.”

“You may be weeding out the entire army—saving those present, of course. Your test is ill-timed, O Agamemnon. The men are war-weary, and legitimately so. The plague proves that. Despite the venom of Apollo’s arrows, a man in good spirits is bucklered against disease. But a sick body means a sick soul. And they are

battle-worn; they long for home. Your speech will send them scurrying off to the ships.”

“Then what would you have me do?” cried Agamemnon. “If things are that bad we may as well fold our tents, raise our sails, and skulk away for home.”

“No,” said Ulysses. “The important thing is to ignore the men’s weariness, and show them a glad and confident face. Address the troops. Speak no discouraging word, but tell them your dream and order them to attack. Twenty years of warfare have taught me that the cure for fear is fighting.”

“Too many words,” growled huge Ajax. “Let’s stop talking and start cracking some heads. If we crack enough outside of Troy we’ll soon be doing it inside.”

But Agamemnon would not be dissuaded. Like all men of few ideas he clung bitterly to one when it occurred. And by now he had convinced himself that his notion was a brilliant one.

“I shall make the speech I planned,” he said. “And depend upon you, kings and chieftains of my War Council, to keep the men from breaking.”

Agamemnon issued orders. Nine heralds went throughout the camp blowing their silver trumpets, calling the men together. They came in a mighty swarm. Even after its losses this army remained the greatest fighting force ever assembled in ancient times.

Agamemnon stood on a rock and raised his golden scepter. He had planned his speech for hours, but was able to utter only one

sentence.

“Friends—my heart has been overwhelmed by our losses, and I have decided it is time to quit this war and sail for Greece.”

No sooner had he said these words, than, as Ulysses had foretold, the vast crowd stampeded. With a wild moaning cry the men leaped to their feet and stormed toward the beach. Had the restless gods not been vigilant the Greek cause would have died that day.

But Hera and Athena were watching from Olympus. “What’s the matter with Agamemnon,” cried Hera. “Has he gone quite mad? Oh, this is some treachery of Zeus, I’m quite certain.”

“No, this is Agamemnon’s own stupidity,” said Athena. “Some idea of testing the men before battle. And he shouldn’t be having ideas, he’s not equipped.”

“They’re stampeding like cattle,” said Hera. “Look at the miserable cowards. And when I think of the effort we’ve spent on them. Go, dear stepdaughter. Descend to Troy, and stop them.”

“Divine stepmother, I go,” said Athena—and she flew down to Troy.

She did not reveal herself to the multitude, only to her favorite, Ulysses, saying to him: “Don’t just stand there, man. Stop them.”

She snapped her fingers. Agamemnon’s heavy scepter flew from his hand and sailed over the heads of the mob. She caught it in midair and handed it to Ulysses.

“Here is the rod of power. The very staff and scepter of kingly authority, given only by the gods—and to be taken back at will. Grasp the scepter, Ulysses. Use it. Stop the rabble’s flight.”

With great strides Ulysses leaped down to the beach, bearing his scepter. Divinely inspired, his shout of outrage rolled like thunder across the plain.

“Stop!” he roared. “Stop! I command it! And I speak the will of the gods.”

He rushed up and down the strand, guarding the beached ships so that no one could board them. His flailing scepter rose like a golden barrier before the men’s astonished eyes. In truth, with his red hair blazing, and his eyes flashing, and the golden rod flailing, he looked like a god descended.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Back to the assembly-place. Agamemnon means battle, not retreat. You misunderstood his words; they were only a rhetorical device. You fools, you dimwitted dolts. Zeus himself has appeared to the king in his sleep, ordering an attack upon Troy. Do you think this is the moment he would order us to sail home? You have misunderstood. You have listened with your fears instead of your intelligence. No wonder you heard things wrong. Back! Back! Back to the arena. Let the king declare your battle array.”

Listening to Ulysses, seeing him blaze with that special creative rage which comes rarely in a lifetime, and then only to extraordinary men because it is a particle of the gods’ own

radiance, hearing Ulysses' clangorous voice, and seeing him guard the ships, the men felt courage slipping back into their hearts, and began to drift away from the beach.

But a gifted troublemaker arose. Thersites was his name, a little hunched shuffling bald-headed man, very clever, with a voice that brayed like a donkey's so that you could hear no one whom he wished to drown out. Now he said:

“You stupid sheep, do you allow yourself to be herded this way by a man with a staff? For the first time in his life that lout, Agamemnon, speaks the truth. By accident, I know, but the truth all the same. This war *is* a disaster, and the sooner we get home the better. It's a bloody miracle there are any of us left to get home after nine years of so-called leadership by greedy, inept, cowardly imitations of kings. So heed not this red-headed madman, my fellow-soldiers, but board the ships. And if any of these brave chieftains come after you and try to drag you back, why then, cut their throats and dump them overboard as a sacrifice to Poseidon, who will ensure us cloudless skies and a following wind.”

It was part of Ulysses' wisdom always to listen to criticism, hoping to learn something thereby. So he held his hand until Thersites finished his speech. Then, by way of comment, he swung his scepter. The knobbed end hit Thersites in the face, shattering his jaw. Thersites tried to keep talking but the only sound that came out was the crackling of broken bone. He kept trying to speak, then gagged on his own blood, and fell unconscious to the ground.

By this time the other members of the War Council—Ajax the Greater, Ajax the Lesser, Idmoneus, Nestor, Diomedes—had joined Ulysses, and stood between the men and the ships, thrusting the men back, exhorting them. The mutiny crumbled. The men turned and moved sullenly back to the field. Ulysses and the other chieftains followed, herding them. When they were again assembled he mounted Agamemnon’s rock, still holding the golden scepter. Agamemnon himself, seized by bewilderment and rage, had vanished into his tent. Ulysses said:

“Our great king and war-leader, Agamemnon, has been so disgusted by your cowardly performance that he does not wish to address you again today, and has asked me to say a few words. Let me say, men, that, despite appearances, I do not view your recent abrupt withdrawal toward the beach as cowardice. I view it as a gigantic form of the fighting man’s gesture whereby, before he can strike his blow, must draw back his arm. You were not running away; you were coiling for the spring, the spring that will take you in one tigerish leap over the walls and into Troy. I promise you this, men, and I do not speak idly: We will have victory. For know that on the night that has just passed, father Zeus himself condescended to visit Agamemnon in a dream, promising us victory if we attack, attack, attack.”

On the third repetition of the word “attack” he flung up his arm, the scepter flashed, and the men raised a great ferocious joyful shout. Two brown vultures coasting the steeps of air off Mt. Ida,

heard this yelling, and planed down a way. For they had heard this sound before and knew that it meant a battle, and a battle meant fine feasting afterward.

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THE BATTLE BEGINS

THE GREEK FORCES ADVANCED toward Troy, raising an enormous cloud of dust. And the dust was the color of gold mixed with the color of blood. For, at Ulysses' suggestion, they were advancing on the western wall of Troy that afternoon so that the Trojans would have to fight with the setting sun in their eyes. This was one of the oldest tricks in warfare, but still effective, and Ulysses never overlooked the slightest advantage.

The great bronze gates of the western wall swung open, and the men of Troy came out to meet the attackers. The high gods settled down comfortably on the peaks of Olympus to watch the sport.

Through the dust-cloud Teucer, who had the sharpest eyes among the Greeks, spotted something strange. He reported to Agamemnon, who held up his hand in the sign of halt. The dust subsided, and the attackers saw an amazing spectacle. The Trojan line had stopped moving and was standing fast, weapons glittering in the slanted rays of the sun. And a single man was coming forward to meet them—a tall, supple figure clad in a panther skin and carrying two spears. It was Paris, who raised his voice in challenge:

“Hear me, O Greeks. I propose single combat between the lines to any one of you bold enough to come forward and meet

me.”

“Rumor travels fast,” grumbled Ulysses to himself. “It’s clear they’ve already heard about Achilles’ defection. Otherwise that coxcomb would never be offering single combat.”

Menelaus then split the air with his war-cry, and shuffled forward. His shout was echoed by all the Greeks, for it was very fitting that he, the offended husband, should respond to the challenge of the abductor.

“I’ll fight you!” he cried. “And a short fight it will be. I’ll tear out your guts with my bare hands.”

Now Menelaus was no comfortable sight for an opponent. If his brother, Agamemnon, was a bull, he was a bear. Not very tall, but very wide, and bulging with muscle, clothed in a pelt of black hair from neck to ankle. Black-bearded, wearing black armor—helmet, breastplate, and greaves not of bronze like most of the others, but of iron—too heavy for most men to wear; iron pieces smoky and black as if they had just issued from Hephaestus’ forge. He carried an axe in one hand, and a huge iron-bossed bullhide shield in the other. Truly he was a fearsome sight slouching out of the Greek lines like an iron bear.

Paris took one look and darted back into the Trojan lines, crying: “It’s not fair! He has full armor. I am clad only in a panther skin. I’ll fight any man alive, but a metal monster is something else!”

His brother Hector, commander of the Trojan forces, turned on him.

“You miserable cringing coward, you yellow-bellied dog. The oracle was right. You *will* bring disgrace and ruin on us all. Here we are, fighting a war started by you, and when a chance is given for you to strike a blow for yourself—something you should have been praying to the gods for—you skulk away. My father was right in his original impulse. He should have garroted you with your own umbilical cord. Dreadful was my mother’s misjudgment, saving you. Well, you are not free to disgrace yourself. You are a son of Priam, and when you bring shame on yourself, you shame us all. I will not permit this. Sooner will I break your pretty skull, here and now, explain that you have met with an unfortunate accident, and take up your challenge to Menelaus myself.”

Paris, who thought quickly, said: “Peace, brother. It was I who issued the challenge—unprompted by you—and it is I who will fight. Please do not scourge me with that tongue of yours. You are my elder brother—my leader—but you have no right to say such things to me, because I chose to lighten the heavy moment with a jest or two. Truly, the thing I regret most about this war I started is that every day it makes the Trojans more like the Greeks. We are forgetting what laughter is. And that is a terrible casualty.”

“I do not follow you,” said Hector. “Speak plainly. Are you going to fight or not?”

“Certainly, I’m going to fight. I didn’t come to battle to exchange platitudes with you. But that man is clad in ugly armor from woolly pate to tufted toe. I, too, must armor myself.”

“Brothers, lend him some pieces of armor,” said Hector. “I’ll start. Take my shield.”

“Nay, brother,” said Paris. “It is too heavy for me. Troilus here will give me what I need. We are the same size.”

And from Troilus, the brother next youngest to himself, also a very beautiful lad, he borrowed helmet, chestplate, and greaves. From Lyncaeus, an elder brother, he took a bronze-bossed oxhide shield.

While Paris was armoring himself, Hector stepped out between the two armies and held up his arms for silence.

“Worthy foes,” he said. “You have known me for nine long years and know that I do not shrink from a fight. So you will not take my proposal in the wrong spirit. But I think there is a kind of inspired justice about the idea of Paris and Menelaus meeting each other in single combat. Now I suggest this: If Paris wins, we keep Helen, and you depart, taking with you only the price of Helen’s bride-gift, which we will repay to Menelaus, or to his brother if Menelaus does not survive the fight. If, on the other hand, Menelaus leaves Paris in the dust, then he must take back his wife, plus an indemnity to be reckoned by joint council between us. Then, your cause having been won, you depart on your black ships in honor and in peace.”

There was a great clamor of joyful shouting on both sides. It was clear that Hector's proposal met with general favor from Trojan and Greek alike. Ulysses saw Agamemnon frown, and knew that the hasty general was about to refuse Hector's offer, and order a charge. Ulysses went swiftly to Agamemnon, and whispered: "Agree ... agree ... We'll have general mutiny if you refuse. And the end will be the same. The oracle has decreed that Troy must fall, and fall she must, for the voice of the oracle is the promise of the gods. But for now, agree to the truce. There is nothing else to do."

Therefore, Agamemnon answered, saying: "Well spoken, Hector. Let our brothers fight."

Hector stepped out between the armies, holding his helmet in his hand. In the helmet were two pebbles, a rough one for Menelaus, a smooth one for Paris. He shook his helmet; one pebble jumped out—the smooth one. A groan went up from the Greek lines because this meant that Paris would cast the first spear. The Trojans cheered wildly.

Paris danced out into the space between the armies. Menelaus shuffled forward to meet him, covering himself with his bullhide shield. Paris came, all glittering bronze, poising two bronze-headed spears. He stopped about twenty paces from his enemy and hurled his spear. Its point hit the iron boss of Menelaus' shield and fell to earth. Now the Trojans groaned and the Greeks cheered. Menelaus immediately hurled his spear with tremendous force. It hummed

venomously through the air, and sheared through the Trojan's shield. Paris ducked aside and the spearhead only nicked his shoulder. Before he could recover, Menelaus was upon him hacking away with his axe. Paris tried to back away but Menelaus allowed him no time to recover. Menelaus raised his axe high and smote the Trojan's horse-plume helmet. Paris staggered but the axe-head shattered into three pieces.

“Cruel Zeus!” cried Menelaus. “First you raise my hopes by allowing me to close with the falsehearted homebreaker. Then when he is in my grasp you save him from my spear; you break my axe—leave me weaponless. But I have weapons still—these two good hands you gave me before you gave me sword and spear—and they are enough to do the beautiful murder I have dreamed of for nine long years.”

He grasped Paris by the crest of his helmet, swung him off his feet, and began to drag him back toward the Greek lines. Paris struggled helplessly; his legs were dragging, the chinstrap of his helmet dug into his throat, strangling him.

But Aphrodite could not bear to see her favorite being manhandled. Making herself invisible she flew down from Olympus, broke the chinstrap of his helmet and snatched him away, leaving the raging Menelaus with an empty helmet in his hands.

Paris felt himself translated into paradise. Instead of strangling beneath his enemy's hands he was lying snug as a babe in Aphrodite's arms, cuddled against her breast. The goddess kept

herself invisible as the wind but he recognized her by her intoxicating scent—which was honey and baking bread. Aphrodite flew over the Trojan wall, past the painted wooden houses and the marble temple, to Priam’s castle. She flew through a casement and deposited Paris in his own bed. Then, still invisible, she kissed him into a healing sleep.

Down on the battlefield the disappearance of Paris had ignited angry confusion. Trojan and Greek began a shifting and muttering but no one was quite sure what had happened. Agamemnon then stepped between the lines, raising his arms for silence.

Honorable Hector, Trojans, all—I declare my brother Menelaus, King of Sparta, the victor in the single combat we agreed was to decide the war. To this you must submit since your champion Paris has vanished and Menelaus holds the field. Therefore, Helen must be returned to us, and the entire cost of our expedition must be paid by you, plus a huge and fitting indemnity.”

The Greeks shouted with joy. The Trojan lines were wrapped in bitter silence.

Helen had been watching on the wall, with Priam and the other elders of Troy. When she heard Agamemnon’s declaration she hurried back to the palace to change her dress, perfume herself, and prepare to be retaken. She was amazed to find Paris in her room.

“What are you doing here?”

“Sleeping ... waiting ...”

“For what?”

“For you, dear. What else?”

“I was watching from the wall. The last I saw of you, you were fighting Menelaus, more or less. Did you run away, darling?”

“More or less. Not exactly.”

“You didn’t exactly stay either.”

“Rough character, that exhusband of yours. No one stays around him very long ...”

“What now, sweet coward?”

“Come here.”

“But I’m about to be reclaimed. Agamemnon has declared the Greeks victorious.”

“Agamemnon is hasty, my dear. The gods are just beginning to enjoy this war. They’re not going to let it end so quickly.”

“Are you sure?”

“Believe me, the real war is just beginning. And we battle-weary warriors need frequent interludes of tender repose. So come here.”

Hera and Athena were now perched on the same peak whispering to each other; they did not like the way things were going down below. Zeus called out teasingly:

“Well, my dears, your gentle impulses should be gratified, for it looks very much like peace will be concluded between Greece and Troy, and many brave men spared who would otherwise have died.”

“You are hasty, sire,” said Hera sweetly. “No peace treaty has been signed, only an armistice. And with two armies full of such spirited warriors, anything may happen to break a truce. Of course, we hope nothing does, but—after all—it has been foretold that Troy will fall.”

Zeus frowned, and did not answer. He knew better than to try to match gibes with Hera. In the meantime the ox-eyed queen of the gods was whispering to Athena:

“We must do something immediately, or peace will break out. Get down there and see what you can do about ending this stupid truce.”

Athena flew down and whispered to a Trojan leader named Pandarus. “The man who sends an arrow through one of those famed Greek warriors will live in the annals of warfare for the next three thousand years—longer perhaps. Just imagine putting a shaft through Ulysses, or Agamemnon, or Achilles. No, he’s not fighting today, is he? Or Menelaus. Look, there Menelaus stands, still searching for Paris. He’s within very easy bowshot. What are you waiting for, man? If I were an archer like you I wouldn’t hesitate for a second.”

Pandarus swallowed this flattery in one gulp, as Athena knew he would. Now, Pandarus was a fine archer, although not as good as he thought he was, and he owned a marvellous bow made of two polished antelope horns seized together by copper bands, and strung with ox sinew. Inflamed by Athena’s words, he snatched an

arrow from his quiver, fitted it to his bowstring, bent his horn-bow, and let fly. The arrow sang through the air and would have finished off Menelaus right then and there had not Athena, making herself invisible, flashed across the space and deflected the arrow so that it struck through the Spartan king's buckle and, still further deflected, passed through the bottom part of his breastplate, just scratching his side. The wound looked more serious than it was because the arrow stuck out the other side of his breastplate as if it had passed through his body. Menelaus staggered and fell to his knees; blood flowed down his thighs. The Greek army gasped with horror, and the Trojans groaned too, for they knew this must break the truce. Agamemnon uttered a mighty grief-stricken shout:

“Traitors! You have killed my brother! You have broken the truce! Greeks—to arms! Kill the traitors! Charge!”

The dust was churned again as the whole Greek army, moving as one man, snatched up its weapons and rushed toward the Trojan lines.

All this time, while the battle was raging back and forth, Achilles kept to his tent and did not come out. He lay on his pallet trying to shut his ears to the sound of battle. But he could not. He heard it all—war-cry and answer, challenge and reply. Spear-shock and the crash of shields; the rattle of sword against helmet, the ping of dart against breastplate. Arrows sang through the air. Men shrieked and groaned; horses neighed and bugled. This sound had always been music to him—the best sound in all the world—but

now it was a simple torment. For there to be a battle going on and Achilles not in it was a thing absolutely against nature. Great sobs wrenched Achilles. But Patroclus was in the tent too, waiting with him, and he did not wish his friend to hear his grief.

So Achilles bit down on his wrist till it bled, stifling his sobs that way. At last he could bear it no longer, but arose from his bed and washed his face in the cold water that stood in a golden ewer, one he had taken in some half-forgotten raid. Oh, happy days they seemed now, before his quarrel with Agamemnon, when he could allow himself to roam the seas raiding the home-islands of Trojan allies, raging into their very fastnesses, spearing men like fish, and sacking the proud castles of their treasures—and taking many slaves.

He stood now at the portal of his tent watching the battle. He saw Diomedes sweeping up and down, and it was like some memory of himself. He groaned aloud. Patroclus came to him and put his arm around his neck.

“Old friend,” said Patroclus, “beloved comrade—I cannot see you kill yourself with grief. Forget your feud with Agamemnon. Go fight! Arm yourself and join the battle. Else regret will tear your breast more surely than enemy spear.”

“I cannot bury my feud with Agamemnon,” cried Achilles. “False friend! How can you tell me to do that? He insulted me, took Briseis. Do you think I will allow any man, though he be king

a dozen times, to do such things to me? No! I would rather fight with the Trojans against the Greeks.”

“A traitor to your own kind? No, you would never be that,” said Patroclus.

“I’m a traitor to my own nature if I do not fight. And that’s worse.”

“You could never bring yourself to fight your old companions. How could you level your spear against either of the Ajaxes, or Ulysses, or Idomeneus? I do not even mention myself.”

Achilles took his friend’s head between his hands and looked deep into his eyes.

“Oh, Patroclus,” he said. “You would be surprised to know the names of those I could bring myself to fight when the battle-fury burns. I like them well—Ajax, and Diomedes, Ulysses, Idomeneus, even that crude bear, Menelaus. I have adventured with them, and raided with them, and fought the Trojans with them. I should regret killing them, perhaps, but I could manage the deed in the heat of battle. Only you, my friend, have a true hold on my esteem. You I will never harm. You I will always avenge should anyone else offer you harm. I feel myself being torn in two. I feel a fire inside my head that is scorching my very capacity to think. I feel a pain in my gut that is worse than any weapon that has pierced my armor. I don’t know what will happen to me in the days to come, but take this pledge: You are my friend, my true friend, sweet cousin and

companion of my boyhood; I shall never harm you, and shall take vengeance upon anyone who does.”

He shoved Patroclus away. “Go now. I know you do not wish me to stand alone, but I pray you, go. For I do not wish you to see my grief.”

“I go,” said Patroclus. “But I shall not join the battle either until you give me leave.”

He walked off, but not far. He circled in back of the tent and stood there watching Achilles. For his heart was sodden with love for the mighty youth, and he was as loyal as a dog.

Hera and Athena watched, frowning, from their peak on Olympus as the Trojans beat back the Greeks.

“What ails you, stepdaughter?” said Hera. “You seem to be losing your touch. The strength you gave Diomedes appears to have ebbed, and with it the tide of Greek fortunes. Look at them; they’re running like rabbits.”

“It is because my brothers have broken their vow of neutrality,” said Athena angrily. “Apollo has completely restored Aeneas who was felled by Diomedes in a glorious action, and the son of Anchises wields his weapon more powerfully than ever before. And Hector has suddenly become inspired, and is raging like a wolf on the field. But it is no accident. Behind him I see the form of Ares goading the Trojans to superhuman effort.”

“Yes, Ares is chiefly to blame,” said Hera. “Although I am his mother, I must confess he is an incorrigible mischiefmaker. Apollo

will mend wounds and issue edicts, but he is too proud to fight with mortals. Ares, however, exults in battle, no matter whom he is fighting. And it is he who harries the Trojans forward. Yes, it is Ares who must be driven from the field. And it is you who must do it, stepdaughter. For Zeus would never forgive me if I took up arms against my own son. He is quite hidebound in some respects.”

“Very well,” said Athena. “Then I shall do it. For many a century now I have been wanting to settle scores with that lout.”

So saying, she sped to earth and, keeping herself invisible, joined the Greeks where they had set up a defense line near their ships. The Trojans were driving ahead viciously, but the toughest Greek warriors—Ajax the Greater, Ajax the Lesser, Teucer, Ulysses, Idomeneus, Agamemnon, Menelaus—all these ferocious fighters formed knots of resistance to the Trojans, who had breached the Greek line in many places, and were advancing upon the beached ships.

Athena spoke to Diomedes, appearing before him in her own guise, but keeping herself invisible to the others.

“Son of Tydeus,” she said. “You are a great sorrow and disappointment to me. After a few hours of fighting you grow weary. You fail. You leave the field to Hector and Aeneas. It’s incredible. Standing there on Olympus I could scarcely believe what I was seeing. I did not know how to answer to mother Hera who chided, and justly, for choosing so weak a vessel to hold the

beautiful rage of the gods. I am grieved, Diomedes. I am shocked and dismayed.”

By this time Diomedes’ face was wet with tears. He tore out his beard in great handfuls.

“Another word of reproof, O Athena,” he shouted, “and I shall plunge this blade into my breast. And you shall have to find another to crush with your scorn. Why do you blame me for that which is not my fault. You saw me overcoming every Trojan I met, even Pandarus, the shrewd archer, even the mighty Aeneas. Why, I even wounded his mother, Aphrodite! And how many men have dappled with ichor the radiant flesh of the goddess of love? But in the midst of these deeds I was stopped by your brother, Apollo, the sun-god himself, who warned me that I must never lift my hand against an Olympian again, threatening me with eternal torment if I disobeyed. So what am I to do? For it is your other brother, Ares, who ranges behind the Trojan lines, filling Aeneas and Hector with battle-rage, and making them invincible. Unless I lift my spear against Ares and chase him from the field he will never allow me to measure my strength with Hector and Aeneas.”

“You speak truly,” said Athena. “But Apollo cannot stop *me* from fighting Ares. I have the permission of mother Hera. As for Zeus, he detests his brawling son. Many a time, in aeons gone, he was moved to punish Ares himself. And although father Zeus tends to favor the Trojans I know he will not chide me overmuch if I chastise Ares. Let us go then. You will lift your spear against him,

but I will ride as your charioteer and guide your spear. And I will be your buckler too when the god of war aims his gigantic lance at your breastplate. Come, brave Diomedes, we will teach the Trojans that the Greeks must prevail even though great Achilles disdains to take the field. Yes, I will be your charioteer, and guide these marvellous horses you have taken from Aeneas, and you shall be able to devote your full time to fighting.”

So saying, Athena sprang into the chariot and took up the reins. Diomedes stood beside her couching his spear and shouting his war cry. Athena drove directly toward Ares, where he was snorting like a wild boar over a pile of dead Greeks, and despoiling them of their armor. He wished to take back to Olympus the gear of twenty men of large stature to give to Hephaestus, who would then melt the metal down and forge a breastplate and pair of greaves large enough for Ares. But when he saw the chariot approach, the somber pits of his eyes glowed with a new greed; he wanted those horses for himself. Also he wished very much to square accounts with Diomedes, who had been so terrible against the Trojans that day. He picked up his twenty-foot spear, the shaft of which was an entire ash tree, and rushed toward the chariot. It was a charge such as could batter down a city gate, but Athena reached out her mailed hand and deflected the spearhead so that it whizzed harmlessly past Diomedes, carrying Ares within easy sword-reach. Diomedes' quick counterstroke half-gutted Ares. He fell with a horrid screech clutching his stomach. Had he been a mortal man the wound would

have been fatal. As it was, he had to quit the field and fly back to Olympus. He visited Hephaestus first, who tucked his mighty guts in place, and sewed up the wound with bullhide sinew.

Then Ares stormed into Zeus' throne-room, crying: "Justice! Justice! That harpy daughter of yours, that owl-hag Athena rides invisible as Diomedes' charioteer, guarding him from all harm, and strengthening his hands so that he kills, kills, kills."

"Fancy that," said Zeus. "I had no idea that killing was so distasteful to you. These scruples seem to have developed overnight."

"You do not understand, O Zeus. It is not only mortals he attacks. Earlier today he wounded Aphrodite. Just now he bloodied me with a lucky thrust. Me! Your son! God of Battle!"

"Who are you to complain?" shouted Zeus. "She should not be taking a direct hand in the fighting, it is true, for I have forbidden it. But you were doing the very same thing on the Trojan side. I saw you. You were disguised as Acamas, and with your own weapons were killing Greeks and despoiling them of their armor. You are equally to blame, and if I punish one I shall punish both. Besides ... I think the God of war should be ashamed to publicize his defeat at the hands of his sister."

"Sister? That's no sister," muttered Ares as he left the throne-room. "That's a harpy out of hell."

Nevertheless, Zeus sent Apollo after Ares to make sure that his wound had been properly tended, and also sent lightfooted Iris to

recall Athena from the battlefield. He then issued another edict against direct intervention by any god on one side or the other.

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HECTOR

THE BATTLE HAD BEGUN at dawn, and it was now the hot middle of the day. The sun hung in the sky like a brass helmet; dust hung in the air hot as metal filings. The exhausted men gasped like unwatered cattle. They could feel their flesh charring where the sun hit their armor. Many of them threw off their armor and fought naked. Shaft of spear and lance, and hilt of sword, were so slippery with sweat that they slid out of men's hands. Without any orders being given the fighting subsided, and the armies drew off a little way from one another to await the cool of late afternoon.

During this lull Hector returned to Troy. He had two errands: First, to dig his brother Paris out of the boudoir and get him onto the battlefield; secondly, to visit his wife, Andromache.

Andromache was not at home. The servants told him she was waiting on the Scaean Wall. He went there to find her. They embraced. She said: "You're so hot and tired. Must you rush back to the battlefield? Can't you stay with me awhile? Stay, only a little while, and let me make you comfortable again."

"No, I must get back there, dearly as I should love to stay with you and pass some cool and delicious hours in your matchless company. But I am the commander, and must lead my men."

"You look so solemn—so sad. Have you come to tell me something special?"

“I have had a vision of Troy’s defeat. And among all the scenes of carnage and disaster it drags in its wake, all I can see is one picture: You, in time to come, have been borne away by some mailed conqueror to faroff Greece. And there in Argos, or in Attica, or Sparta, I see you dressed in dull clothing, spinning at the loom, or drawing water under the eye of your mistress—who will not be partial to you for you will be too beautiful, more beautiful than she, whoever she be. And her husband, your master, will be spending his nights with you rather than with her. I see you a servant, a slave. That is what losing means—to be enslaved. And that sight of you there fills me with such sorrowful rage that I feel a giant’s strength, feel that I, personally, could interpose my body between Troy and all the Greek hordes—even if my comrades are cut down—and kill and kill until there is not one Greek left. And so the vision brings its own contradiction. And what do you make of that?”

“What do I make of that? That you are very brave, and very dear. And that I am blessed beyond all women in my husband. For you, I believe, are the mightiest man ever to bear arms, and the noblest heart ever to bear another’s grief. And when you meet Achilles, or Ajax, the gods will favor your cause, for you are living proof that their handiwork is excelling itself.”

“Thank you for those words,” said Hector. “They are the sweetest I have ever heard in all my life. It is true, whether I can conquer Achilles or not, I must challenge him to single combat. These pitched battles waste our forces too much, and we do not

have as many men to spare as do the enemy. Yes, I shall fight the strong Achilles, and when I do the memory of your loving words will make a victor's music in my ears.”

He took his infant son from the nurse's arms. Lifting him high as if stretching him toward the heavens, he said: “Great Zeus, father of us all, hear a lesser father's prayer. I am a warrior; some call me a hero, and, as you know, a degree of self-esteem attaches to that condition. Instead of sacrificing a bull to you then, let me sacrifice my self-esteem—which, I assure you, is as huge and hotblooded and rampaging as any bull. Let me ask you this: That when my son is grown and fights his battles, as all men must, and returns therefrom, that men will say of him only this. ‘He is a better man than his father was.’ ”

The baby was frightened by his father's nodding horsetail plume, and burst into tears. Hector smiled and kissed him, and gave him into his mother's arms. Then he kissed her, and said: “I must be off now, good wife. I must rout out lazy Paris and try to prevail upon him to do a bit of fighting in this war that he started. Farewell.”

But it took him a while to press through the mob. It seemed all Troy was out in the streets. Since he was their special hero, the people crowded about him, shouting questions, trying to touch him. He kept a smile on his face, but forced his way steadily through the mob. However, his son's nurse had been so moved by his words on the wall that she had rushed off to tell everyone she could find what

her master had said. By the time he reached Paris' house all Troy was buzzing with his speech to Andromache, and no woman who heard it could refrain from bursting into tears, and thinking critically of her own husband.

He found Paris with Helen, polishing his armor.

"It's clean enough, brother—too clean. I should prefer to see it bloodied a bit."

"Ah, the old complaint," murmured Paris.

"Yes, the old complaint. You do not fight enough in your behalf, Paris. You set a bad example to the troops, and create rancor among your brothers. The word has spread that you are a coward. I too have called you that in the heat of my displeasure, and yet I know that you are not. You are too proud for cowardice. What you are is irresponsible. You cannot bear the discipline of warfare. The compulsion, the iron urgency. You are like some magic child who can do anything, but views his own caprice as the basic law of the universe. Well, you must drop that. For the cruel necessity of war is upon us—a war prompted by your own desires. And you must play not only an honorable role, but a hero's role. Zeus knows we need all the heroes we can muster."

"You keep saying these things, Hector," said Paris. "But I haven't uttered one syllable of objection. Why do you think I'm polishing my armor. I never wear it to bed. A rumor, incidentally, that is whispered about you, big brother. No, I mean to go to battle; I just want to look nice when I'm there."

“Dear brother Hector,” said Helen. “Honorable commander. I know you think little of me. I know you consider me a shameless woman who seduced your brother and plunged Troy into a dreadful war. Nevertheless, let me say this: I, too, am always after him to do his share of fighting. I am of warrior race too, you know. In fact, it is said that a very prominent belligerent, Zeus himself, is my father. I don’t know how much truth there is in it, but they say he wooed my mother in the shape of a swan, and that I was born from a swan’s egg—which accounts for my complexion.”

She smiled at Hector, and he could find no word of reproach to say to her. In the blaze of Helen’s smile no man could remain wrathful. Even iron Hector was not immune.

“And I heard what you said to Andromache,” said Helen. A single pearly tear trembled on her eyelash without falling. “I think it was the most beautiful thing any man has ever said to any wife. This scoundrel here could never in a million years find such sentiments on his tongue, and he is famous for sweet speech. Truly the thought of being enslaved is something that haunts every Trojan woman and devils every warrior.”

“Truly,” drawled Paris. “No man likes to think of his wife being enslaved by anyone but himself. Quite intolerable.”

“See ... he jokes even at that,” cried Helen. “What is one to do with him?”

“Make a soldier of him,” growled Hector. “Come on, pretty-boy, enough talk—let’s fight.”

Paris knelt before Helen, took both her hands, turned them over, and kissed each palm. Then he closed her hands.

“Keep these until I come again.”

The sight of Hector and Paris emerging from the gate, fresh and shining, brought new heart to the Trojans, and they charged the Greek positions again. Led by Hector, Paris, and Aeneas, they wrought great havoc among the enemy, who lost some of their best warriors in that flurry.

Athena, despite Zeus’ edict, flew down from Olympus to help the Greeks. This time she was intercepted by Apollo, who said:

“No, sister, you must not. You are Zeus’ favorite daughter, as everyone knows, and you should be the last to flout his commands. You see that I am keeping aloof from the battle, and so must you.”

“I can’t,” cried Athena. “I won’t! Too many Greeks are being killed.”

“Come away. Listen to me. I have a plan to end this slaughter—without any direct intercession on our part.”

Athena joined Apollo under a huge oak tree.

“Owl-goddess,” he said. “We can stop this killing by arranging that the battle be settled through single combat. This was attempted earlier in the day when Paris challenged Menelaus, but Paris fled, and the idea came to nought. Now, however, we shall have great Hector issue the challenge, and you may be sure that he will fight to the finish.”

“I agree,” said Athena. “Let us send Hector the idea.”

Gods send ideas to men in different ways. But whatever way they choose it is necessary to create the illusion of personal authorship—that is, that each man believe the idea to be his own. The gods' idea came to Hector as a dart of sunlight glancing off the tall helm of Ajax which towered above his companions. Seeing that high helmet gleam Hector said to Paris:

“Listen, brother, I have an idea.”

Paris was willing enough to stop fighting and listen. Aeneas drew close too. So did the other sons of Priam. And the fighting was eased again as the Trojans held a council on the field.

“We have fought valiantly this day,” said Hector. “And have prevented the Greeks from storming our walls, which was their intention this morning. So, in a sense, we have won the battle. In another sense we have not. Nor can we win any head-to-head battle with the Greeks. For if our losses be equal or anywhere near equal they will contribute toward our final defeat. The Greeks outnumber us, and we dare not match their losses, or even match half their losses, or by and by we shall find ourselves with no fighting men at all while they will have a force capable of taking the city. What I propose then is this: That I challenge one of their champions to single combat, and that the honors of the day rest upon the result. If I win I shall do this each day until either I shall have run through all their champions and so dishearten them that they must depart, or I myself am killed, leaving the decisions to someone else. Let me

add that the absence of Achilles should be no little help to this project.”

His words met with general favor. He stepped in front of the Trojan lines, and addressed the Greeks.

“Honorable foemen,” he said, “you have fought long and well upon this day, and have killed many of us. We have fought no less honorably and have killed many of you. But the sun sinks now and we have supplied the vultures with food enough for this day. Let me be a surrogate for the Trojan deaths, and choose you a champion who will meet me and be a surrogate for your deaths. Upon our combat let rest the honors of the day. If I lose, the victor may strip me of my armor, nor will any of my brothers oppose him. All I ask is that my body be returned to my father, Priam, for decent burning. But if the gods favor me in this combat, then I will act in the same way toward my fallen foe. Come, then—let me hear! Who of you will fight me? I await your reply.”

His voice blared like a trumpet across the lines, leaving silence after it. The Greek champions looked at each other. No one, it seemed, was rushing to volunteer. Finally, Menelaus dragged himself to his feet, and said:

“Well, I won one duel today. Maybe this is my day for winning. If none of you offers to fight him, then I must.”

But Agamemnon pulled him back.

“No, brother, not you. In plain words, if you fight Hector, you will die. The man belongs with the greatest warriors of all time.

Everyone acknowledges this. Even our own Achilles, for all his murderous pride, has never seen fit to engage Hector in single combat.”

“Someone must fight him!” cried Menelaus. “If not I, then someone else.”

“For shame!” cried old Nestor, rising and berating them in his dry voice like an angry cricket. “For shame ... How the generations have shrunk! There were mighty men in my day. How they would laugh and scoff to see you sitting here like a circle of schoolboys awaiting the master’s rod! Come ... if there is no one to volunteer then we must draw lots and let the gods choose.”

He took chips of wood and inscribed the names of the Greek champions—nine of them—the two Ajaxes, Teucer, Idomeneus, Diomedes, Ulysses, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Nestor’s own son, Antilochus, a very skillful charioteer. He shook the chips in his helmet, then selected one, read the name inscribed in a piercing voice.

“Ajax,” he said. “Ajax of Salamis. Known as the Great Ajax.”

To Hector, Ajax looked as big as Ares prowling out of the Greek lines. The westering sun cast his gigantic shadow back over the massed Greeks and, beyond them, over the beaked ships drawn up on the strand. His shield looked enormous as a chariot wheel. It was made of nine bullhides bound in brass. And he was using Ares’ own spear, twenty-feet long, its shaft made of a single ash-tree, which he had picked up after the god of war had dropped it upon

being wounded by Diomedes. Ajax was the only mortal large enough to wield this spear.

Hector did not wish to give Ajax a chance to hurl that huge spear, so he cast his own javelin first. It sped through the air and hit Ajax's spear, shattering its brass boss and penetrating all but the last bullhide. Ajax shivered like a tree under the blow of a woodman's axe, but he steadied himself, drew back his knotted arm and hurled Ares' spear. Now Hector was using a smaller shield—also made of bullhide bound in brass. He preferred a shield he could move about to cover himself rather than one to hide behind, because he depended more on speed and agility than size. When he saw the ash-tree lance hurtling through the air toward him he lifted his shield, which was immediately shattered by the spear. His left arm fell to his side, numb. But he swerved his body, avoiding the spearhead, and suffered only a scratch on his shoulder. But that cut spurting blood, and the Trojans groaned.

Ajax did not pose on his followthrough, but let it take him into a wild-boar rush upon his foe—his signature in battle. Hector barely had time to scoop up a boulder. He did not have time to hurl it, only bowled it across the ground. He cast it so skillfully that it took Ajax's legs out from under him, and the big man sprawled on the ground. Then Hector whipped out his sword and rushed toward the fallen Ajax to cut off his head.

Ajax, seeing him come, picked up the boulder which had felled him and, still lying on his back, hurled it at Hector. It hit him

on the breastplate and knocked him off his feet. Both men pulled themselves up and stepped toward each other, swords flashing. Blades clanged against breastplate and helmet. Ajax stood still, pivoting, aiming huge scything blows as Hector circled him, half-crouched, darting in and out, using edge and point. Both men were bruised, shaken, and bloody. Neither yet had the advantage.

It was at this point that Apollo intervened—without meaning to. He had not intended to meddle in the fighting. There had always been some coldness between him and father Zeus, and he did not dare defy the high god's orders the way Athena did. So, after his consultation with the owl-goddess, which had resulted in Hector's challenge and Ajax's reply, he had flown off to intercept his sun-chariot, which, in his absence, was being driven by Helios, his charioteer. The sun-god took Helios' place in the chariot, gathered the reins in one hand, and whipped up the fire-maned stallions. They set off in a swinging trot across the blue meadow of the sky, heading toward its western rim.

But when Apollo heard the shouting of Greek and Trojan far below, heard the clang of sword against shield, he dipped lower to watch the fighting. The duel was so exciting, he grew so fascinated that, for the first time in memory, he neglected his duties as the sun's coachman and allowed the stallions to stay in one spot grazing on the fluffy white cloud-blossoms. He kept the chariot reined in, burning a hole in the air, charring the earth below ... until he smelled something burning. He saw great clouds of smoke

pierced by dancing flames where the lingering coach had set forests ablaze. He put his horses to a gallop, leaving that place as quickly as he could, and fled, bright as a comet, toward the stables of night. But the land below had been charred over great distances, making a waste place which, today, men call the Sahara.

His gallop westward had drawn a curtain of night across the earth. Greek and Trojan, amazed, saw the afternoon sun drop like a red-hot coal, hissing, into the sea beyond the western wall of the city. Hector and Ajax groped for each other in darkness.

Heralds bearing long willow wands rushed forth from the Trojan lines and the Greek lines, calling:

“Night! Night! Sudden night! Leave off fighting and seek your tents, for the light has flown.”

This was the way they ended battles in those days.

Hector and Ajax stopped fighting. They felt the night wind on their hot brows. All at once, these duelling warriors who had avoided killing each other only by the blunder of a god, felt closer to each other than to anyone else on earth.

“Noble Hector,” said Ajax, “I have never met a worthier foe.”

“Nor have I, sir,” said Hector. “Truly I am glad that the light was so magically brief. I welcome this pause.”

“We shall resume tomorrow, no doubt,” said Ajax. “In the meantime let us sleep. But, pray, take this as a gift and a remembrance.”

He unbuckled a purple belt from about his waist. It was of thick, soft wool embroidered in gold and black with the figures of dolphins that play off Salamis, and do odd favors for men.

“Thank you, great Ajax. It is a beautiful cincture; I shall wear it proudly. But take you this. It has never been yielded, sir, but now it is freely given.”

Hector, then, whom a generous gesture always moved to an excess of generosity in return, handed Ajax his silver-hilted sword. The two warriors embraced, turned, and went back to their own lines as the first stars trembled steel-blue in the black sky.

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THUNDER ON THE RIGHT

MORNING LIGHT REVEALED THE battlefield so littered with corpses that Greek and Trojan agreed to a truce so that they might honor their dead, build pyres, offer to the gods, and consign the bodies to decent flame.

That morning, too, Zeus called a council of the gods on Olympus. All the members of the Pantheon were required to attend.

Zeus spoke: “Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, wife ... Many a time have I warned you, gathered here in sacred convocation, and individually to your faces, that I permit no direct intercession on the part of any god in the war below. We may keep our favorites, we may grant godlike dispensations and civilities from the privilege of our godheads, but we are not permitted to descend upon the field and actually handle arms like brawling mortals. Yet, as often as I have issued my edicts, that many times have they been disobeyed.

“Gods ... I am not accustomed to being disobeyed. The very notion violates not only my principles but my identity. There can be no Zeus where there is defiance of Zeus. You have violated my decrees, some of you, and have intervened on both sides of the battle. Only yesterday my eyes were offended by the unseemly spectacle of brother and sister actually spearing each other on the reeking plain. Do you not know that this is the way that gods

destroy themselves? Not by being conquered, not by invasion, through no act of foe, but by stooping beneath themselves—by behaving like mortals. To behave like a mortal is to forfeit immortality. To behave like that animal called man is to forfeit divinity. What is mankind to think when it sees Athena fighting with Ares—in other words, Wisdom in conflict with Warfare? Man seeing this can no longer be either wise or warlike. And since this race of man was created for our edification and amusement, such a falling away from the great creative principles of survival will provide us with an earthful of dull automata whose antics we will find most boring through eternity.

“I repeat my edict then, and for the last time. If I catch any of you, and I mean anyone, no matter who he is or what high domain he rules, if I catch any god or goddess directly aiding either Greek or Trojan, then I shall take that offender and cast him or her down into the depths of hell. Yes, I will plunge that one into the blackness of Hades. There I will fork him with the roots of a mountain, as a boy catches a snake in a cleft stick, so that he cannot budge, but must lie there with giant worms passing in and out of each eye-socket ... still alive, still possessing all his strength, all his desires, but unable to move, unable to turn or shift, unable to be comforted. And this through eternity ... Any questions?”

There was only silence.

Finally, Poseidon, who always stood on his dignity with his brother, Zeus, said: “Really ... these mortals and their affairs are so

petty. So unsavory. I don't see how any god can concern himself overmuch with this breed. Oh, we play favorites, to be sure. I suppose that I tend to prefer the Trojans simply because the Greeks have offended me more in times past. And yet ... really, to choose between them would be like discriminating among columns of ants as they converge upon a breadcrumb one has shaken from one's board."

Then, casting a sidelong glance at Zeus, he continued:

"Look at them now. Those Greeks are so arrogant and impious. Why they are building their funeral barrows and none of them has thought to sacrifice to Zeus, Lord of Life. Have the Trojans sacrificed to you, brother? Oh, yes, I believe they are doing so now. Aren't those white bulls they are slaughtering? Yes. Well, as I said, little there is to choose between them, yet the Trojans do seem a bit more courteous. But for a god to intercede? Folly ..."

Poseidon arose, shook the billows of his green garments, combed his beard with his fingers, and struck three times with his trident upon the marble floor, summoning a tidal wave which curled its awful cold, green tongue over Olympus. He slipped into the cusp of that enormous wave, and upon his command it subsided, rolling him down into the ocean depths where stood his castle of coral and pearl. But the sea-god left behind him, slyly kindled, a wrath in the heart of Zeus, because he had been given the idea that the Greeks had neglected sacrificing to him.

Dismissing the council after his tirade against intervention, Zeus decided to do a little something himself to discomfit the Greeks. He translated himself to Mt. Ida where he had a summer home. He sat on the peak of Ida looking down upon the battlefield. Poseidon's gibe had worked; he was full of rancor against the Greeks. Now Mt. Ida is to the north of Troy, and the Trojans faced westward as they tried to drive the Greeks into the sea, so that when Zeus thundered he thundered from the Trojan right, an ancient sign of good fortune. When Hector heard the thundering, he leaped to his feet and cried:

“Enough of truce, brothers! I hear thunder on the right! Hear it? It is a sign from Zeus; he favors us in the battle to come. So let it begin! To the attack!”

The Trojans armed themselves and began a furious attack upon the Greek positions, driving the Greeks backward upon their ships. Diomedes tried to lead a counterattack, and indeed breached the Trojan lines. His chariot was drawn by the marvellous team of Aeneas, and this get of the sun-stallions was faster than any horses ever foaled. But as he sped toward Hector, spear poised, Zeus spotted him, and hurled his lightning bolt. Thunder crashed. Lightning struck directly in front of Diomedes' chariot. There was an eerie flash, a suffocating smell of sulphur. The horses reared. Diomedes tried to whip them through the smoke, but Zeus threw another thunderbolt. Again the heavens crashed on the Trojans' right flank; again the searing flash of lightning in Diomedes' path;

again the sulphur stench. The stallions reared again, whinnying in fright. And Diomedes realized that Zeus had decided to favor the Trojans that day, or that hour. He reined in his steeds and drove back to the Greek lines.

Hector led another savage charge toward the ships. They were protected by a deep ditch, called a fosse. Behind the ditch were earthworks of sand. On top of the sand hummocks, and entrenched behind them, were Greeks. Hector and his brothers began to throw rocks into the fosse, and to throw planks across it, so that they could cross over. Sword in hand they fought their way over their rude bridges and began to climb the earthworks.

Watching from Olympus, Hera cried:

“My Greeks are being defeated! I can’t bear the sight of it! Will no god help me? Then I must go alone to save them.”

But Apollo said: “No, stepmother, it would not be prudent. Do not tempt the wrath of Zeus. Every word he said to us this morning was freighted with the promise of eternal humiliation and torment for the god who would defy him. I know him well. You should know him better. If he sees you crossing the sky in your chariot he will transfix you with a lightning bolt. Alas, I know those lightning bolts; I know how they can kill, for did he not slay two of my sons? You remember Phaeton, who borrowed my sun-chariot, and, careless youthful impetuous driver that he was, drove too high, too low, alternately scorching and freezing the earth. Yes, Zeus toppled him from his chariot with one cast of his fiery spear. And there was

some justice to it, I suppose; it is the duty of Zeus to protect his realms. But how cruelly and with what little cause did he send his shaft through my son, Asclepius, the marvellous physician, whose only transgression was that he saved so many of his patients from death that it displeased dark Hades, King of the Underworld, who saw himself being deprived of clients, and complained to his brother, Zeus. And Zeus complied by killing my wonderful son. So, stepmother, I beg you, do not dare that awful wrath. Do not attempt to help the Greeks. It is not their day today. Return to your peak, and abide the question.”

Hera was convinced. She returned to her peak and sorrowfully watched the Greeks being routed below. Now the Greeks were driven back upon their ships. If they allowed the Trojans to advance any further, the ships would surely be burned, and with them all hopes of sailing homeward ever again. Agamemnon tried to exhort his men, and his phrasing was as tactless as ever.

“Cowards!” he bellowed. “Empty braggarts. Are you those who claimed one Greek was worth a hundred Trojans? A hundred Trojans? Stand the numbers on their head and we may arrive at something more sensible. For have I not seen one Trojan, Hector, driving a hundred of you at spearpoint like a shepherd dog herding sheep?”

His voice broke into hoarse sobs. Tears streamed from his eyes. He turned his face to the sky, and said: “Oh, father Zeus, why are you punishing me so? Have I not always sacrificed bulls to you,

the very finest I could cull from my herd? Great white bulls with black eyes and polished horns and coral nostrils? Swaying broad-backed white oxen too? Or did I perchance by error neglect some sacrifice or libation to you? Is it for this your hand falls so heavily upon me and my men, delivering us to the enemy? Did not you yourself send me a dream bidding me attack the Trojans, promising me victory? Is this the price of my obedience? Oh, father Zeus, have mercy. Let me at least drive the Trojans a little way from my ships if you can vouchsafe me no greater victory.”

Although Zeus was still annoyed at the Greeks and still intent to keep his promise to Thetis that the Greeks would be denied victory until Agamemnon should plead for Achilles’ help, still he was touched by the Mycenaean king’s plea, and he relented a bit. This took the form of fresh courage firing the Greek hearts. Crude as Agamemnon’s words were, still the Greeks responded to his speech, and launched a counterattack. They hurled down the plank bridges, and drove the Trojans back from the lip of the fosse.

Teucer now became the most effective of the Hellenes. Hiding behind the enormous shield of his brother, Ajax, he shot arrow after arrow, and it was as if Zeus himself personally guided each shaft. He loosed nine arrows and each one of them killed a man. Nine Trojans fell, nine of the best. With his genius for saying the wrong thing, Agamemnon now rushed up to Teucer, crying:

“Hail, great archer! Every arrow you let fly kills another Trojan. But you must redouble your efforts. Snatch your arrows

faster from the quiver. Notch them more speedily to your bowstring, and shoot one after the other without delay. For you must kill as many Trojans as possible while Zeus smiles on you. His smiles are brief, as well we know.”

“Why flog a horse that is breaking his wind galloping for you?” said Teucer. “I cannot shoot any faster.”

“Certainly you can. You want an inducement. Listen ... I promise you this. As high king and commander of the forces I pledge that when finally we take and sack Troy you shall have the woman you choose for your very own, no matter how many princes contend for her, and may take your choice from among all the daughters of Priam, and the other beautiful maidens of the court.”

“Thank you for nothing,” said Teucer. “When we take Troy I’ll do my own choosing. Now please, king, break off this discourse, and let me continue to send my bolts into the ranks of the enemy. As we stand here talking they’re regrouping. If we linger like this the only thing we’ll be taking is a ferry across the Styx.”

And, sure enough, by the time he had notched another arrow to his bowstring, Hector had approached close enough to hurl a boulder that caught Teucer square, toppling him, and crushing his collarbone. That would have been the end of the superb little archer except that Diomedes scooped him up into his chariot and galloped with him to safety behind the Greek lines.

This was a turning point again. Zeus felt that he had responded sufficiently to Agamemnon's prayer, and withdrew his favor.

The Trojans crossed the fosse again and forced the Greeks step by step back toward their ships.

Hera, watching on high, was again seized by a savage dissatisfaction, with that imperious burning displeasure that was a hallmark of her character.

"Come, Athena!" she cried. "We must go help the Greeks!"

"No, father Zeus has forbidden it," said Athena.

"My conduct is defined by my neglect of his decrees," said Hera. "Am I a wife for nothing? Forbid it or not, we must go down there or the Greeks are doomed. And after all our efforts! It's intolerable!"

"Be patient but a little while, stepmother," said Athena. "I know that Zeus in the larger measure of things means to abide by his oath of neutrality. He, too, as much as any of us is bound by the anciently woven destiny of the Fates, who are older than the gods, and less changeable. He knows that Troy must fall."

"It will never fall while Trojans are killing Greeks," said Hera.

"Patience, mother. Zeus is but keeping the promise he made to Thetis, the silver-footed, that Greek fortunes would ebb until Agamemnon should be humbled and have to come to Achilles' tent to plead with him to drop his grudge and enter the lists again.

When that happens—and the time is drawing near—then Zeus will resume his impartiality and let the Fates work.”

“I can’t wait that long,” said Hera. “Or there will be nothing left down there but Trojans. If you don’t join me, I’m going alone.”

But Hera had no sooner climbed into her chariot than Zeus made his power felt. Before she had a chance to whip up her horses, swift-winged Iris, the messenger-goddess, flashed across the sky from Mt. Ida where she had been sitting at Zeus’ feet awaiting errands.

“Father Zeus is watching you,” she said. “He is listening. He sees and hears across great distances. He knows your intentions. And he instructs me to say that if the wheels of your chariot leave this peak you will be transfixed by a thunderbolt—which even now he holds poised, ready to hurl.”

Hera threw down her reins and pulled herself from the coach, weeping.

Athena tried to comfort her.

“Take heart, mother,” she said. “Night is falling, and the fighting must stop. Perhaps in the watches of the night, father Zeus will relent, and tomorrow turn his favor to the Greeks. Or, perhaps, allow *us* to aid them, if he will not. He is changeable, you know. His moods are brief as they are violent.”

Hera, still sobbing, allowed herself to be led into her chamber.

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NIGHT

SENTRIES WATCHING FROM THE walls of Troy were comforted by the sight of a hundred fires burning on the beach. Trojan fires. This meant that the Trojans had penned the Greeks onto a narrow marge between forest and ocean. Hector ranged among the fires exhorting his men.

“Tomorrow!” he cried. “Tomorrow is our day! I feel it in my heart. Tomorrow we will finish what we have begun so well today. We will force them back, back, back upon their ships and slay them every one. We will teach haughty invaders never again to dare the beaches of Troy.”

On the Greek side, the scene was much different. Dismay hung like a pall, and no watchfires gleamed. But a solemn conclave was going on in Agamemnon’s tent.

“Kings and princes,” he said. “Members of the Council ... I pray your forgiveness. As commander, I must take supreme responsibility for our defeat. And now I ask for your advice. Do you think we should try to save what we can ... that is, launch our ships under cover of night—this night I mean—and sail for home? Tomorrow, remember, the enemy may cross the ditch and burn our ships, cutting off our retreat. That is the question we must resolve here and now. Do we depart tonight or gird ourselves for tomorrow, knowing that this morrow may be our last among the living?”

Diomedes spoke briefly: “The rest of you can leave, everyone, but I stay. I and my charioteer, Sthelenus. If all the rest of you go, together we will mount the chariot and drive Aeneas’ wonderful horses against the Trojans, killing as many as we can, before we are killed in our turn. If you want my real recommendation, Agamemnon, it would be for us to burn the ships ourselves tonight, cutting off our own retreat, and giving every doubter among us the great gift of no alternative. Better to be cut down here like men than to skulk home, defeated, dishonored, disgraced.”

“Diomedes, you are a very young man,” said Nestor, “but you speak like a sage. Your words are golden, my boy. Golden. I cannot quite hold with you on burning our ships, but this much is sure, we must not sail home tonight. Of course, we must stay and fight. And, by the gods, if we face the enemy without dismay, we will win. For the Fates have foretold it. And their decree not even the gods may alter. But I have this to say: We must decide on a very important step tonight. By this I mean we must coax Achilles back into the fold. Agamemnon, the burden is yours. You must apologize to him and make amends, and I know how this will torment your proud spirit. But you have no choice, truly. You must take upon yourself that humiliation; must eat your arrogant words, return the slave girl you took from him, and give him rich compensation besides. Then, perhaps, we can persuade him to fight tomorrow. My Lord Agamemnon, this is absolutely necessary. Without Achilles we are just an army; with him we are an irresistible force.”

Agamemnon spoke: “Honorable Nestor, dear sage, adept councillor, I speak no word in objection. I will humble my spirit and do everything necessary to persuade Achilles to join our ranks once again. I was wrong to quarrel with him, wrong to take the tall Briseis ... wrong, wrong, wrong! I can ascribe my actions only to some hostile god addling my wits, and doing us more harm thereby than if he had supplied the Trojans with a company of slingers, a company of archers, and a cavalry troop. Now I have come to my senses again. Harsh defeat has restored my balance. I see how misguided I was—and this is what I propose to do for Achilles if he consents to stand beside us tomorrow. Hark now to my gifts of appeasement. First, cooking ware, rich enough to prepare a feast for the gods: seven bronze kettles, twenty huge pots of burnished copper, each of them big enough to boil an ox in. Ten gold ingots, each of them weighing almost a hundred pounds. Six teams of matched stallions that in a chariot race would press the sun-bred stallions of Aeneas. Seven girl slaves, the most beautiful of all those captured in nine years of island raiding, all of them contortionists, and very good at embroidery too. Lastly, I shall return to him tall Briseis—and with her my oath that she comes back into his hands untouched by me.

“Generous? Yes. But this is only the start, good sirs. When we return to Greece I shall bestow upon him other gifts, beyond the dream of avarice. I shall consider him my son, an elder brother to Orestes, with all the privileges appertaining to a prince royal in

Mycenae. He will choose a wife from among my two beautiful daughters; her dowry will be seven cities, the richest in the land. I pray you, inform Achilles of my offer, and bring me his answer.”

“Very well,” said Nestor. “And on behalf of the War Council let me thank you for the remarkable generosity you now display. I have no doubt it will make Achilles forget the insults he suffered at your hands. I propose that the overtures be made to him by the men he respects most: Phoenix his old tutor, Ulysses, and Ajax. And I myself will accompany these three, for, in all modesty, he esteems me also.”

When the delegation came to the tent of Achilles they found a very peaceful scene. There was a driftwood fire burning, and the smell of roasting meat. Achilles was playing a silver-chased lyre and singing a boar-hunt song of Phthia. Patroclus lay back listening dreamily. Achilles sprang to his feet when he saw his guests. He embraced them, calling to Patroclus:

“See, my friend, how we are honored. Our companions, battle-weary, come to visit us. instead of refreshing themselves with sleep.”

“Oh, son of Peleus,” said Patroclus. “I believe you misread their intent. They come not to exchange amenities, nor pass the time; not even to indulge themselves in your warm hospitality. They come on business, grim business. Am I right, friends?”

“Your wits have always been as sharp as your sword, good Patroclus,” said Ulysses, “and, unlike your sword, have been given

no chance to grow rusty. Yes, we come on business. Grim business. Survival is always a grim affair. And it is particularly grim when your enemies have you penned on a narrow stretch of beach threatening to slaughter you like cattle and burn your ships.”

“Business or not, grim or not,” boomed Achilles, “nevertheless we shall preserve the amenities. You have come on a visit to my tent, and it is my custom to feed visitors. Patroclus, will you do the honors of the table, sir?”

Patroclus served the savory roast meat and the rich purple wine. Greedily, the guests fell to. Agamemnon had neglected to feed them at the Council. When they had fed, Achilles said: “Now, sirs, say to me what you will. I am all attention.”

Then Ulysses, always the spokesman in any delegation, told Achilles how greatly Agamemnon desired to make amends, and the rich gifts he was offering.

Achilles answered, saying: “If anything could persuade me to drop my feud with Agamemnon and join battle against the Trojans, it would not be his bribes, but the feelings of comradeship, respect, and affection I have for you, great Ulysses—and you Ajax, you Nestor, and you, Phoenix, beloved friend and mentor. Nevertheless my answer must be no. I loathe and despise Agamemnon. In open meeting before all the troops, he insulted me repeatedly; spoke to me as if I were the seediest of camp-followers. He laid rude hands upon Briseis and dragged her away. So, my friends, when you report back to him, tell him to keep his cook-pots and his ingots

and his talented slave girls and his seven cities in Mycenae. As for his kind offer to wed me to one of his daughters, I can say only this: I have not met either of the two young ladies. I hope for their own sakes they resemble their mother Clytemnestra, or their aunt Helen. Nevertheless, heredity is a quirky thing. Lineaments and traits of personality have been known to skip generations. Ask my lord Agamemnon if he thinks I would risk having a son or daughter with his pig face and verminous disposition. No, gentlemen. The answer is no. Tomorrow, at dawn, my Myrmidons and I board our ships and sail away to Phthia. Patroclus comes with me. And you, Phoenix, old teacher, do not stay and sacrifice yourself in this vain war, but come on board my ship and sail home with me.”

Phoenix could not speak; his voice was strangled with tears. He simply nodded to Achilles, and embraced Nestor and Ulysses and Ajax in farewell. They said not a word in protest, knowing it would be futile, but took courteous leave of Achilles, and left his tent.

ON THE WALL

IT WAS AS THOUGH the gods, heavy with business, had pressed the sky low that night between battles. The stars hung low, pulsing, each one big as a moon; the moon itself was a golden brooch pinning the folds of darkness that were night's cloak. The gleaming watchfires on the field looked like star-images dancing in water; standing on the west wall it was hard to tell where the sea ended and the beach began. Under the immense jewelry of the summer night lay the corpses of the day's fighting: bodies pierced and broken; smashed heads of beautiful young men; severed arms and legs. They bulked strangely now; they were heaped shadows. Pools of blood stank and glistened in the moonlight. Birds came down to drink. The night is beautiful on the Dardanian plain when the sky presses low, flaunting its jewelry. A night not to sleep in, though you be battle-weary, or love-weary, or devilled by hope, or torn by fear. On both sides of the fosse men seethed restlessly. Men and women still lingered on the walls of Troy where they had watched the battle all day. Usually, by night, the walls were bare of all save sentries, but this night pressed with too many hot lights; people trying to sleep were pressed between flaming sky and reeking earth, and were tormented by dreams that drove them from sleep.

Helen and Cressida lingered on the wall. They were wrapped in long cloaks; their faces glimmered in the weird light.

“I have been wanting to talk to you,” said Cressida.

“Indeed?” said Helen, frowning slightly.

She was the daughter of kings and the wife of a king, paramour of a prince, and was being fought for by all the kings of Greece. She was proud. And Cressida was only a priest’s daughter—but recently a slave in Agamemnon’s tent. The difference was great between them.

“Forgive me for addressing you so familiarly, Queen Helen,” said Cressida in her odd furry voice. “I know the distance between us. But, you know, you are a heroine, a demi-goddess. When you go out on the streets of Troy not only princes admire, but the populace cheers itself hoarse too. I am not too humble to esteem you. And, being here on the wall with you this way, after a day of such sights, I cannot forbear from addressing you. There is something old in our hearts that tells us wisdom is allied to beauty. And I need wise counsel.”

“Nay, put aside these ceremonial forms of address,” said Helen, reaching her long arm and putting her hand on Cressida’s shoulder. “We are two women together.” For admiration was soul’s food to Helen, and the clever words of Cressida fired her vanity and made her ignore social distinctions.

“Two women together,” murmured Cressida. “Yes. And we have watched the battle all day. With what mixed feelings women watch. Men are lucky; they’re so simple; their alternatives are so crude. Kill or be killed. Good or bad. Noble or cowardly. Their

simplicity is what gives them power over us, O Queen of Sparta. For we are poor weak divided creatures, torn by distinctions. We see our loved ones fighting, and we want them home safe. Yet, if they kill—and they must kill or be killed—it is other beautiful young men they are destroying. It is a waste. And waste is what women cannot abide. We hate to see things thrown out while there is still use in them. And there was use in those young bodies, glorious hot-blooded use. Forgive my babbling, Queen, but I am more affected than others, I suppose, because, as you know, I lived among the Greeks. There were no strangers to me today on either side of the fighting.”

“You forget,” said Helen. “I, too, know Trojan and Greek.”

“It is different with you now, beautiful queen. For your heart and soul reside in that radiant young prince, Paris. And you must whole-heartedly follow his fortunes ...”

A strange voice broke in.

“But will she follow her prince to Hades—where he must soon go by reason of her foul enticements?”

It was Cassandra. Almost invisible because she was clothed in black, but her eyes, like a cat’s, were burning holes in the darkness.

“You know my little sister-in-law, no doubt,” said Helen. “And do not feel offended. What would be the most unpardonable rudeness in anyone else is genius in her. The sign of genius, apparently, is a systematic and ruthless discourtesy.”

“You have good reason to dislike me,” said Cassandra. “The moment I saw you I knew you meant the destruction of Troy. Every breath you exhale poisons Ilium. Every glitter of your leman’s eye kindles a flame for that night of flame when Troy will be sacked. In your voice that coo of love is the death-rattle of brave men.”

“You see how wise one is in accepting flattery when it comes,” said Helen to Cressida. “So soon afterward one hears something else.”

“Good Cassandra,” said Cressida. “On such a night, between battles, when the darkness itself seems pregnant with events struggling to be born, on such a night, there is an appetite, I think, for prophecy more than for food or drink or love. Tell us what will happen—who will be killed tomorrow and who survive? Will the Trojans drive the Greeks to the sea and burn their ships? Will the Greeks drive back the Trojans and storm these walls? Will Achilles return to the fray? Will Hector rage again like a lion in the field? And what of Paris? And young Troilus—so like Paris in beauty of face and form, yet shy where his brother is bold—what of him? He escaped death by a hairbreadth today; will he be as fortunate tomorrow?”

Helen was gazing at the moon, seemingly absent, but listening hard all the same. For she recognized in these last words of Cressida not an address to Cassandra but a message to herself. Cressida fancied young Troilus among all the Trojan men, and was

obliquely asking Helen to drop a hint to the lad, the most naive and inexperienced of all Priam's fifty sons.

"Do not plague me with your sordid little queries," said Cassandra to Cressida. "You say one thing but mean another. You seek to entrap my brother, Troilus."

"I do not understand what you mean, dear Cassandra," murmured Cressida. "But then it is said that you often prophesy in riddles. Are you doing that now—riddling us? Please tell us what will happen in the battle tomorrow. But in plain words."

"In plain words, shut up," said Cassandra. "I will not speak of the battle tomorrow. I will not speak at all. But wait. I do see something. A bloody thing is about to happen right now. Not tomorrow, *now*. My vision, god-poisoned, pierces distance. I see Ulysses and Diomedes preparing for a foray."

"Diomedes," said Cressida. "A very likely man. He was another Achilles in the field today. He seemed like a god descended, bright as a star. I've never seen anything like it."

"Yes," said Helen. "He is too young to have been one of my suitors. Today I rather regretted it. He put on a remarkable performance. Remarkable."

Cassandra went on: "Ulysses dons a skullcap of boarhide and a half cloak of polished boarhide to serve as an arrow-proof vest. Diomedes, despite the warmth of the night, wraps himself in a wolfskin cloak. They costume themselves like this to cast bulky shadows, for the moon is very bright, and they wish to steal among

our men—and Ulysses is a master of artifice. They carry short hunting spears, and knives at their belts—no swords to rattle against their legs. No bows and arrows, for they will be working in close. They seek to raid our lines and capture a Trojan and extract information from him. And into the jaws of this trap the gods are sending one of our officers named Dolon. He seeks to invoke the aid of darkness by putting on a moleskin cloak and moleskin cap. For moles are blind and cannot see, and their hide, he believes, will protect him from being seen as he scouts out the Greek positions. Foolishness. The whole art of magic is the exchange of attributes through invocation, and he has no magic. Poor Dolon ... he must die.”

Cassandra paused. Unwinkingly her cat’s eyes burned holes in the darkness.

“Tell ... tell ...” whispered Helen. “What are they doing? Please tell. ...”

Cassandra resumed her tale in a low monotonous voice. She cared nothing for her listeners—she never cared for listeners—she told things to herself, but she knew that others overheard. “The Greeks pick their way among fallen bodies and pools of blood. At their approach, birds flutter away. When they pass by, the birds return to drink. There is a rustling as rats scurry amid the corpses. Oh, things of night do feed richly upon the battle’s fruit.”

She fell silent again and the others, listening, thought they heard rats gnawing and birds sipping. And these tiny sounds were

the most terrible they had ever heard.

“Listen well, my slothful sisters, and I will tell you a tale of this busy night ... of this vast and starry bloody night. Ulysses and Diomedes pick their way among corpses to spy upon the Trojan lines, while Dolon skirts pools of blood to spy upon the Greeks. They will meet, they will meet, and sad will be the tale thereof. For Dolon knows a secret. Upon this night allies have come to join our forces. King Rhesus of Thrace with a thousand henchmen—from that land behind the north wind where men grow large and fierce. Drawing the chariot of King Rhesus is a pair of horses unmatched by any in the world except those that Diomedes took from Aeneas earlier today—a pair of milk-white mares, sired by Pegasus upon one of the white-maned gray mares that draws Poseidon’s chariot when he raids the beaches.

“And their coming should be a joy to us. O Watchers upon the Wall, sisters, the coming of Rhesus should be an occasion for rejoicing. For anciently it has been told that our city cannot fall once these mares drink of our river. Once these thirsty steeds dip their muzzles into the waters of the Scamander and drink therefrom, the walls of Troy must stand and its inhabitants be undisturbed. Will Rhesus arise in the rose and pearl dawn of the Dardanian plain? Will he start the bronze dust as he drives his chariot toward the Scamander and allows his mares to drink before the thirsty work of battle begins? Alas, alas, Dolon knows that the Thracians have come with Rhesus at their head. He knows they

guard the right flank, that they have put out no sentries, and that they sleep soundly after their exhausting journey. He knows the tale of the prophecy. Dolon steps quietly. But Ulysses has ears like a fox; he hears someone coming. He pulls Diomedes into the shade of a tamarisk tree, and there they wait. They seize Dolon when he comes. Yes ... now they have him. He has fallen into their jaws like a mole taken by a night-running hound. They tie him to the bole of the tamarisk tree. He pleads with them; they do not answer, but speak to each other in grunts. Now he is ready. Ulysses takes out his knife, saying: 'We are Greeks. We are after information. You will please answer what we ask or we will carve you like a joint of meat. You are dead already, you see, because we will not leave you alive. But you can spare yourself some pain. Why not spend your last minutes without pain?'

"Dolon sobs. He is a brave man, but not brave enough for this. He is brave in the sunlight, but now they are under the cold lamp of the moon. He has been ambushed by shadows, by men big as shadows who speak to him in a strange yet understandable language, saying nightmare things.

"Diomedes grows impatient while Dolon hesitates. He wields his knife and slices a finger off Dolon's hand. Dolon's screams are stifled by Ulysses' hand clapped over his mouth.

" 'That hurts, does it?' says Diomedes. 'Don't forget you have ten of those, not to mention your toes. Why don't you tell us what we want to know?'

“Dolon cannot bear this; few men could. He begins to babble away telling them more than they wish to know. Ulysses slaps him across the face, bidding him be still and just answer the questions.

“ ‘Have you posted sentries?’

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘Why not?’

“ ‘We thought you were too beaten, too disheartened to make any forays this night.’

“ ‘How are you encamped? What are the disposition of your forces?’

“ ‘We Trojans hold the center. To the left, toward the sea, lie the Lelegians, the Cauconians. On the left flank are those raiders from Crete, the sea-harassing Pelasgians. To the right of us are stationed the Lycians, the Mysians, the Phrygians and Maeonians. On the extreme right flank are those newcomers, the Thracians, under King Rhesus.’

“ ‘The Thracians? Are you sure?’ said Ulysses. ‘I know of no Thracians here.’

“ ‘They have joined us only tonight. I was a member of the welcoming party. Pray let me go, good sirs. My father is the herald, Eumedes, and heralds grow rich in times of war. He will pay a large ransom for me. I will tell you what I know, but then let me go.’

“Diomedes prods him with the point of his dagger.

“ ‘Speak on,’ he says. “Who leads these Thracians?’

“ ‘I told you, King Rhesus.’

“ ‘Is he accounted a good fighter, this Rhesus?’

“ ‘The finest. Ranks with the best. And, in a chariot, is perhaps the very best. For his steeds are matchless.’

“ ‘Indeed?’ asks Diomedes. ‘Better than those of Aeneas?’

“ ‘As good, as good. Some say better. They were sired by Pegasus upon one of Poseidon’s own surf-mares. They are tall and they run like the wind. And his chariot is made of silver and gold with brass wheels—and his axis sprouts six long knives which scythe down the enemy. Am I not a good informant, O captors? Pray, accept a ransom and let me go.’

“ ‘But how many men does he lead?’

“ ‘A thousand Thracians come with him. But best of all ... I know something else! Don’t kill me yet, don’t kill me yet! I have something else to tell!’

“ ‘Tell away. The night grows old, and our patience short.’

“ ‘Don’t kill me yet, not yet! Just listen to this!’ ”

Cassandra broke off her tale, eyes huge and staring.

“Go on ... go on,” cried Helen.

“Don’t stop now ... Tell. Please tell,” whispered Cressida.

“Oh, no!” muttered Cassandra to herself, pressing her knuckles against her mouth. “He must not! No, Dolon, do not tell them! Do not inform them of the prophecy! It will be fatal! ... Oh, coward! He tells! He tells! ...”

“Tells what?” cried Helen.

“What I told you, you fat-hipped fool! Has it fled your memory so soon? The prophecy concerning the mares of Rhesus—that if they drink of the Scamander’s waters, Troy shall not fall. He tells this to Diomedes and Ulysses; that is all they have to know. Ulysses thanks him and signals to Diomedes who, with one swift movement, cuts Dolon’s throat as if he were a sheep. They leave him bound to the tamarisk tree, and set off to their left—toward the extreme right flank of our lines—where sleep Rhesus, the Thracian host, and the fatal mares.”

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POSEIDON DECIDES

THE GOD OF THE sea was vexed. Unlike the other gods he had held himself aloof from this war. He had preened himself on being so far above the affairs of petty mortals that he might not stoop to take a hand in their quarrels. This was a unique position in the Pantheon; all the other gods had lined up one way or the other. And, for a while, this sense of uniqueness served his pride. But now of late he had felt a difference. The combatants, Trojan and Greek, offered him fewer prayers, less sacrifices, adorned his statues more meagerly, built him fewer altars. They implored his intercession only in specific sea matters—voyages, piracies, and the like. But this had developed into a land war, so Poseidon was feeling neglected.

“All because of my impartiality,” he raged to himself. “An attribute I have always held truly divine. Instead of being thankful that I do not meddle in their battles, killing this one, saving that one, turning all their plans awry—instead of being thankful for my benign indifference, they have dared to neglect *me*. The Trojans, knowing that Athena is against them, sacrifice to her constantly. But yesterday Hector sent all the women of Troy in great droves, led by Hecuba, to the Palladium to pray to Athena to turn a less furious face upon them. Similarly, the Hellenes court Apollo, who favors the Trojans. Yes, they pray and sacrifice to him and to his

cold sister, and to that blundering bully, Ares. They crawl to all the gods who favor Troy. The Trojans again fill the air with supplications to Hera, whom they know loathes them. It's getting so a god has to punish a nation to get its respect. Well, I'm weary of being neglected. I shall take sides too. Those I favor shall thank me, those I mistreat shall implore me ... Yes, I shall have my mead of mortal attention—without which, it is curious to say, we gods, even the most powerful of us, are apt to shrivel and waste.

“Now who shall it be—Trojan or Greek? Very difficult. No instantaneous bias suggests itself, only a mild dislike for each.”

The trouble here was that Poseidon for all his tempestuous bluster had a strong feminine side to his nature. He was incapable of loving or hating people in groups. Generalization irked him. He could form a powerful attachment to an individual—as he had to Theseus, for instance, said to have been his son—and keep an eye on him through all circumstance and crown his deeds with glory. Or, far more often, he could hold an implacable grudge against someone, and pursue him with storm, tidal wave, sea-monster, every type of marine catastrophe. But, as he thought about things, he found himself incapable of preferring either Greek or Trojan en masse.

“Let's see,” he said. “Let me consider this carefully. Certainly I can find cause to favor one side or the other ...

“Greek or Trojan, Trojan or Greek? Shall I have to draw straws? Seems a paltry device to decide such potent favor. Perhaps

I should consult my preferences among the gods—who have all involved themselves in this fray. Here again it is very difficult. I have reason to dislike all my brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. My sister, Demeter, has always pleased me the most, I suppose. On the other hand, she takes least interest in this war among all the Pantheon. She dislikes war too much. It means the destruction of crops, whoever wins. And she is the Lady of Growing Things.

“I have this old feud with Athena, and her espousal of the Greeks might lead me to choose the Trojans. Against this, though, those mealy mouthed, high-stepping twins, Apollo and Artemis, help Troy, and I should not wish to be on the same side of any question as they are. Apollo’s flaming nuisance of a chariot parches my waters whenever it can catch them in shallow pools. While that grasping, bare-thighed, male-hating icicle sister of his has the gall to meddle with my tides. Her keen whistle pierces to the underwater kennels where the seadogs sleep. She summons them, leashes them with a chain of silver light, and swings them high, low, despite my dominion of the sea. Her I will destroy one day. I don’t quite know how, but I will find a way.

“Difficult ... most difficult question. Quite gives me a headache.”

And he spit a tidal wave that covered an ancient island with a wall of water a hundred feet high. When the wave subsided the island had disappeared, and has never been seen since.

All this time he had been hovering over the face of the waters. Now he whistled up his chariot—not the beach-raiding one drawn by his white-maned gray mares, but the sleek green sea-going chariot drawn by dolphins. He sped to his palace of coral and pearl. Seated on his great throne, which was of whalebone lined with mother-of-pearl, he felt more at ease, and resumed his thought.

“I am unable to decide this way,” he said to himself. “That is clear. Perhaps it is better so. Weighing this, calculating thus, that has never been my style. My rage is storm. My kindness a fall of light, sudden bliss of blue weather. I am sudden, capricious, king of tempest. The sea itself takes its famous changableness from my moods. I shall watch the battle then as it shapes up this morning and, as I watch, take inspiration from what I see. Yes ... that will relieve me of this head-splitting meditation, and provide some diversion also. For I find uncertainty pleasing—and have always diced with dead men’s bones. Very well, then, I shall watch the battle, and decide. And woe be to the forces, Greek or Trojan, whom I decide against.”

He took a great bowl made from a single chrysoprase, the largest in all the world. It is a light-green jewel pure as a child’s eye holding much light. This bowl of chrysoprase he filled with clear water. And, watching the water, and thinking about the Dardanian plain, he saw cloudy pictures form and dissolve, and they were the images of battle.

Poseidon, like all gods, was intensely amused by the sight of men fighting. The fiercer the fighting, the more he enjoyed it. A good killing sent him into peals of laughter. This laughter of the gods at the sight of death and suffering is sometimes dimly heard by men—as a natural sound, usually, the wind howling on a peculiar note, the cry of an owl striking, a scream out of nowhere waking the sleeper who tries to identify it, and fails.

Thus, Poseidon, on his whalebone and nacre throne, rocked with laughter as he saw the battle rage on the Dardanian plain. He saw the cloudy images form and dissolve in his bowl of pure water. So much blood was spilled in these scenes that the bowl was tinged with red, and this pleased Poseidon.

He saw Agamemnon, clad in gorgeous armor, goaded to fury by the whisper of Athena. Agamemnon clove the Trojan ranks, thrusting with his long spear, shearing through shield, breastplate, helmet—crushing bone, drinking blood.

“How gaudy he is, this commander,” said Poseidon to himself. “This wild boar from Mycenae who cannot utter a word without creating dissension; how splendidly he is clad, and how splendidly he fights, to be sure. Marvellous his armor. Of lapis lazuli, of bronze, and of pure beaten tin. He glitters like a beetle on the dusty plain. And, like a beetle, he can be crushed.”

Just as Poseidon said these words the picture in the green bowl dissolved from that of Agamemnon spearing the elder son of Antenor, to a picture of the younger son of Antenor spearing

Agamemnon. The younger son, Choön, drove his spear through the king's shoulder. Agamemnon's counterthrust pierced the lad's eye-socket, and split his skull. But Agamemnon, bleeding sorely, was forced from the field.

Grinning, Poseidon signalled to a naiad, who took up the bowl and poured out the blood-tinged water, and refilled it with clean water and returned it to the laughing god. Now Poseidon, conning the waters in the bowl, saw Hector rally the Trojans for a counterattack that carried them back over the field half-way to the fosse.

Here at the lip of the fosse the best of the Greeks took a stand against the Trojan's hurricane charge. Diomedes flung a rock at Hector that crushed the crest of his helmet and hurled him to earth, stunned. But Aeneas straddled the fallen Hector and covered him with his shield, and Diomedes could not follow up his advantage. Such was the fever of combat burning in Hector that his dizziness fled, and he sprang to his feet, ready to fight again. As Diomedes hesitated, seeking a way to get at Hector, Paris slithered near. Sheltering behind a tree, he notched an arrow to his bowstring, and let fly. It was a splendid shot. Had he ventured closer before shooting he would have killed Diomedes, but the tree was a long bowshot away, and the arrow struck downward, piercing Diomedes' foot, pinning it to the ground. Seeing that Diomedes could not get at him, Paris laughed, and came closer, fitting another arrow to his string.

“It was you, was it, prince of sneaks!” roared Diomedes. “Hiding behind a tree like a mountain bandit, and shooting arrows at your betters. Miserable ambusher! Puling abductor! Dare to come within my reach. Dare to meet me with spear or sword!”

Diomedes stooped and pulled the arrow out of his foot despite the awful pain of the barb tearing backward through his flesh. Paris was so disconcerted at this stoic feat that he melted into the crowd again without shooting his second arrow. But Diomedes had lost much blood; he had to quit the battle.

Now Hector, flanked by Troilus and Aeneas, swept like a brushfire along the bank of the Scamander where the Thesalians were making a stand.

Paris had hastened to join this group because he preferred to shelter himself behind an impenetrable hedge of such shields. But he was welcome. His archery was inspired. It was as if Apollo himself had tutored him in bowmanship between one day’s fighting and the next. Every arrow he shot found its target in Greek flesh. He sent a shaft through the shoulder of Machaon, who fell where he stood. A shout of despair arose from the Thesalians. Machaon was their king; not only their king, but the most able healer in the Greek camp. Son of Aesclepius himself, he had been taught by the great surgeon, and had mastered his father’s art. This made him a grandson of Apollo, of course, but he had lost Apollo’s favor by fighting on the wrong side.

It was old Nestor who leaped out of his chariot and lifted the fallen Machaon, and drove him safely back to the Greek lines. But the Thesalians were disheartened by the loss of their leader and would have crumbled before the Trojan charge had not Great Ajax come rushing up, and rallied their wavering ranks with a loud war-cry.

All this time Poseidon was watching the battle in the visionary waters of his bowl. Octopi wrestled beyond the huge windows set in his palace of coral and pearl. Sharks glided, smiling their hunger. Shoals of long-legged naiads swam by, hair floating. Balloon-fish, giant rays, the artful twisted glyph, the only sea-creature that can outmaneuver an eel. All the rich traffic of the sea swam past his window—which he so loved in his ordinary hours, but which he failed to notice now, absorbed as he was in the shifting images of battle.

He saw Ajax standing among the broken Thesalians, steady as a rock, with streams of Trojans dividing upon him as waves break upon a rock. The Thesalians gave ground; the Trojans swarmed. Ajax, for all his huge strength, was about to be overwhelmed. Then Poseidon's heart bounded with pleasure as he saw Ulysses storm up in a chariot drawn by a pair of magnificent mares. Milk-white they were with black manes and brass hooves.

“How did Ulysses come by that team?” said Poseidon to himself. “They belong to Rhesus. They are the get of my own surf-

mares, sired upon them by Pegasus. But he could not be driving them, and Rhesus alive. What could have happened?”

He shook the waters in the bowl until they darkened into images of the night before. He saw Ulysses and Diomedes, acting upon the information they had tortured out of Dolon, steal into the Thracian lines, cut the throats of Rhesus and twelve companions, leap into his chariot and whip up the beautiful steeds to a windlike rush back beyond the fosse.

“So that’s how they did it,” said Poseidon to himself. “What devils they are, those two—crafty, bold, imaginative, ruthless. How can the Trojans possibly stand against such men; how could they have withstood them for nine years? Zeus secretly helps the Trojans; that’s the only explanation. Despite his oath of neutrality he is sending signs and portents to hearten the Dardanians beyond the limits of their own mortal strength. And yet he threatens with awful punishment any of the other gods who intercede.”

Poseidon shook the waters in the bowl again, and returned to the day’s fighting. Ajax and Ulysses, shields locked, were making a stand on the banks of the Scamander. But they had each suffered wounds, and, step by step, were being forced back. Finally, Ulysses grasped Ajax, who was more seriously wounded, about his waist, thick as the trunk of a tree, and with an enormous effort hauled the giant into his chariot. Then he whipped up the white mares, who galloped so fast it seemed they were flying. With one bound they

leaped the Scamander, pulling the chariot through the air after them, and sped behind the Greek lines.

But now the Trojans were free to ford the river, storm the fosse, break the ramparts, and burn the ships. With the flight of Ulysses and Ajax, with Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Machaon wounded—and Achilles still refusing to fight—the battle had definitely turned in favor of the Trojans.

But now Poseidon had decided. He could not retrace the process by which he had made the decision—but he recognized an enormous urgent partiality toward the Greeks. He lost no time. He sent a message by a naiad who swam underwater to a marg of the Inner Sea where a river cuts its way to the shore. There the naiad rose to the surface and sang a summoning song, which was answered by a nereid, a river nymph. She arose, tall, naked, brown-haired, and dripping, to meet her green-haired cousin. The naiad whispered the message to the nereid who swam upstream to the source of the river—a spring on the slope of the mountain. She arose from the water, sleek as an otter, and sang a summoning song. A song answered—far and coming near. Running over the fields came a troop of dryads or wood-nymphs. The nereid spoke to their leader, a tall, black-haired nymph with suave satiny muscles tightening her brown skin.

“I will bear the message, cousin,” cried the dryad, laughing.

She ran up the slope again, followed by her troop, screaming and laughing. The nereid watched them until they disappeared into

a grove of trees, then dived back into the river and floated downstream. The tall dryad ran to a certain grove on the slope of Olympus where she knew Hera was wont to hunt. There she found the goddess holding a hooded falcon on her wrist, instructing it—which she did quite fluently. She was queen of the air and spoke the language of falcons and of all birds. The dryad knelt before her.

“A message from Poseidon, oh queen.”

“What have you to do with Poseidon, hussy?” cried Hera, who, like her falcon, would not be in good humor until their first kill. “Has he been hunting on these slopes again? Does he not have naiads aplenty that he must seek my dryads of the Sacred Grove? Why, he’s as insatiable as his elder brother, if that is possible.”

“Pardon me, queen,” said the Dryad. “But I was not given this message by him, personally. It was brought by a nereid who swam upstream from the Inner Sea—and she had it from a naiad sent by the Lord of the Deep with this message to be given to you, and you alone.”

“What is it?”

“He wishes to meet with you on a matter of much urgency. He will meet you halfway on the isle of Patmos.”

“Urgent for him or for me?”

“A most important affair,” he said, “which he could confide to your ear alone, but that you would rejoice to hear.”

“Thank you then for the message,” said Hera.

She uncinched the falcon from her wrist, and gave it to the dryad.

“Take him back to the palace for me. Catch a rabbit and feed it to him, fur and all. But take care of your fingers.”

Hera whistled. A chariot appeared, drawn by eagles. She mounted the chariot, uttered a piercing eagle scream, and sped away off the mountain toward the blue puddle of the sea.

Poseidon’s residence on Patmos was a great cave. He received Hera very courteously.

“Sister, forgive me for bringing you this distance. Had I come to visit you on Olympus, the wrong ear might have heard us speak, and a tattling tongue borne our business to Zeus.”

“Ah, this is to be a secret from Zeus then,” said Hera.

“A heavy secret. Heavy enough to crush us both ... if we are not prudent. I have observed, sister, that your husband has broken his oath of neutrality in this war between Trojan and Greek, and has now tipped the balance in favor of the Trojans ... though their numbers be fewer and their heroes less splendid. So I, who abhor dishonest dealing, have resolved to abandon my own posture of impartiality—by which, you know, I have truly abided, alone among the gods—and to cast my influence on the side of the Greeks, whom, I know, you favor also.”

“That is well known,” said Hera. “At the moment it’s not helping them much, but I haven’t played out my string yet.”

“Precisely,” said Poseidon. “And now I give you a new melody to play on that string. A most seductive one.”

“Speak plainly, sir. I do not like this deep-sea riddling.”

“Plain as plain, gentle Hera. I mean to intervene actively in the battle, for there is no time to waste. The Trojans have crossed the fosse, are about to burst through the rampart, and drive the Greeks into the sea, thus ending the war. I mean to visit that beach myself, and tip the battle the other way. But Zeus must not see me do this. Else he will hurl his thunderbolt, nail me to the indifferent earth with a shaft of light, then send his Titans to drag me to Hades and chain me to the roots of a mountain, in awful blackness, in choking dryness, there to abide for that endless, sleepless night called eternity.”

“And you dare to defy him like this? Knowing the penalties? Truly, this is a change of heart, brother of the deep.”

“It is that, high sister. And the success of my venture depends, as I said, on his remaining ignorant of what I am doing.”

“How will he remain ignorant? He sits on his peak on Olympus, or a more private one on Mt. Ida, and studies the battle below with keen and vigilant eye. If you even approach the Dardanian plain he will see you.”

“Then we must get him off that peak, sister. We must close that keen and vigilant eye. And of all the creatures on earth, of air, or in the sea, mortal or immortal, you are the one to do this. For you are the most beautiful, the most sumptuous, the most regal, the

most intoxicatingly seductive personage in all creation. You must woo him off his mountain, hold him tight, and beguile him with such delights that he will forget the battle below. This will give me time to help the Greeks.”

“I never realized you thought me so attractive,” said Hera. “We have known each other since one generation past the beginning of time, and never have you looked upon me with ardent eye, or spoken such words.”

“The modesty of a younger brother. I knew you were destined for our elder brother, who was to be king of the gods and deserved the best.”

“Well, it’s a dangerous, dangerous game,” said Hera. “Old Zeus is a male, true. And, like all males, vulnerable to a low blow. Nevertheless, he is very wise, very cynical, very mistrustful, very difficult to deceive for any length of time. However, I find you oddly persuasive this hot afternoon, and I will try to do as you ask.”

“Trying is not enough; you must succeed,” said Poseidon. “Don’t forget, you were the first to espouse the Greek cause, and have kept it alive these nine years, you and Athena, against all the stubborn resistance of your husband.”

“That is true. I hate Paris, loathe the Trojans, dote on the Greeks. And, suddenly, dote on you, dear Poseidon. So I shall return to Olympus and do what you want done.”

“It is just before the noonday meal,” said Poseidon. “Would it not be better to approach him after he has dined? Like all males he

has difficulty managing more than one appetite at a time. This gives us an hour or more.”

“Gives us an hour or more for what?”

“For rehearsal, sweet sister.”

“You are full of ideas today, my wet lord. One of them better than the next ...”

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HERA AND ZEUS

POSEIDON WAS SLEEPY AFTER Hera left, and would have much preferred to nap the afternoon away in the flowery grove on Patmos. But he knew that the Trojans were pressing hard, and that he must act immediately. He mounted his chariot and hastened to Troy.

Down on the field the Trojans had crossed the fosse and were storming the rampart, which they were trying to knock down with battering rams. A squad of them lifted a log and rushed toward the wall at a dead run, smashing it against the wooden palisade. The timbers groaned and shuddered, but still stood. The Greeks were thrusting down with their long lances from the top of the rampart. At each battering-ram charge the Trojans were losing men. Then Zeus sent a sign. He swerved an eagle in its path so that it crossed the sky to the right of Hector, and dipping closer to the beach than eagles ever fly. And Hector knew that the god of air and mountain had sent the eagle as a sign.

Filled with joyous strength at this signal of divine favor, the Trojan leader now did something no man had ever done before. He ran to a wrecked chariot; with a mighty heave pulled off one of its wheels. Then, as Greek and Trojan watched him in disbelief, he lofted the enormous copper-spoked brass wheel, and whirled as if he were hurling a discus. The wheel flew on a flat trajectory like a

discus well-thrown, and struck the rampart beyond the fosse, knocking a huge hole in it. Hector uttered a loud war-cry and charged toward the gap in the wall followed by his men. They crossed the fosse, climbed up the other side through a cloud of darts and arrows, then rushed toward the breached wall, still following Hector who was several paces ahead, his brass helmet flashing light.

It was then that Poseidon came to the beach. All in gold he came, in a golden chariot, wearing golden armor, carrying a golden lance.

“Too soon, too soon,” he said to himself. “Hera will not have had time to woo brother Zeus from his vigil. If I appear like this he will see me and hurl his thunderbolt. Yet, if I delay, the Trojans will overrun the Greek camp. I must act now—but in disguise—and let us hope that Hera on her part does not delay; or that her husband is not immune to her wiles. For Zeus sees quickly through disguises.”

Poseidon then put on the form of Calchas, the Greek soothsayer, and appeared on the other side of the rampart among the Hellenes. He stationed himself near great Ajax, and faced Hector, who, with the eagle-rage still upon him, face and body glowing like a demi-god, was charging the center of the Greek line, held by Great Ajax, Little Ajax, and Teucer.

Hera had not been wasting time. She knew how desperate the situation was. But, for all her haste, she made careful preparation. She knew that after a thousand years of marriage Zeus found her

charms something less than irresistible. His changeableness in these matters had become a fact of nature, and indeed had produced a large variety of demi-gods and heroes. But Hera was ferocious in her moods too, had a volcanic temper, and time had never made her accept the ways of Zeus. So they had bickered down the ages with increasing rancor and, for the last few centuries, had seldom been together. Therefore, she fully understood how difficult was the assignment given her by Poseidon. She visited Aphrodite, and said:

“We have quarreled, cousin, but I think it is time to forgive each other. I will forgive you for having so shamelessly suborned Paris’ judgment and forced him to award you the golden apple as the most beautiful of us all. It is done now, and cannot be undone. It will not change. But I will forgive *you* if you will forgive *me* for all I have done and said against you, and for my ardent espousal of the Greek cause—which also will not change.”

Now Aphrodite had a passive easygoing nature, especially in the summer. She was quick-tempered and vengeful like all the gods, but did not have the patience for feuds. Besides, she feared Hera.

“Queen Hera,” she said, “you could not have uttered words to give me more pleasure. Long have I wearied of this quarrel between us. I apologize for any harm I may have done you and, with a full heart, forgive you for any injury you may have done me.

The two goddesses embraced, but not too closely.

“Since we’re friends again,” said Hera. “I am emboldened to ask you a favor.”

“Ask away. I am sure the answer will be yes.”

“Will you lend me your girdle—that magic garment which arouses desire in any man or god you fancy?”

“Girdle? I wear no girdle. Look at me.”

She pirouetted before Hera.

“Do I look like I’m wearing a girdle, O queen? And what would I do with such a thing after my charms work on this man or god? It would just get in the way.”

Hera frowned. “Come now,” she said. “Don’t trifle with me. Everyone has heard about your magic girdle.”

“That which everyone knows is most likely to be wrong,” said Aphrodite. “I deny that any such girdle exists. What you refer to is simply the essence of those attributes which make me Goddess of Love and Beauty. Do not forget that I can make myself irresistible, as you say, not only to any man I fancy, or any god—but that my favor, extended to any other female creature, makes *her* irresistible to any god or man *she* fancies.”

“Are you going to help me? Yes or no?”

“Yes, yes, yes ... Let me prepare you for love, and no man or god will resist you, no matter what his inclinations are. Once I have scented you with the distilled attar of those flowers in whose amorous cups bees linger longest; once I have kneaded into your flesh my secret ointment which makes any hag as sleek and supple

as a sixteen-year-old girl, then you can approach what god or man you will, and know that in two winks of an eye he will be grovelling before you.”

“Sounds promising,” said Hera. “I place myself in your hands.”

Poseidon had not dared to exert his full efforts in helping the Greeks until Hera had been given time enough to distract Zeus. What he did was stand as close as possible to the center of the Greek line where Great Ajax held the field, aided by his brother, Teucer, and Little Ajax. There, disguised as Calchas the soothsayer, Poseidon flung his arms heavenward and pretended to raise his voice in prophecy, crying:

“Great Ajax, Little Ajax, Teucer the archer: stand fast, stand fast. Resist the Trojans, and you will finally prevail. For a great god is coming to aid you, a great god I cannot name seeks your victory. He cannot come yet, but he will come and cover you with his mantle, and you will be invincible. So stand fast, stand fast.”

The three warriors, heartened beyond their own knowledge by the keen gull-cry of the pretended Calchas, fought more savagely than ever and held back the Greek advance.

Hera flew to Mt. Ida, to its tallest peak, Gargarus, where Zeus sat watching the battle unfold.

“Greetings, dear lord and husband,” she cried. “Forgive me for breaking upon your solitude, but I am departing on a long journey

and did not wish to leave without saying good-bye.”

“Where are you going?” said Zeus without turning around.

“Off to the bitter margin of the earth where our uncle, Oceanus, and his wife, Tethys, reside. Lately it has come to my notice that they live in terrible loneliness with each other, keeping a cold distance between them because of some ancient quarrel, never exchanging a kind word, never dining together, nor warming each other with a caress. I go to reconcile them so they can live together again as man and wife.”

“Who do you think you are, Aphrodite?” said Zeus. “Lovers’ quarrels, reconciliations. She takes care of all that.”

Hera came very close to him.

“But I am moved by pity for my Aunt Tethys,” she murmured. And in her voice was the song of birds. “I know what it means to be denied a husband’s caress. To long for him with all my heart and soul and to be denied, denied ...”

Zeus turned, then. Hera was very close to him. She gave off a powerful fragrance of sunshine and crushed grass.

“Besides,” she whispered. “Aphrodite has lent me her bag of tricks. Has tutored me in certain arts that are bound to reconcile that stupid feuding man and wife.”

By this time Zeus was completely enraptured by the sight of his wife, who looked as beautiful to him as she had when the world was very new and they had hid from their parents, old Cronus and Rhea, wrapping themselves in a cloud and loving each other with

such hunger that the cloud had burst and the valley of Olympus was flooded. And Cronus and Rhea had been forced to give permission for the brother and sister to wed. He stood up and clasped her in his arms.

“Before you trundle off to the ends of the earth,” he said, “there are a husband and wife here who have some arrears to make up.”

“Right here?” she whispered. “Here on the highest peak of Ida? But all the Pantheon will see us. I am proud, proud to be loving you again my lord, but such revels as I plan are better done in privacy.”

“Privacy we shall have,” said Zeus. “Without moving from this spot.”

Thereupon he caused the rock to grow anemones and roses and hyacinths and sweet grasses to a height of three feet, making a soft bed. And he pulled down a fleecy cloud to cover them like a quilt, quite concealing them from view, shielding them from the sun with a delicious moistness, bathing them with the lightest of dews.

And the folk who lived in the village at the foot of the mountain felt the solid rock shake, saw their slopes tremble, heard the giant sounds of Zeus’ pleasure. And they fled their village thinking their mountain had turned volcanic and was about to erupt.

As Hera lay down with Zeus she released a dove which she had been carrying on her wrist like a falcon—a swift-darting, blue

and gray bird specially trained to bear messages and keep secrets. It darted to earth, and found Poseidon where he stood on the Trojan beach disguised as Calchas. The bird cooed to him, relating Hera's message that he could help the Greeks as much as he liked because Zeus would be too busy for the rest of the afternoon to notice what was happening on earth.

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ATTACK AND COUNTERATTACK

BELLOWING AND DANCING IN his exultance, the Lord of the Deep cast off the guise of old Calchas like a tall tree twisting in the wind shedding leaves. He made himself invisible, all except his golden trident, and when he wielded the great three-tined staff it was like the sun-fighting clouds sending spears of light through the cover. Invisibly he approached Great Ajax and Little Ajax and Teucer and goaded them with his trident. A great salt wave of health broke upon their blood, filling them with the surging strength that the god of the sea can bestow. They led their men forward in a mighty rolling charge that smashed against the Trojan line like the ocean sending its white-plumed breakers to pound a foundering ship. And the Trojans, who had been so triumphantly victorious just a few moments before, now began to retreat.

Hector went purple in the face with rage, smacking his men with the flat of his sword, trying to harry them forward. Ajax, knowing his strength multiplied, stooped to pick up an enormous boulder lying half-buried in the sand—a massive rock, seemingly rooted in the beach—which twelve men had been unable to move. He raised it above his head with an easy motion and hurled it straight at Hector. It hit the Trojan hero's shield, driving the shield against his chest, knocking him flat. He seemed to be crushed like a

beetle; he lay under the rock, legs kicking feebly. But then with a last indomitable effort he thrust himself from under the boulder, and lay there, unable to rise, vomiting blood. Aeneas it was who lifted him onto his shoulders and rushed back toward Troy. Prince Troilus covered their flight, fighting like a young lion.

But when Hector left the field, the Trojans were shattered. The retreat was becoming a rout. By this time Poseidon had ranged behind the Greek lines where the wounded leaders stood in a cluster watching the battle. Agamemnon was there, Diomedes, and Ulysses. Patroclus was there too, tending their wounds. The comrade of Achilles was the most skilled surgeon among the Hellenes. Poseidon, keeping himself invisible, spoke to them in sea-whispers. A huge salt wave of health broke upon their blood, healing them, knitting bone, mending flesh. With loud, glad cries they leaped into their chariots and lent such strength to the Greek countercharge that the Trojans were driven back through the breach of the rampart, scrambling back over the fosse. Troilus tried to make a stand, so did Antenor, and a few other of the most redoubtable Trojan warriors, but they could not stem the Greeks alone, and finally had to flee after the Trojan force which had fled before.

Bedded on flowers and sweet grass, wrapped in a fleecy cloud, Zeus slept in Hera's arms; and everywhere, except on the Dardanian plain where the battle wore on, lovers touched each other in sleepy rapture. Everywhere, over field and meadow, hung a

haze of pollen thickening to a golden drift under the slant rays of the afternoon sun—so that lovers moving toward each other through the grass felt themselves cleaving a heavier substance than air, felt their very blood fusing into a golden heat.

But on the Dardanian plain men killed each other. Heavy metal blades cracked bone, sheared through flesh. Beautiful young men, naked under their armor, drowned in their own blood. And still the Greeks pursued and Trojans fled.

High upon Mt. Ida, on a peak called Gargarus, Zeus slept in Hera's arms. But Hera did not sleep. Drowsy though she was, still her interest in earthly affairs kept her from joining her husband in slumber. Which turned out to be a mistake ...

Moving very carefully, very slowly, she slipped out of his embrace, slithered out from between flower bed and cloud cover, and walked to the edge of the precipice. She looked down upon the Dardanian plain. What she saw made her forget her caution and laugh aloud in triumph. The Trojans were in full flight, pursued by furiously yelling Greeks whose swords and spearheads dripped with blood.

With Hector gone, Paris fled, Troilus and Aeneas wounded, the Trojans were a disorganized rabble instead of an army. It appeared as though the Greeks might be able to storm the walls of Troy there and then. Again Hera laughed.

Too loudly! She heard Zeus grumble. She had thought him deep asleep. She whirled about. To her horror she saw him sit up,

stretch, yawn—and scratch his monumental chest. She ran to him and knelt upon the flower-bed, stroking his shoulders.

“Do not awake, dear lord!” she murmured. “Sleep, sleep.”

But Zeus stood up. The habit of vigilance was strong upon him. Besides, into the depths of his sleep had wound a skein of mocking laughter. He put her aside gently and walked to the edge of the precipice.

“Don’t look down there!” she cried. “Why trouble yourself with mundane affairs? Rest, rest, great lord of creation! The rusty old earth will turn a few turns without you.”

But Zeus was looking down upon the plain. His huge brow was furrowed like striated rock. He whirled and took Hera’s throat in those enormous hands that crack stars like peanuts.

“Things have changed,” he said softly, “since we two lay down together. I left the Trojans ascendant. They had breached the rampart and were driving toward the Greek ships. And now, what do I find? Poseidon down there, my treacherous brother, who has turned the tide of battle so that the Greeks are everywhere triumphant. Tell me, was it coincidence, sweet sister, steadfast wife? Was our sudden encounter after all these centuries one of those happy accidents? Or perhaps part of a deeper design?”

“I can scarcely follow what you are saying,” said Hera. “Poseidon at Troy? The Greeks winning? But this is a very abrupt change—as surprising to me as it is to you. What can Poseidon be thinking of to defy your edicts this way? It’s dreadful.”

“Be still! Don’t try to play with me. I am very angry.”

“Angry at me? Do you so soon forget the delicious hour we spent?”

“No, I do not forget. And I may even look forward to other such hours—unless, of course, I decide to punish you so painfully that you will seek to avoid my company. However, we can postpone that decision. Let me attend to Poseidon first.”

The God of the Sea stood tall in his golden armor just beyond the beach, balancing himself on the surf like a child on a skateboard. From time to time he uttered a great northwind yell to hearten the Greeks. But matters were going so well now, he had little to do but watch the battle. Suddenly the sky growled. He looked up. No storm clouds at all, but a wide fair expanse of blueness.

Out of the blue sky shot a thunderbolt—a hooked shaft of white-hot light, burning the air as it passed. It plunged into the water, just missing Poseidon, immediately turning the sea to steam.

“What are you doing?” cried Hera, pleading with Zeus above. “Are you trying to destroy your own brother, Poseidon, Lord of the Deep? Think of the consequences.”

“He should have thought of the consequences,” growled Zeus. “I *am* consequence.”

“Consider his record,” pleaded Hera. “He may have transgressed a bit this afternoon, but after all up until now he has

been the most neutral of the gods in this war, has been the one who has obeyed your edicts most strictly.”

“That is why my first bolt missed,” said Zeus. “As you know I usually hit what I aim at. I hope it serves as a warning. For my second bolt will not miss; it will gaff him like a fish.”

But there was no need for another bolt. When Poseidon saw the white-hot zigzag shaft of lightning hit the water he was bathed in steam; felt that he was being boiled like a lobster. And he knew that Zeus had seen him, and was angry. Pausing only to flick a quick idea at Ulysses, he uttered a whistle, which evoked his dolphin chariot in the wink of an eye. Instantly he had mounted the chariot, and was gone—down, down into the depths of the cool sea where all the creatures are too busy eating each other to bother about such things as war.

Poseidon’s last idea flew like a dart and hit Ulysses painlessly in the neck, passing into his head, nestling just beneath his consciousness ready to sprout as a full-fledged idea when its time should come.

“I cannot tell whether you are guilty or innocent,” said Zeus to Hera. “Perhaps I do not want to know. It is the essence of a beautiful woman that she bewilder—and in this a goddess is as a woman—so let it be. But do nothing from now on to change my opinion of your innocence. In other words, dear wife, keep your meddling hands off that war below, or I’ll cut them off.”

“Yes, husband,” murmured Hera.

“Now fly back to Olympus and send Apollo to me. We must undo the harm you have done. Let him come immediately.”

Hera was frightened. She did not take the time to fly but translated herself back to Olympus where she said to her stepson, Apollo:

“Go ... go. ... Go swiftly to Zeus. He awaits you on Mt. Ida, on the peak called Gargarus. He wants you immediately.”

Apollo appeared before Zeus, who said: “That briny uncle of yours has played us false. He has appeared among the Greeks, endowing them with such strength and courage that they are about to overwhelm the Trojans. I suspend my act of neutrality now—or at least amend it—so that we may be neutral on the Trojan side. Go to work, dear Phoebus. Rally the Trojans. Make them fight again, and prevail.”

Now, Apollo, of course, had watched that afternoon’s fighting, and had been much impressed by the feat of Hector with the chariot wheel. He took a spare wheel of his sun-chariot, one of those glittering golden disks, that, trundling across the blue meadow of the sky, refract the eternal fire as they turn, flashing; and that fire falls to earth in a benign glow that men call sunshine. He took this heavy glittering wheel, and, holding it as a shield, flew to earth.

He appeared among the Trojans, flashing his sun-shield at them and kindling their courage, burning away fears and hesitations. He went to where Hector lay on a litter, pale and crushed and unconscious, almost dead from the blow of Ajax’s

boulder. Apollo focused light upon the fallen hero who, in the clammy grip of his swoon, felt the cockles of his heart warming, felt his every vessel filling with sap, putting forth buds. The amazed Trojans saw Hector arise, flushed with heat, eyes glittering.

“What are we doing here?” he cried in a voice like a trumpet. “Why here, in the shadow of our walls? For shame! For shame! The last I remember we were beyond the rampart, advancing upon the Greek ships, ready to put them to the torch. And now, and now ... How could we have retreated so far? So soon?”

Troilus spoke. He had refused to be carried beyond the walls for treatment despite grievous wounds.

“I’m with you, brother!” he cried. “Both my arms are broken, but I can still lower my head and charge like a stag.”

Aeneas, also wounded, said: “A breath ago we were gripped by despair, ready to yield the city. And now—such a change! It is obvious, good friends, that a god is among us, that we have again earned the support of heaven, which we had lost for a bitter interval this afternoon. But the favor of gods abides only among the brave. So, forward under Hector! Forward! Forward!”

“Each prince to his chariot!” shouted Hector. “We will mount a chariot charge, one such as our fathers mounted in days of old, and still lie about.”

Now, the Greeks, who had been enjoying themselves chasing the Trojan rabble across the field and spearing them like rabbits, found everything changed. Instead of a fleeing mob scurrying

toward Troy, they saw a rank of bright chariots rushing toward them with terrible speed. They heard the squeal of wheel against axle, heard the clank of weapons, and the bugling neigh of the chariot-steeds, and their eyes were assailed by splintering light. They saw light gathered in their enemy; light in sheaves, in quivers, in darts and lances; light splintering off breastplate and helmet, and brass wheel and brass coach, and the brass corselets of the chariot-horses. Light that splintered, quivered, danced; refracted by Apollo's sun-shield—which, keeping himself invisible, Apollo wielded behind the Trojan lines, harrying them forward with bright cries. And the Greeks, seeing these phalanxes of light, hearing the bright trampling triumph of the chariot charge, knew indeed that the god who had been helping them had deserted the field and that a god who loved their enemy had descended in his stead. They turned and fled. Fled from the shadow of the city wall over the corpse-littered field, in their fearful haste stepping on the bodies of men fallen, not caring whether they were friend or foe.

Back the Greeks swarmed, back over the field, scrambled across the fosse, streamed through the breach in the rampart, and took a stand only when they had reached the first line of ships. The Trojans, doubtless, would have stormed through and begun to burn the ships had it not been for the superb courage of Great Ajax, Ulysses, Diomedes, and Agamemnon, who kept their heads through all the dismay of the route, and rallied their men to beat the Trojans back from the ships.

Great Ajax sprang on board his own ship. He snatched up his thirty-foot mast from where it nested in its cradle on deck, and flourished the enormous shaft as if it were a light throwing lance. He swept it over the gunwales of his ship breaking Trojan skulls like eggs, helmets and all, and swept the deck clear.

Then it was that the glinting dart of Poseidon's last idea which he had planted in Ulysses' head began to flower. Ulysses, close-hemmed between Diomedes and Little Ajax and locking shields with both, suddenly whispered to them: "Dear comrades, I quit you only on a matter of strategy. Lock your shields."

He backed away, took the shields of Little Ajax and Diomedes in his hands, and lapped them with each other, and no gap appeared in the line. He then simply walked away from the battle, walked toward the tent of Achilles which stood with the Myrmidon fleet at the other end of the beach.

"This is it!" he said to himself. "A master notion. Achilles still sulks in his tent ignoring our mortal peril, the death of his comrades, the humiliation of Greek arms, and the certain destruction of the fleet. But he is still nourished by that poison pride of his, and by his justified rancor against Agamemnon, and he still refuses to fight. Nevertheless, suppose his dear friend, Patroclus, were to impersonate him? Don his armor, wield his weapons, ride his chariot, and lead his Myrmidons into the field? That would be a superb stroke. One of two things must happen: Either the Trojans will believe that Patroclus is Achilles, and,

seeing him, flee in terror, as they always have; or, they will see through the disguise and kill him. Then, if Patroclus falls, Achilles will have to choose between two passions—his pride and his love for his friend. And, I am sure, with his dear friend fallen, that great heart will burst with spleen, and he will take arms and sweep the field like plague. Either way we can't lose. All I have to do is persuade Patroclus to talk Achilles into lending him arms and armor.”

Achilles' tent was cool after the hot sun. And the young warrior, seeing Ulysses so battleworn, refused to let him say a word of business until a slave girl had been summoned to loosen his armor, bathe his feet, swab his face and neck with a cool scented cloth, and bring him a restorative drink of barley steeped in honey.

“Thank you, great Achilles,” said Ulysses. “As all men know, your courtesy is equalled only by your courage ... by the memory of your courage, that is. For indeed no man has seen you recently performing those feats of arms which made you famed among the famous before you were old enough to grow a beard.”

“Your conversation is always stimulating, friend Ulysses. The gloss of your compliments always conceals a sharp-edged gibe. But you are, as usual, justified. I know that I have been a non-combatant recently, know it well. Do you not think that I chafe at this inactivity? I am like a tiger playing with a ball of wool, hearing a lion roar as he hunts my deer. My desire for battle is so fierce I feel that I could drink blood by the goblet ... like some ancient

ogre who ate men raw. But I am bound by an oath never to fight on this field as long as Agamemnon leads the Greeks. So I must abide here in my tent, listening to the sounds of battle, being beguiled by my beloved friend, Patroclus—and, occasionally, having the honor of entertaining such fighters as you.”

“A truce to compliments,” said Ulysses. “I have not come here to urge you to fight. In the past few days you have been begged to do so in more eloquent phrases than I can lay tongue to. No, I come with another suggestion: that you, Patroclus, play Achilles. We need an Achilles, even a counterfeit one. And what more fitting than that you, friend of his heart, should put on his armor, take his weapons, mount his chariot, and lead his Myrmidons in a charge against the Trojans?”

“Ridiculous!” said Achilles.

Patroclus said nothing.

“Perhaps you don’t appreciate the gravity of our situation,” said Ulysses. “We are at our last gasp. Even now the Trojans would be firing our fleet did not Great Ajax, like a Titan of old, fight them off with a mast he is using as a spear, carving a place for himself in the history of arms that will never fade as long as men love courage. But when Ajax falls, as fall he must, then they will burn the fleet, not excepting your own ships unless you set sail immediately. Yes, they will put our proud beaked ships to the shame of the torch, and then, in all leisure, penning us between fire and sea, will slaughter us like cattle. You refuse to fight, Achilles.

Very well. You are bound by an oath, fettered in your pride. You will not fight. But, in the name of all the gods, lend us your shadow. Allow Patroclus to impersonate you. It is our only chance.”

“What do you say, Patroclus?” said Achilles. “Do you wish to do this thing?”

“I do,” said Patroclus.

“Then you shall. I will be your squire, and dress you myself in my own armor that I never thought any other man should wear.”

“Thank you, great Achilles,” said Ulysses. “Thank you, gallant Patroclus. I must hasten back to the fighting now. Even the whisper of what is to come, I’m sure, will hearten our comrades so that they can withstand the Trojans yet a little while—until Patroclus shall appear on the field.”

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PATROCLUS

PATROCLUS STRIPPED HIMSELF THEN in Achilles' tent, and put on his friend's armor. Achilles acted as squire, helping him don corselet, breastplate, greaves, and plumed helmet.

“Beloved friend,” said Achilles. “I wish I could clothe you in my invulnerability instead of these pieces of metal. Oh, they are beautiful pieces of metal, cast of molten gold, and brass, with inlay of copper and tin, made by Hephaestus himself as a wedding present for my father, Peleus. The enemy, seeing this armor, know that it is Achilles they must face, and are disarmed by fear before they can begin to fight. But, friend, let me tell you a secret that no man knows, and no woman either, except my mother, Thetis. I can fight without that armor, and no spear, no sword, nor arrow can pierce me. For my mother, queen of the nereids, ranks as a goddess, and she wished to give me, her son, sired by a mortal, her own immortality. So, when I was just nine days old she dipped me into the River Styx, that black stream that separates the land of the living from the land of the dead and whose waters have magic power. Every part of me the water touched was rendered beyond hurt—tough as nine layers of polished bullhide, stiffened with brass—without losing the delicacy of human skin. Thus, no blade can cut me, no wound kill. All except one place.”

Achilles lifted his foot and tapped the great tendon over his heel.

“She held me right here as she dipped me into the river. Where her fingers clasped, the waters could not touch. In this one spot I am vulnerable.”

Patroclus laughed. “Not an easy spot for an enemy to reach,” he said. “To expose it you would have to be running away. And that is a sight no man has ever seen, or ever will.”

Achilles laughed, and embraced his friend.

“Truly,” he said, “you are a gallant fellow. Here you are about to meet the Trojans—in the full exultant tide of their victory, when their courage burns hot, and they fight better than they know how—and you are smiling and jesting as though you were at a banquet.”

“Dear friend,” said Patroclus. “Clad in your armor I feel as safe as though I were at a banquet, reclining on a couch, being served wine by the slave girls and chatting with the other guests. As Ulysses said, clad in your armor I go forth as your shadow, and even the shadow of you, mighty warrior that you are, is enough to chase the Trojans the best day they ever saw.”

“One word of advice,” said Achilles. “You will be followed by my Myrmidons, who, having been kept out of battle, are rested and fresh. They will give a good account of themselves. The Trojans should break before you. But please, I implore you, when they break, do not pursue them. Let them retreat in their own way. If

you follow them, keep with your troops. Do not charge ahead. Do not seek to despoil a fallen foe of his armor, no matter how rich it is. Above all, do not seek single combat. The Trojan heroes will not be seeking an encounter with you, either, clad as you are, so such duels should be easy to avoid. Avoid them! Most important of all, do not seek to engage Hector in hand-to-hand conflict. Now go, dear Patroclus. And may the fickle gods go with you.”

He embraced him again, led him to his chariot and helped him mount, then walked quickly away to the edge of the tide, and stood there looking out over the sea. For his heart was heavy with foreboding.

Patroclus, shining like the morning star in Achilles’ armor, vaulted gaily into Achilles’ chariot. It was of burnished bronze, drawn by a pair of stallions named Xanthus and Balius. They were of divine breed. Their dam was not a mare at all, but a harpy named Podarge who had become amorous of the West Wind. She foaled, dropping two colts, matched blacks with golden eyes, silver hooves, mane and tail of silver fleece. They ran as swiftly as their sire, the West Wind; in their temperaments was the loving ferocity of their dam, Podarge. They were loving to their master, but savage in battle. Achilles had trained them to rear back and strike like a boxer with their silver hooves; one blow of a hoof could crack a warrior’s helmet like a nutshell. They used their great yellow teeth also, snapping like crocodiles. No man dared handle them except Achilles and Patroclus. Achilles boasted of their intelligence,

saying they could speak if they wished, but preferred to remain silent.

Drawn by these stallions and driven by Patroclus, the burnished bronze chariot of Achilles whirled into battle.

The Trojans were still trying to burn Ajax's ship. Hector had mounted the deck where the giant still wielded his thirty-foot mast. Ajax swept the deck with the huge staff, trying to crush Hector. But each time the mast swept toward him Hector either ducked beneath it or leaped above it. Each time he did this he struck at it with his sword, each time hacking off a piece of it, until Ajax was left holding only the fat stump of the mast, which he hurled at the Trojans, who were again swarming over the gunwales, killing two of them. Then Great Ajax leaped off the deck, and tried to rally his men for another stand.

Gleefully the Trojans set Ajax's ship to the torch, and began to fire the other ships of the first line. Hector pressed forward swiftly after Ajax, wanting to finish him off—so swiftly that he became separated from his men. Suddenly he heard the shouts of triumph change to cries of bawling fear.

“Achilles! It's Achilles! Flee! Flee!”

He turned, and saw his men break and flee before a chariot of burnished bronze drawn by those stallions he recognized as Xanthus and Balius. Riding the chariot was a tall figure in golden armor, his crest a plume of eagle feathers. Hector's men, chased by the bright chariot, were like a swarm of field mice and hares fleeing

a grass fire. Brave Hector himself was sucked up in the wind of that going, and fled before that chariot to the walls of Troy.

Patroclus, riding in his bronze car, felt the armor of Achilles clinging as lightly and intimately to him as his own skin. Yes, it was as if by some stroke of the gods he had been given a hide of supple bright armor, had been fanged with glittering blades, and had come among the Trojans terrible as a tiger among deer.

He swerved his chariot toward where the enemy was thickest. They fled before him always; they could not outrun his stallions. He scythed down the Trojans like summer grass. Everywhere he led, his Myrmidons followed—wheeling, charging, moving like one man.

They followed after Patroclus at a dead run. No matter how fast the chariot was drawn by those stallions sired by the West Wind the Myrmidons would always catch up, and engage the Trojans at the point where Patroclus had broken their lines.

Hector stood on a low hill under the west wall of Troy watching his men flee. It was here that he meant to rally them to try to prevent the Greeks from storming the wall. But he was full of foreboding. He did not see how he could put any heart into his terror-stricken men. Then he smelled a sunny fragrance and heard a voice full of angry music. He dropped to his knees to listen to the words of Apollo.

“I am disappointed in you, Hector. You were my chosen hero, the man of men who was to combat Achilles. Throughout this war

you have plumed yourself on being the only Trojan who would dare to close with the son of Peleus. And now what do I see? You flee his shadow.”

Tears streamed down Hector’s face. He felt himself burning with shame. He could not answer.

“Yes, his *shadow*,” said Apollo. “And I mean it not as a figure of speech, but literally. For that glittering armor clothes not Achilles, but Patroclus, who has borrowed his mighty friend’s appearance, knowing that it alone would be enough to frighten the Trojans into fits. For almost ten years now I have been trying to warm you with my own flame. I see it is hopeless. No one can help cowards; they defeat themselves. I am going to stop defying my father, Zeus, and keep aloof from this war.”

“No, bright Phoebus, no,” pleaded Hector. “Do not withdraw your hand from us. Lord of the moving sun, I pray you—lord of the harp, of the golden bow, heed my plea. I will prove to you I’m no coward. I faltered for a moment, it’s true, but if you abide with me, I will reclaim my manhood, and straightway engage Patroclus. And when I do, he is a dead man. I further swear that when Achilles comes to avenge the dead Patroclus, as come he must, I will not fear to meet him either, but will challenge him to mortal combat.”

Then the sun-god appeared in all his radiance before Hector, and said: “Rise, Hector. Rise, and reclaim your manhood.”

Apollo took off his golden helmet whose crest was a plume of red and blue flame.

“Dip your spearpoint into this plume of flame,” he said. “And go, hot-handed, to meet your false foe.”

Hector arose and held his spearhead in the plume of flame that sprouted from Apollo’s helmet. The god became invisible again, leaving only his fragrance behind—the odor of oranges and roses and those fruits and flowers that love the sun. This fragrance enrapt Hector, filling him with a wild exultance. Yelling his war-cry, he rushed toward Patroclus, shouting: “Actor! Mountebank! Fraud! Descend from that borrowed chariot and fight in your own name.”

Patroclus heard this bright cry, and wheeled his chariot about. He remembered Achilles’ warning, that on no account was he to seek out Hector in single combat. But by now the mask had grown into the face: Aping Achilles, triumphing like Achilles, he had *become* Achilles—or so he thought. Often in days past had he and Achilles felt close enough to have been joined by a membrane, like a pair of unnatural twins, one bloodstream coursing through both bodies. So now he leaped from his chariot, and rushed toward Hector, shouting:

“Well met, son of Priam! Whether I be Achilles or Patroclus, you will never know the difference because the same blade will find your heart.”

He ran so fast that he outraced the Myrmidons. Hector raced to meet him. They met with a crash of weapons like two stags breaking their antlers against each other. Brave he was, Patroclus, and fair. Nobly he wore Achilles’ armor and handled Achilles’

weapons. But he was no Achilles. And Hector at that moment, burning with Apollo's flame, was more than Hector.

Patroclus never had a chance. Swiftly, delicately, Hector handled his spear. The white-hot spearhead sheared through Patroclus' armor like a welding torch—for Hector wished not only to vanquish Patroclus but to ease the pain of his own shame by shaming his foe.

Greeks and Trojans watching this duel saw a sight never seen before. Hector's white-hot spear cut through Achilles' armor; corselet, breastplate, and greaves dropped off Patroclus, leaving him naked except for his helmet. He hurled his spear. Hector laughed as it rebounded from his shield and leisurely advanced on his naked foe.

“You look like a plucked chick, little Patroclus,” he jeered. “If I were cruel as a Greek, I would stand here, using my sword like a butcher's knife, and joint you like a chicken. But such is not my purpose. I have bared you this way so that all men may see that it takes more than armor to make a man. Now, actor, it is time for your death scene.”

With an upward stroke he speared Patroclus through the belly. It was a bad death. Patroclus fell, screaming horribly, clutching at his entrails.

ARMOR FOR ACHILLES

PATROCLUS SPRAWLED IN THE bloody dust. Hector lifted his voice above the battle din.

“Take the body, men! Bear it to Troy! I shall set his head on a pike on the city wall, so that Achilles may meet his friend again, face to face, if he seeks to storm the wall. As for the body, we shall throw it to the dogs!”

But before the Trojans could seize the body, Menelaus rushed up and straddled it, growling like a mastiff, fighting off everyone who approached. Other Trojans pressed forward; other Greeks pressed in to aid Menelaus. A bloody battle raged over the corpse.

What happened to the dead, in those days, was very important to the living. Bodies were not buried; they were cremated. The flames were made sacred by sacrifice to the gods, by libation, and by prayer. In the case of a great warrior, or a king, or of any person who had earned unusual respect during his lifetime, the death ceremonies would include funeral games—chariot races, wrestling, boxing, spear-throwing and archery—reflecting in play form the mourned one’s aptitudes in manly pursuits. By such ceremonies and celebrations, it was felt, the dead person could depart in all honor; this sense of honor would ease his journey to the Land of the Dead and give him status in Hades’ kingdom. If sufficiently honored at his funeral, he would be singled out from among death’s

hordes by Charon, the grim boatman whose job it was to ferry them across the Styx. The honored one would not have to linger in a mob, sorrowfully, on this side of the Styx, but be ferried quickly over by the status-conscious Charon to his reward in the land of the dead.

On the other hand, if, for some reason, a corpse went unclaimed by friend or relative—or was kept by the enemy and not given a proper sendoff—then dreadful things would happen to the survivors. The dishonored dead could not cross the Styx and enter Hades' kingdom. His spirit would cling to the site of his unregarded death. Wearing stinking rags of flesh he would appear before family and friends, usually at night, howling, weeping, begging. Or, worst of all, he would be found standing in any hidden corner, staring at you out of empty eye-sockets. If you were unfortunate enough to have dealings with a ghost, you would set out his favorite food—black beans in little pots, shallow dishes of blood—and he would be appeased for a while by such delicacies. But not for long. Soon he would reappear, howling, begging, or silently staring.

In the case of the Greeks, demoralized as they were at this point of the battle, they still fought savagely for Patroclus' body, because they knew that Achilles would go berserk when he learned of his friend's death. But if Achilles also learned that the body of his beloved companion had been taken by the Trojans, beheaded, and then thrown to the dogs, they knew he would be capable of

doing anything—to friend as well as foe. In fact, it was probable he would visit his first vengeance upon the Greeks.

Thus, despite being outnumbered by the Trojans, they formed a hedge of spears around the body, and would not let the Trojans pass.

But Hector sent in more men, and the weight of their numbers must finally have broken the Greek resistance had it not been for Achilles' horses, those magically bred stallions, tall as stags and fierce as Harpies. They charged toward the knot of fighting men, burst into their midst, and hurled people in all directions. Rearing on their haunches, they struck with their front hooves, kicking and biting until they had cleared the Trojans away from the corpse. This allowed Menelaus time to lift the body and put it in the chariot. Then the horses galloped back toward Achilles' tent, bearing their dead charioteer.

Patroclus had come very close to the Trojan wall before being killed and so the fighting had been beyond Achilles' sight, although he had been watching from the rampart trying to follow the course of battle. All he could hear was faroff shouting; all he could see was a cloud of dust.

“Under their walls,” he said softly to himself. “I told him not to advance so far. Still, perhaps it means that he has broken their lines, and put them to flight.”

Then he saw a bright speck detach itself from the dust and fly toward him. He watched until it took shape. A chariot! Coming

with such speed it could be drawn only by Xanthus and Balius, his own stallions! His heart leaped with joy.

“It’s Patroclus!” he cried. “It must be he! They will obey only his hand beside mine! He’s safe! Safe! Coming to report a great victory!”

With incredible speed the West Wind stallions galloped to the rampart, rearing and neighing when they saw Achilles there. He looked at them in amazement. Great tears were welling from their golden eyes. No one had ever seen horses cry before, and it was a terrible sight. He tried not to believe what those tears meant as he stood staring at his beautiful stallions. Then they broke the long primordial silence:

“Forgive us, dear master,” said Xanthus. “We bring back to you Patroclus.”

“Dead ...” said Balius. “We bring him dead.”

Achilles did not weep. His face was like a rock. Very gently he lifted the battered body from the chariot and bore it into his tent, binding the latches so that no one could enter. The stallions stood before the tent like watchdogs and let no one approach. Achilles remained alone with his grief all through the long twilight and the hours of night, and the next morning.

No one dared approach his tent and intrude upon his grief. The Greeks were afraid he might have fallen on his own sword, choosing to lie in death beside his comrade, but they did not dare approach.

“He will not kill himself,” said Ulysses. “He has work to do first; he must avenge himself upon Hector. After that, perhaps ... but not yet.”

In the darkest hour of night Thetis arose from the sea and walked through the walls of Achilles’ tent. He had not wept, but mothers can hear silent grief; she had heard his even in the depths of the sea, and had come to him. All night long he crouched in her embrace, not weeping, but making low hoarse whimpering sounds. She held his head to her breast as if he were a babe again, and stroked his face, and kissed him. Even in his terrible grief he was comforted by her sea-magic touch. He spoke only at dawn, just before she left him.

“Will you do something for me, mother?”

“Anything, son.”

“Patroclus went to battle clad in my armor. The Trojans stripped him of it. It is worn by Hector now, that armor made by Hephaestus and given to my father as a wedding present. I mean to seek Hector out and combat him today, but I wish to appear in armor no less fine than that I lost, and to bear weapons no less fine than those taken from Patroclus when he fell. These can issue only from the smithy of the gods. Can you persuade Hephaestus to labor this morning and forge me new gear?”

“I have some influence over the lame god,” said Thetis. “I was the one who nurtured him, you know, after Zeus had flung him from Olympus and he had fallen into the sea with shattered legs,

helpless as a tadpole. I took him to my cave, mended his wounds, and raised him as my own child, giving him pebbles and seashells to make jewelry of, so that he grew clever in that craft. He will drop what he is doing and labor this morning. Weapons and armor more beautiful than those you lost will issue from his forge. By the time you are ready to combat Hector you will find what you need here in your tent. Now farewell, dear son.”

On certain evenings the sun diving through clouds forges out the shape of armed men, taller than mountains, who burn in the western sky as if guarding the horizon. Their flaming delicate armor is what Hephaestus took as his model when he yielded to Thetis’ plea and worked the morning through casting new weapons for Achilles. Like the red-hot sun-disk itself written over with a tracery of cloud was his shield. His spear was a polished volt-bright shaft that Zeus himself might have used as a lightning bolt. For helmet crest he sheared a plume of cloud-fleece and dipped it into the colors of the sunset.

When he gave Thetis this gorgeous gear, the tall nereid scooped up the little lame god, held him in her arms as if he were a child, and kissed him on the lips.

“Thank you, dear Hephaestus,” she said. “Thank you for your kindness, for your quickness, and for your masterful craftsmanship. You are a great god now, Artificer-in-Chief for the whole flat world; your smithy is a volcano where you wreak implements for the high use of father Zeus and the Pantheon. God though you be,

you shall always remain my own dear little tadpole, my sweet maimed foster-child, and from me you shall always have a mother's tenderness although I am cast in eternal flowing nymphhood and you in eternal middle age."

She kissed his seamed, charcoal-grimed face, set him down, and flew off with the glittering new armor made for Achilles.

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THE SCROLL OF THE FATES

EVERY FEW YEARS THE gods were entitled to read in the great book of the Fates wherein was written all that had been and all that was to be. We use the word “book,” but there were no books then as we know them. This tome of the Fates was a huge scroll hung from a place in the heavens beyond man’s sight and written over with starry characters. Night-blue was this scroll, made from the dark blue hide of a heavenly beast, unknown to man, hunted by the gods once every thousand years in a great chase across the inlaid floor of heaven.

Night-blue was the scroll, and those winged crones who were the Fates, those twisted sisters whom even the gods fear, would dip their claws into starlight and scrawl their irrevocable decrees upon these dark pages. Once every several years the gods were summoned to read what was written on the scroll, to consider what they had read, and then to return to Olympus to conduct the affairs of men accordingly.

Usually the gods chose to keep man in ignorance of what was fated for him. Occasionally, though, when it amused them, or when they wished to seduce a mortal by special knowledge, or when coaxed by artful oracles, the gods would let slip some information in the form of a riddle. And it was this matter that the oracles uttered as prophecy.

These oracles tended to cluster in groups called “colleges,” each of them dedicated to a special god. Apollo’s priestesses were especially well-known. They dwelt in a huge cave dug into a mountain at a place called Delphi. It was volcano country. Through a fissure in the rock an aromatic steam arose from the very entrails of the earth. The priestesses set their stone tripods across this fissure, and squatted above it, breathing these fumes—which gave them visions. These visions, they claimed, were of the future. They also chewed laurel—which we know as bay leaf—which sharpened vision, or blurred it; whatever it is that makes a vision most real to those who have it. Their utterances were always couched in riddles, knotty ones; no one could understand what they were saying except other priestesses, who, for a fee, would interpret these riddles.

Now, prophecy about the Trojan war had made a rich tale from the very beginning. On this subject soothsayers blabbed the secrets of the gods without restraint. We have already met certain of these prophecies: The one which said the Greeks could win the war only with the help of Achilles; and the second part of it which said Achilles must die before Troy, but if he stayed at home and did not go to war he could live a long, peaceful life. We already know the choice he made, with the help of Ulysses. And Ulysses himself was the subject of a prophecy which said that if he went to Troy he could not return to Ithaca until twenty years had passed ... and would return alone, beggared, unrecognized.

Now, on this day following the death of Patroclus, the gods were summoned again to the far reaches of heaven to read the great scroll. It was the first time since the war had begun that they had been so summoned, and there was much new matter to read in the flaming scrawl of the Fates. The gods returned to Olympus brimming with news, some chattering, others sunk in meditation. All were trying to think how they could best use this knowledge of the future to tease man into providing some special entertainment in the years that lay ahead.

They had three principal spokesmen to work through. Calchas and Chryseis were professional oracles. Chryseis, the Trojan, was a priest of Apollo. He was also father to Cressida. Calchas was the most influential among the Greek soothsayers. Sometimes he posed as a priest of Hera, at other times claimed the special confidence of Athena. Actually he freelanced, picking up clues from any god he could, and making pronouncements about what the Greeks should or should not do. When things were going well he was listened to with half an ear; when disaster struck his counsel was more valued. So, professionally, he was not quite averse to catastrophe.

But the one with the real heavy, fatal burning talent for the future was Cassandra. Bestowed upon her by Apollo was that most terrible of gifts—a *memory* of the future. And she kept her pronouncements rare because she knew how awful they were. However, she did not disturb the Trojan peace of mind at all. It will be remembered that Apollo punished her for refusing his amorous

advances by capping his gift with a curse. His sentence was that although she would be able to prophesy with the utmost accuracy, and know that she was doing so, she would always be disbelieved by her own people.

Apollo came to her that night, sliding down one of the shafts of his sister's moonlight. He entered her chamber where she lay asleep. But she had trained herself never to sleep more than a few minutes at a time because her dreams were so terrible. She awoke now and gazed upon him where he stood igniting the shadows, and closing her eyes again, said: "You are so unwelcome a sight you *must* be a dream. It doesn't really matter. You have always ignored my need for privacy, and walked through the walls of sleep as though they were open doors. Speak, my lord. Why do you honor me with this visit?"

"To impart to you certain matter that I have read in the starry scroll of the Fates. There is much, much about Troy."

Apollo spoke at length. The last thing he told her excited her unbearably. She knelt before him and clasped his knees.

"Oh, great Phoebus—please, please, in this let me be believed. If he believes me, perchance he will take the opportunity to save his life, brave though he be. Please let him believe what I tell him. If you do so then I will put aside the loathing I feel for you, I swear I will. Somehow—I don't know how—I will school myself to respond to your love; but you must do this thing for me."

“Your idea of diplomacy, my child, will never cease to astound me. But make no rash vows. In the first place, you will be unable to keep them, lest they go against your inmost nature. Secondly, even if you could, I cannot break my vow, once given. This is a disability we gods suffer from. And that is why we so seldom make promises. Farewell, I shall visit you again. Try to restrain your impatience until that golden hour.”

Chryseis found his daughter, Cressida, cutting flowers in the garden. He bustled up to her.

“A very important day, my dear,” he cried. “Much business brews.”

“How is that, father?”

She was picking roses. Her slender fingers plucked and snipped, moving like white moths among the petals. Her face was flushed, making the roses look pale. Their fragrance was all about her.

“I consulted the entrails of a pigeon this morning,” he said. “A very informative set of guts. They told me that the high gods had been summoned by the Fates to read the great scroll. But there was no hint, no hint at all, of what they learned.”

“Perhaps another pigeon is on the way with this information.”

“No, no, the matter has not been published yet. That much I know. They’re being very closemouthed, the gods. I resorted to other devices. Cast dice, juggled numbers, even tried a few eastern

tricks with the conjunction of the stars. But no luck at all. The gods are silent, and I don't know what to think.”

“Well, keep eavesdropping. Perhaps you'll hear something.”

Girls in those days were very courteous to their fathers, even while being bored.

“It's absolutely essential that I learn something,” Chryseis went on. “For the war has come to a most important pass. Prince Achilles will undoubtedly rejoin the fray. He will seek out Hector. And upon the Dardanian plain beneath our walls the two greatest heroes on all the flat world will fight until one of them is killed. Now it is upon such days that oracles grow rich. If I could pick up even the tiniest scrap of information, I would be able to prophesy to Prince Hector concerning the duel, and he would give me splendid gifts. Yes, so noble-hearted is he, this eldest and strongest son of Priam, that he would reward even a gloomy prognostication, and if, by chance, the forecast should be happy, who knows what treasures he might heap upon me?”

Just then Cressida saw him look past her shoulder and pin a greasy, fawning smile to his face. He made a deep bow. Cressida turned. She saw Princess Cassandra, who had entered the garden so silently it was if she had been made to appear by magic.

Cassandra saw the priest's daughter coming toward her with an armful of roses. They seemed to be little red flames. The girl was carrying a bouquet of fire. And Cassandra saw her in the midst

of smoke and shrieks and falling timber offering a lover her corsage of flame. She spoke icily to quench the pain of the roses.

“Greetings, Cressida,” she said. “I do not wish to interrupt your gardening. I have come to speak with your father.”

Cressida watched her father with distaste. The man was practically jigging with pleasure and importance as he led Cassandra toward a garden seat.

“Priest,” said Cassandra. “The gods last night consulted the scroll of Fate.”

“I know, I know, good princess. So I have divined.”

“Have you divined what they were told?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Your patron, Apollo, has told you nothing?”

“Not a word, not a word. I am hopeful of persuading him by my arts. But it takes time, time. ...”

“Well, I have been told. I know now the heavy oracles concerning Troy.”

“Can you perhaps, dear Princess, find your way clear to confiding them in me?”

“No, I cannot.”

“A pity ...”

“But I have not come to your garden empty-handed. I will give you a single piece of information. It concerns my brother, Hector. I tell you so that you may tell him. If I tell him, I shall of course be disbelieved.”

“In all modesty, he will believe me,” said Chryseis. “He knows that I—”

“Yes, yes ... Listen closely now. For this is a conditional prophecy. If he fights Achilles, he will be killed. But Achilles cannot outlive Hector more than three days.”

“You say ‘if.’ Is it not ordained that they must fight?”

“Try to understand the way the gods entertain themselves, O oracle. There is always a margin of uncertainty injected into each edict concerning the future. That is the way the gods keep themselves in suspense about those affairs they themselves concoct, and make the spectacles more dramatic. This margin of uncertainty, this divine suspense, is called man’s will—those decisions he makes about his own affairs. ‘If,’ my friend, is a tiny word of sublime proportions. If man properly taps the explosive strength of its pent possibilities he can alter circumstances, and thrust the gods themselves into entirely new situations. The word ‘if’ heads the prophecy. *If* Hector fights, he dies. *If* Achilles kills Hector, he too dies. Make this clear to Hector. He can avoid the fight. In all honor he can do so. No one else fights Achilles. Why should he? If he avoids this duel, he will live. Go. Tell. He will reward you. Here is a gold armlet set with rubies and sapphires to pay for the time you have given me. If Hector exercises his ‘if,’ and refuses to fight Achilles, then I shall add to this armlet a fat bag of gold.”

Cassandra pulled the heavy gold circlet off her arm and gave it to Chryseis, who fell to his knees when he took it. The princess nodded to Cressida, and walked out of the garden.

As Cressida crouched again among the roses, Aphrodite now began tampering with affairs. She had come back from her session with the Fates teeming with mischief. Plan after plan for confounding the Greeks danced through her head.

“In my quiet way,” she said to herself, “it seems to me I have been much more influential than those brawling hags, Hera and Athena. After all it was my gift of Helen to Paris that started this war. And who was it that embroiled Agamemnon and Achilles, instilling in them a desire for the same slave girl? And look what that has led to. Now, however, with Patroclus dead, Achilles is sure to take the field. When he does, that mighty sword will shear through the delicate web of my contrivances. What then? All is not lost. Achilles must slay Hector if they fight, says the scroll of the Fates, but if he does, he himself must die soon afterward. If he does not combat Hector, all is as before. If he does, and they both die, then a new situation prevails. Diomedes will be the most formidable hero in the Greek camp. And I have a sharp grudge against that bully, Diomedes. Did he not dare to raise his lance against me, me, the Goddess of Love and Desire, and wound me on the wrist? Wait ... here’s an idea! I can settle my grudge with him, and in doing so throw the Greek camp into turmoil again. All this, by heaven, without even making a new plan; I’ll use the old one.

As I once set Agamemnon against Achilles, now, should Achilles die, I will set that Mycenaean bull in murderous rivalry against Diomedes ... and do it in the very same way—through Cressida, whom Agamemnon held as a slave, and whose ways intoxicated him. Now, I will infect Cressida with the sweet venom of love for Diomedes. She is already inclined that way, having watched him fight during his day of glory, and my job will be easy. Yes ... I will raise admiration to a passion that will burn in her veins and melt her bones. And when she returns to Agamemnon's tent, nothing will keep her there. It is Diomedes she will want, Diomedes she will find her way to, hurling those two chieftains at each other's throats, dividing the Greeks into factions again, and weakening them altogether, so that they will be incapable of an assault against my Trojans."

Thereupon she took a vial of a thick gluey red ointment that smelled of honey and baking bread—the odor of desire. Invisible, she flew to the garden of Chryseis and smeared, with this venom of desire, the thorns of the roses that Cressida was picking. The thorns pricked Cressida's hands. Suddenly she burned for Diomedes and she knew that before the night had passed she must find a way to him.

"But will he want *me*?" she thought to herself. "He is in love with battle. Killing Trojans is his one passion. And murder is an absorbing business. Will it leave room for gentler occupations? Agamemnon I could twist around my finger. But for this Diomedes

I feel a kind of terror. I must make myself irresistible to him. But how? By giving him what he wants the most. Yes ... victory over the Trojans, that is what he wants the most. If I can bring him information that will help him achieve victory, then perhaps he will love me. Do I know any secrets? Nothing that is not generally known. Chitchat about the court, observations about the personal habits of Priam's sons and daughters—these will not be useful to him. No ... I need something big, important. If, for only an hour, I could be that sour-faced Cassandra with her talent for reading the future, then I could come to him filled with the authority of an oracle, a priestess of knowledge, and could make him love me. But that's it! Cassandra! Locked in her head is what I must know. I must unlock it. But how? She despises me. Whom does she not despise? Her brother, Troilus—that's who. She dotes on him. Watching on the wall, she has eyes only for his deeds, his safety. She would tell Troilus what I want to know. Then I must try to know Troilus a little better. It should not be difficult. He has a roving eye. It has rested on me occasionally." And so, as we shall see, goddesses can be outwitted too. Or rather, can outwit themselves. For Aphrodite, attempting to confound the Greeks, had kindled a tiny flame that was to grow into a fire big enough to burn Troy even unto the last timber.

Chryseis visited Hector to tell him of Cassandra's prophecy, claiming it as his own. Hector interrupted him.

“If I had any doubts about fighting Achilles,” said Hector, “I am quite rid of them now. I have always expected him to vanquish me. His pedigree is much finer than mine. He is not only the son of Thetis, queen of nereids, but great-grandson to Zeus himself. We lift our weapons against him in vain. With much pain we have learned that he cannot be hurt by spear-cast or sword-thrust. No arrow can wound him, no dart pierce his magically toughened hide. And in the use of weapons he has no equal. Yet, I have always known that I must challenge him one day, for I am the best we have, and we must counter their best with ours. To challenge him, to meet him, to pray for strength and skill somehow to pierce that invulnerable hide—to do this and then to die—this I have known to be my fate ever since Paris returned with Helen from Sparta. To meet him, to fall, and to account myself lucky to be spared the sight of Troy being sacked—that has been the best I could have hoped for. Now you tell me that my death must lead to his? And you call this a gloomy prophecy? My dear man, it is the best news I have heard in almost a decade. I just hope I can trust it. I don’t take much stock in readings of the future, you know. We have a prophetess in the family who claims to be divinely inspired, and she is invariably wrong. However, I shall do my best to believe what you tell me. Now I shall seek out Achilles with great joy. And joy strengthens a man’s arm.”

“Pray, prince Hector, consider—”

“Enough, good Chryseis. You have pleased me. Don’t spoil it. Take this bag of gold, and go. And be sure to watch from the wall tomorrow. It should be an interesting afternoon.”

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THE WRATH OF ACHILLES

ACHILLES TOOK THE FIELD. all aglitter he was in the new armor forged by Hephaestus. His shield burned like the sun-disk at dawn; his plumed crest burned with the colors of the sunset. Between dawn-colored shield and sunset crest his face burned white-hot as noon with pent fury. He leaped into his brass chariot and shouted to his horses. But instead of charging toward the enemy lines which they always did at the first sound of his war-shout, this time Xanthus and Balius tossed their heads, turned their long faces to him, rolling their great golden eyes.

“Pray, forgive us, master,” said Xanthus. “But one word before you go into battle.”

“It is this,” said Balius. “Do not seek Hector in single combat. If you find him, you will kill him, for no one stands before you—”

“And if you kill him,” said Xanthus, “you must die within three days, because that is the decree of the Fates.”

“I cannot believe my ears,” said Achilles. “When in the field no one questions my commands—from the lowliest Myrmidon to the most powerful member of the War Council—I am certainly not accustomed to consulting my chariot horses concerning tactics.”

“It is for love of you we speak, dear master,” said Xanthus. “Now do as you will.”

“But one favor,” said Balius. “Please leave instructions that we be burned on the same pyre as you. We do not wish to be driven by another master after your death.”

“Noted,” said Achilles. “Now be silent and obey orders. Forward!”

As Achilles took the field, Hector was being dressed for battle. Not by his squire, but by his wife, Andromache, who had begged him to let her prepare him for this day’s fighting. He had hesitated. She had been present at the conversation with Chryseis and knew the prediction about his death. But she had not said a word to dissuade him from meeting Achilles. She had saved it all up, he was afraid, for this last hour before battle. And the one thing that could weaken him, he knew, was her weeping. But she had asked to be allowed to help with his armor and he could not refuse. And now she was dressing him in the gorgeous metal that he had taken from Patroclus.

“Dear husband,” she said. “I am filled with such love and admiration that my hands tremble, and I can scarcely bind the latches of your corselet. For in this heaven-forged armor you shine like the very morning star.”

He looked at her in amazement. No tears, no reproaches, no mournful face. She was alight with love, brimming with serenity. Never since the beginning of the war had she exuded such confidence. He did not question her, but accepted her mood with glad heart. He would have felt differently perhaps had he known

how she had arrived at her present mood. But it was a secret he was never to learn.

The night before, Andromache had left Hector's bed. She wrapped herself in a dark cloak and made her way through the sleeping city. Mounting the inner steps to the wall and keeping to the deepest shadows, she avoided the sentry and climbed down the other side of the wall. There she crossed the Dardanian plain to a bend of the river called Scamander. Now she unwrapped her cloak, pulled her gown over her head and stood naked, white as a birch, in the moonlight. She stepped into the river up to her knees.

"River!" she called. "O tall brown god who loved me while I was yet a maid. River-god, strong brown lover, Axius, spirit of the Scamander, answer me now—for I have come to you once again."

The river was a blackness spangled with gold in the moonlight. And gold was the color of the god who arose before her.

"Many tender maidens bathe in my stream," he said. "Which one are you?"

"Andromache."

"Oh, yes? ... I think I remember. Very sweet and willing. How have you been since last we met?"

"Flourishing, my lord. I am wife to Hector, son of Priam, first among the princes of Troy."

"Hector—the great warrior?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been wed?"

“Seven years.”

“Why have you left his bed and come to seek me now?”

“Tomorrow Hector fights Achilles.”

“Foolish child! Hurry home, wake him up, take him into your embrace! It is your last night together.”

“No.”

“No? Did you say it was Achilles he was fighting?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what I thought. My dear child, no one, no one at all, engages Achilles in single combat and returns to his wife. It’s just not done. The man is completely fatal. Couching here on my riverbed I have watched him in action now for nine years and, believe me, he is the complete widow-maker. Go home and love your husband, lady; tomorrow you are a widow.”

“I beg leave to differ,” said Andromache. “There is something in woman that rebels against these ordinances of the Fates ... these absolute iron edicts concerning the future. We do not like to foreclose on possibilities. To us the future is precisely that which is pregnant with new life, new chance, new luck. I have heard the prophecy concerning Hector, but I will not accept it. And I need an ally strong as Fate. That is why I have returned to you, O river-god.”

“Strong as fate? You flatter me. More powerful gods than I bow to fate. I do well enough here, but after all I am only a small

local deity. Beyond the banks of this river I have no authority whatever.”

“Ahh—but rivers rise. Rivers rage. Rivers overflow their banks and extend their authority across great fields. They sweep away walls, cities. Rivers drink floods and grow to mighty torrents rivalling the sea. You are too modest, Axius. It is a new quality. I never noticed it before.”

“And you are a very clever, very persuasive lady,” said Axius. “Something I did notice before, but had forgotten. Speak plainly; what is it you want me to do? Ask me what you will, and if it is in my power I shall help you.”

“Trojan meets Greek upon your bank tomorrow. Hector will meet Achilles on your shore. Go into flood, my lord. Rage over your banks—but selectively. Sweep Achilles away. Drown him in his heavy armor.”

“How do you know they will fight upon my bank?”

“They shall. I promise.”

“Then I promise to do what I can. Sweet Andromache, you have returned to me on a night of hot moonlight when I was feeling old and stagnant, and have restored to me the lusty tides of my youth. I will do as you ask though stronger gods oppose me.”

Andromache returned to the palace and, later that morning, as she helped Hector on with his armor, she still gave off the fragrance of that river which half-girdled Troy, running from the mountains to the sea, with dragonflies blue as jewels darting at its ripples and

with elm-tree and willow and tamarisk dipping toward their reflections. And yet it was a river which could change its temper with brutal suddenness—drinking rain, gulping floods from the hills, and rising, raging over its banks, devouring town and village.

And Hector, donning his shining armor, felt himself fill with the strength of that river whose presence had been brought into this room by his river-smelling wife.

Andromache spoke: “One request. You know I never meddle into your affairs. But do me this favor, my husband, my lord, and let me advise you out of a dream that came to me in the night.”

“Speak, my dear.”

“Do not seek Achilles beyond the Scamander, but stay within the bend of the river, and let him come to you. If you do so, according to my dream, you shall defeat the son of Peleus and win everlasting glory ... and return to me after the battle is over.”

She fell to the ground and hugged his knees.

“Promise!” she cried. “Promise, oh, husband, please promise!”

“I promise,” he said.

A detachment of Trojans pretended to flee before Achilles and his Myrmidons, drawing them toward the Scamander. There they turned to face the Greeks within a half-circle of marshy land lying in a bend of the river. Achilles could not use his chariot; its wheels sank up to their hubs in the marshy ground. So he dismounted and fought on foot, followed closely by his Myrmidons. But mounted or afoot he moved through the Trojan ranks like Death itself with

his scythe. Every thrust of his spear drank blood. Charging ahead he broke the Trojan ranks, and the brown columns of his Myrmidons, festive as ants, gorged their swords on the flesh of the scattered foe.

Now Hector and his picked guard charged into the marshy arc in a flank attack on the Myrmidons. Howling with ferocious joy Achilles sought Hector through the mob of fighting men.

“Stand, son of Priam!” he roared. “Try your stolen armor against my weapon’s edge! Stand and face me or my spear will find your life between your shoulderblades, and you shall die a shameful death!”

Despite himself Hector found his courage melting at the sound of that terrible voice. He did not turn and flee, but retreated slowly until his back was to the river and he could retreat no further.

“Now! Now!” shouted Achilles. “You have a narrow choice, killer of Patroclus. Death by water or death by blade.” And he drew back to hurl his spear. But Axius arose invisibly from the depths of the river and cast a cloak of mist about Hector. Achilles, poising his mighty lance, saw Hector disappear. Saw mist rising from the bank of the river, hiding his foe from sight. He cast his spear into the column of mist, but saw it sail harmlessly through and land in the river. For Axius had lifted Hector in his arms and borne him safely to the other side of the river. And all Achilles could see was tatters of mist drifting across the face of the water, and he knew that Hector had escaped his wrath once again.

Now, in terrible fury at this loss, he turned upon the other Trojans, and killed, and killed, and killed. The wet marshland grew wetter yet with running blood. Men sank to the top of their shin-greaves. Only Achilles remained lightfooted as a demi-god, running over the surface of the mud like marsh-fire. His new-moon sword rose and fell as if he were mowing a field. Every time it fell, a Trojan died.

Finally, the Trojans in panic fled into the river. But Achilles followed with his Myrmidons and slaughtered them as they tried to cross the ford. Bodies fell into the river and disappeared. The water ran red as sunset. Now Axius arose again from the depths of the river—in his own form this time—and Achilles found himself confronting a figure tall as a tree with greenish, coppery skin.

“Halt, Achilles,” he said in a voice that rumbled like a waterfall. “Son of Peleus, halt—before I drown you beneath fathoms of my outraged stream.”

“You must be the god of this river,” said Achilles. “Very well. I have no quarrel with you, my lord. My business is with Trojans.”

“But I have a quarrel with you, you tiger in human form. How dare you stain my waters with blood? Pollute my stream with corpses? Prince of Phthia, you have offered me deadly insult, and now you yourself must die.”

Axius leaned down scooping into the river with his mighty hands and flung a wave at Achilles. The heavy water hit him full, knocking him off his feet, tumbling over him. He fought for breath.

Every time he tried to rise another wave knocked him down. The river-god stood waist-deep flinging torrents of water over the bank. Caught like a beetle in his heavy armor, unable to rise, Achilles was rolled over and over into the river itself. He must surely have drowned had not his mother been Thetis, daughter of Nereus, Old Man of the Sea, who bequeathed to all his descendants the power to breathe under water. But the Myrmidons had no such lineage; they were capable of drowning, and those that had followed Achilles into battle were caught in the rising waters and drowned, every one.

Achilles, who had stumbled to his feet, saw his men drowning about him, and could not help them. He sprang into the middle of the stream and challenged Axius, shouting: “Fight fair, you watery demon! I have contended with you in your element, and you have not killed me. Now come up on land and fight me with sword and spear.”

But Axius uttered a cataract laugh and, knowing now he could not drown Achilles, tried to crush him under a weight of water. He curled himself into a huge crested wave that towered taller than any building in Troy and smashed this entire mass of water down on Achilles, who was hurled to the bottom of the river. He felt himself being pummeled, beaten, choked—felt an unbearable pressure squeezing his ribs. His arms were crushed against his sides; he could not even raise his sword.

Seeing his enemy pinned helplessly to the river-bed, Axius now scooped up boulder after boulder and rained them down on the

Greek hero—like a boy pelting the ground with stones, trying to squash an ant.

But Thetis, Lady of the Living Waters, knew everything that was happening in every sea and stream and river of which the earth drank. Rising swift as thought from the depths of the sea she appeared before Hephaestus, who worked at his smoky forge inside his volcano. Claspng him in her cool arms she flew the hot little lame god to the lips of the crater, and said: “Look! See what’s happening! Axius is murdering my son!”

Hephaestus, blissful as a babe always at Thetis’ touch, half-dazed before the sea-magic of her beauty, dived back into the volcano, returned with an armful of fire from his forge. Now this fire is hotter than man ever sees burning in any furnace. It is the essential flame, the very core of flame, burning deep in the bowels of the earth, and is the source of all flame. And the lame god cast this fire that was hotter than fire down upon the river-bank. It kindled reeds, elm-trees, willows, and heated the mud itself to a molten mass. The river boiled. Axius, god of the river, felt his flesh scorching. And while he was a god and could not die, he could feel pain, and the pain of Hephaestus’ red fire was so terrible that he cried: “Hold, Hephaestus, hold! Hold off your red fire! And I will break my vow to Andromache and allow the son of Thetis to escape!”

The smith-god recalled his fire. Axius dived to the river-bottom to cool off his blistered shoulders. Achilles staggered to his

feet, took off his helmet, emptied it of water, then clapped it on his head again, forded the river, and set off in chase of Hector.

Andromache, watching from the city wall, had been seized with great joy when she saw the river rise. She was filled with a marvellous laughing happiness when she saw Axius hurl his crested wave and bury Achilles under tons of water. But when she saw the banks burst into flame, saw the river boil, and the river-god's hair burning, and heard his wailing—when she saw Achilles rise from the depths of the river like the spirit of vengeance itself, the terrible tin of his greaves cleaving the water, and saw him race over the plain seeking Hector, and the light flashing from his sun-disk shield and his new moon-sword—then she knew that in him was gathered the strength of a natural force, crushing all plots and stratagems and wifely schemes—then she knew that Hector was doomed.

“I will not watch him being killed,” she said to herself. “I cannot bear it. No wife should be made to watch her husband being butchered. I will go back now and get my baby and, at the very moment that Hector falls, I will leap with my son in my arms, dashing out our lives on the plain below. Thus father, son, and wife will be burned on one pyre, and cheer each other on the last journey to Erebus.”

She left the wall and went to her home. Entering the nursery she took her babe from the nurse's arms. But when she looked into its face her strength deserted her and she fell into a swoon.

Now, in the shadow of the wall, watched by his father and his mother and all the people of the court, Hector turned to face Achilles—breathing one last prayer as he did so:

“I call to you, Apollo. I ask not for victory, for victory cannot be given, it must be taken. All I ask is that my courage last; that my marrow does not freeze at his terrible war-shout; that my knees do not melt before the white-hot fury of his lipless face; that I can stand my ground before his dread charge, and meet him weapon upon weapon without fleeing. My father watches on the wall. The pride of Troy rides upon my shoulders. Fair Apollo, bright Phoebus, I pray you, let me face my death like a man.”

Apollo heard and sent down a shaft of sunlight that hit the back of Hector’s neck, gilding his helmet and warming his courage so that he stood full to Achilles’ charge. Met him sword upon sword and shield upon shield, standing firmly planted before that fearful rush that no other man had ever withstood.

But Achilles felt himself being caressed by a delicious chill. He was bathed in sweet combative airs. The clash of weapons was bright music to which he moved perfectly, as in a dance. And he was happy to have a partner for this deadly dance, happy that Hector did not break and run before him. He wanted to feast himself slowly and gluttonously on the death of the Trojan who had killed Patroclus. His new-moon sword flashed. It locked with Hector’s sword. Intimately the blades writhed. A great shout went up from the walls of Troy as the people there saw their champion

stand so stoutly against Achilles, parrying his thrusts, blade meeting blade in equal play.

“Can it be?” thought old Priam. “Will my long years be crowned by this enormous glory? Will my son really be able to stand against this monster?”

Achilles laughed aloud as he felt the force of Hector’s parry.

“Well done,” Achilles said. “You’re as good a man as ever I met. Almost as good as the one you killed—but for that one you shall pay.”

Hector did not answer. He saved his breath for fighting. He was putting all his strength into every parry and counterthrust, and so far had met sword with sword and had kept the terrible new-moon blade from shearing through his armor. But every stroke now that Achilles aimed seemed to fall from a great height, seemed to fall with greater and greater weight as if it were plunging toward the center of earth. Hector felt his arms grow weary, his shoulders numb with the weight of his own muscle bunching to move his arms. Achilles’ blows fell with greater and greater weight, and the laughing voice grated in his ear.

“Not so soon,” said Achilles. “Don’t start to breathe so hard this early in the game, my fine Trojan. We have barely begun. This is only a little early sword-play; the real work is still to come.”

Then, with a magnificent intricate stroke that changed direction in midair, Achilles snared Hector’s blade in his own,

snapped the sword from the Trojan's hand and sent it flying. And a great groan went up from the watchers on the wall.

"No sword?" said Achilles. "A pity. It was my own sword, too, that you took from Patroclus. Never before has it been sent flying like this. But if you have lost your sword then you need no armor."

Now, coolly, relentlessly, he stepped around Hector, using his sword as delicately as though it were a small knife. And just as Hector had done to Patroclus, so did Achilles do now to Hector, shaming the Trojan hero by cutting the latches of his armor. The breastplate fell off. The corselet fell away. The greaves were sheared away. And Hector stood naked except for his helmet.

But Hector, free of his armor, dodged away from Achilles' sword and ran for the city gate. Achilles flashed after him. Carrying full armor he still ran lightly as Hector did, cutting him off from the city gate and pursuing him around the walls. Like an eagle swooping upon a lamb was the armored Achilles, striding effortlessly after the naked Hector. Around and around three times did Achilles follow Hector—as Hecuba hid her eyes and Priam tore his beard and all the people lamented. Striding relentlessly after his naked prey, flashing in his armor like the evening star, Achilles pursued Hector around the city walls. And, after the third circuit, he lengthened his stride and caught him.

Now Hector fell into the burning embrace of that bright armor like a maiden who has run from her first suitor, but finally swoons into his arms. For Hector's wind was gone, his marrow was frozen,

the hinges of his knees were melting with dread, and his manhood was run out. He fell into Achilles' bright embrace. One great hand seized Hector's hair and drew back his head, stretching the strong bronze throat like a lamb's to the knife. The other hand raised the new-moon sword.

And as Apollo shrieked in anger and threw a cloud across the face of the sun so that the entire Dardanian plain darkened, Achilles with a swift merciful stroke cut Hector's throat. Then, still unstained, unwearied, and bright as the evening star, he bound Hector's ankles with the embroidered girdle that Ajax had given Hector after their duel. He bound the other end of the girdle to the axle of his war-chariot, which had trundled up to him at his whistle. He leaped into his chariot, shouted to his stallions, and they began to gallop around the walls of Troy dragging Hector in the dust behind them. Seven times Achilles circled the walls of Troy, dragging Hector's body behind his chariot.

But Apollo threw a sleep upon Priam and Hecuba so that they would not see the body of their son being dragged in the dust. The sun-god also threw a magic balm upon the corpse of Hector so that the body was not broken or the flesh torn as it was dragged along the rough ground behind that terrible chariot.

With a final shout Achilles swerved his horses and headed back for the Greek camp still dragging the body of Hector.

CRESSIDA

LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, while the armies were skirmishing on the plain, Cressida crossed the lines all unseen and entered the tent of Diomedes. She found a slave girl there heating water in a huge copper cauldron, a little pale girl whom Diomedes had captured in a raid two years before on the island of Tenos. The maidens of Tenos have squeaky voices and look like little white mice, but Diomedes had kept her as a bath-girl because her hands were so soft.

“Are you heating water for your master’s bath?” asked Cressida.

“Yes, lady. He comes back all hot and grimy from the fighting. And blood-splattered—you have no idea! And he wants his bath immediately, and a cool drink, and fresh clothes.”

“Heavy labor for so small a girl,” said Cressida in her hoarse purring voice. “I am moved to pity. Now just disappear somewhere and I shall do your work this afternoon.”

“Oh, no, lady!”

“Oh, yes, little girl.”

“I daren’t! I daren’t! He likes things just so. He has to be scraped of battle-filth with this ivory stick. Then kneaded in every muscle with warm oil. Then anointed with cool scented oil. Then blotted with a fleecy towel.”

“These are demanding tasks requiring enthusiasm and skill,” said Cressida. “Nevertheless, I think I can do them passably well. So off with you!”

“No, lady, no! I cannot! I dare not! He allows no one else to bathe him. He likes the touch of my hands.”

“You will be feeling the touch of my hands, little one, and you won’t like the feel of them, I promise. Now get out before I lose my patience. And here are three pieces of silver for you.”

“I will not take them; I will not go!”

Cressida slapped the girl across the face so hard that she knocked her off her feet. Then grasped her thin shoulders, pulled her up again, and shook her until her jaw wobbled. Seizing her by the hair she dragged her from the tent. Cressida held the little pale weeping girl in both hands and looked down at her through the tangle of her hair. The slave girl was like a white mouse in the clutch of a beautiful tawny cat.

“You will keep away from the tent all night,” said Cressida. “Understand? If I catch a glimpse of your pasty face before morning I’ll whip you till you can’t walk. Hear me, little mouse?”

“Yes, lady. Anything you say.”

“Here are three pieces of silver. Go find some soldier to kiss away your tears.”

When Diomedes returned to his tent after the day’s skirmishing he found Cressida there heating water in the big copper pot.

“Welcome, my lord,” she said. “Did you have good sport today?”

He looked at her in amazement.

“Who are you?”

“Do you not remember me, O Diomedes? Many a time during the past months coming to Agamemnon’s tent for a war council, you have found me there.”

“Agamemnon’s tent? Yes. But then you are the priest’s daughter, the one that had to be returned to her father because Apollo shot arrows of plague into our camp.”

“I did not ask to be returned to my father. It was his idea entirely. And now, you see, I have crossed over again. I have become attached to the Greeks—or, rather, to *a* Greek. To you, my lord. I have come back to you.”

He looked her up and down very carefully, and said nothing.

“Let me help you off with your armor. Here is your cauldron all ready. Everything is ready: the ivory stick, the warm oil, the cool scented oil, the fleecy towel. I have acquainted myself with your bath habits.”

“Where is my bath-slave?”

“Here I am.”

“I mean the little girl from Tenos.”

“I sent her away.”

“You sent her away?”

“Do not blame her. She had no choice. I bribed her; she refused the bribe. I beat her. She could not refuse the beating. You will not see her until morning.”

“But do you not know that you have richly earned a beating yourself for meddling with my servants?”

“I put myself into your hands, my lord. But why not let me take your armor off and bathe you? If you still want to beat me then I am at your disposal. But right now you must be weary.”

“You are a daughter of the enemy,” said Diomedes. “Your presence in our tents before brought disaster upon us. Cost us hundreds of men. How do I know that you have not returned with some treachery in view?”

“Oh, I have treachery in view,” she said. “You are acute, my lord. I plan a massive betrayal—but of Trojans.”

As she spoke she had been undoing the latches of his breastplate. She drew off the heavy curved piece of bronze, and then began to untie the bindings of his corselet.

“After your bath, when you are rested, when you have been anointed in cool scented oils, and clothed in clean garments, and have drunk and fed, and your mind is unclouded by fatigue—then I will tell you what you most want to know.”

Later that night when all the tents were dark, Cressida told what she had done.

“To make it brief, my lord,” she began. “I come to you with those secret oracles which enwrap the fate of Troy. Things which

must happen or be made to happen before you can storm those walls and sack the city.”

“How did you come by such oracles? From your father, the priest? Forgive me, but I have seen him, my girl, and I do not believe he is the kind of man the gods really entrust their secrets to.”

“Not from him. Of course not. But from Apollo himself—through Cassandra, whom the sun-god confides in even against her will.”

“And she confided in you?”

“Not at all,” said Cressida. “She loathes me. With good cause. No, it was her brother, Troilus, she confided in. For I, wanting to come to you, not wishing to come emptyhanded, resolved to bring you a love-gift you could not refuse. So I persuaded young Troilus. I asked the young prince to go to his sister, Cassandra, and make her tell him the oracles, and bring them to me.”

“Why did Cassandra, who is so clever, and would know the importance of such oracles to the fate of Troy, why would she entrust them to anyone else?”

“She *is* clever, poor girl. But she dotes on Troilus, and can refuse him nothing—even as I dote on you. Besides, the poor thing is so accustomed to her prophecies being disbelieved that she is eager to cast the future for anyone who pretends belief. And this I instructed Troilus to do.”

“You are a very clever girl yourself.”

“Love has sharpened my wits. Such love shows how stupid I am. And so cleverness can come from stupidity—which gives me hope I can tease some heat even out of your icy soul, King of Argos.”

“The oracles!” cried Diomedes. “Tell me the oracles. What must we do to take Troy?”

“Two conditions are necessary. One of them is couched in a riddle. It says that Troy can finally fall only through an act of ‘monumental piety.’ And it caps this riddle with a verse:

‘Could is should,
Should is would,
would is wood, of course.
What began with an apple
Must end with a horse.’ ”

“Too much for me,” said Diomedes. “Maybe Ulysses can figure it out. He has a head for such things. What’s the other one? I hope it’s a little plainer, or we’ll be here for another ten years.”

“The other one is quite plain, quite simple. It says Troy shall not be taken unless Troilus dies today.”

“Today? Then it’s too late! It is after midnight; the day has passed!”

“But before it passed, young Troilus had also passed—over the Styx into Erebus where he will join all his brothers sent before him by you and Achilles.”

“You mean Troilus is dead?”

“I have had a very full day,” said Cressida. “Here is a little souvenir of it.”

She handed him a dagger.

“See, my lord, it is sharp. And it has been used. It is encrusted with that which should be more precious to you than jewels—the heart-blood of Troilus.”

Diomedes leaped up. He was a brave man, among the bravest who ever lived, but now he was bathed in an icy sweat of horror.

“You killed him!” he cried. “He loved you, and you killed him! Why, you are Hecate’s own handmaid, a witch out of hell.”

“For shame,” she crooned. “A warrior to be so shocked at the idea of death. How many men have you killed, my lord? How many beautiful sons have you butchered and left in the dust? Why begrudge me my one—which is my love-gift to you? How many times have you seen a cat who loves its master bringing him a dead bird or mouse to lay at his feet as a token of this love? So I lay Troilus at your splendid feet, my master, my king, my only love. His death is the key that unlocks the gates of Troy, and brings you victory—as soon as Ulysses reads the riddle of that other oracle.”

“To kill an enemy in open warfare is one thing,” said Diomedes. “But to slip a dagger into his back while telling him how much you love him is something else.”

“Foolish man,” murmured Cressida. “Your enemies die in pain and terror. Troilus died in bliss. My arms were about him, my lips

on his. He did not even feel the blade. If so happy a death could come to all men, it would lose much of its unpopularity.”

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THE END OF THE WAR

THIS IS HOW THE PROPHECY was fulfilled concerning Achilles:

Priam came to Achilles' tent to beg that Hector's body be restored to him for honorable cremation. The old king humbled himself before the mighty youth—knelt at his feet, and kissed the terrible hands that had killed his son. Achilles relented, and promised to return the body. This kindness was to kill him. For when he bore the body to the city gate, Paris was hiding nearby. As Achilles lifted the corpse from his chariot, Paris loosed his arrow, which Apollo guided to the one vulnerable spot on Achilles—the great tendon behind the right heel. The arrow cut the tendon, killing him immediately.

The promise Achilles had made to his stallions was kept; they were burned on the same pyre, and never had to know another master's hands on their reins.

Ulysses, faced with the task of unriddling the oracle, prayed to Athena for wisdom. Whether she granted him new insight or refreshed his old cunning, he never knew.

“The verse ends with these words,” he said to himself, “‘What began with an apple must end with a horse.’ But what began with an apple? This war, of course. It was started by the golden apple of discord, which led to the squabble among the goddesses,

to the judgment of Paris, to the abduction of Helen—all of which led to the thousand ships at Aulis and the siege of Troy. Then the war must end with a horse, the oracle says. What horse? What kind of horse? The verse tells, no doubt. Let's see now.

‘Could is should
Should is would,
Would is wood, of course.
What began with an apple
Must end with a horse.’

“The answer is wood! A wooden horse! This is what the oracle clearly demands, leaving everything as murky as ever. What can we accomplish with a wooden horse? What do we want to accomplish? To get inside Troy, of course. Can we ride this wooden steed, jump it over the walls of Troy? Wooden horses are not noted for their speed and agility. Looking at it another way, it's not a horse but a statue. A statue? But yes. A statue to Poseidon, father of horses! That's it! A statue so big that armed men can hide in its belly and be obligingly rolled by the pious Trojans into Troy. That is what the oracle meant by ‘a monumental act of piety.’ It all fits.”

Thereupon Ulysses set a gigantic plan afoot, the most cunning plot he had spun in all his artful career. On a beach hidden from the sight of the walls, he ordered carpenters to build an enormous wooden horse, varnishing it to a last luster, and ornamenting it with

gilded mane and hooves. It was set on solid wooden wheels, and a trapdoor was cut into its belly big enough to hold twenty men.

Then Ulysses, Diomedes, Menelaus, Little Ajax, and sixteen other of their best warriors hid themselves in the belly of the horse. They wore no armor and carried no shields, lest the clanking metal betray them; they were armed only with swords and daggers. Then the ships were rolled down to the water, and launched. Masts were stepped, sails raised, and the fleet moved out of the harbor, behind a headland, out of sight. When they were hidden from view, they moored again to wait for a signal.

When the Trojans awoke the next morning, they saw no tents on the beach, no ships, no Greeks. The camp had disappeared. Even the cattle were gone, and the fires were cold. Rejoicing with loud shouts, weeping for joy, the entire population rushed out onto the beach. No one at all was to be seen. After ten years the beach was Trojan again—the war was over! It was unbelievable, yet unbearable to believe anything else.

They marvelled when they found the giant wooden horse, and tried to guess its purpose.

“Read what is written!” cried Chryseis.

Cut into the shoulder of the horse were these words: “An offering to Poseidon by the Greeks, who, after ten years of war, sail for home again, and beseech fair skies and following winds.”

“Clearly, an offer to Poseidon,” said Chryseis wisely. “And if we take it into the city and set it in our temple we shall be the ones

to earn the favor of the Earth-shaker, who has been so hostile to us.”

“Brilliant,” said Priam. “The very thing.”

“Fatal!” shrieked Cassandra. “That horse will devour Troy!”

But no one heeded *her*.

Another of Priam’s advisers, a man named Laocoön, had other ideas, too.

“Hear me, O king,” he said. “Beware the Greeks, even bearing gifts. I mistrust this horse. I mistrust everything an enemy does. Let us take axes and chop it to pieces.”

He was a very large, impressive, deep-voiced man. His words made Priam hesitate, and he might have convinced the king—but Poseidon took a hand. He sent two enormous sea serpents gliding up onto the beach. They seized the two small sons of Laocoön and began to swallow them whole. Laocoön leaped upon the serpents. But they simply looped their coils about him and crushed him to death as they finished swallowing his sons.

“Let the impious take heed!” cried Chryseis. “Those serpents were sent by Poseidon to punish the sacrilegious words of Laocoön. We must honor this wooden horse dedicated to the sea-god; bedeck it with flowers, take it into the city, and set it in our temple.”

Awestruck by the fate of Laocoön, the Trojans did as Chryseis bid.

That night the fleet put into shore again. Under the command of Agamemnon the Greeks disembarked and waited on the beach. Exhausted by their rejoicing, the Trojans slept in their city. In the darkest hour of night, Ulysses crept out. Seeing no one, he tapped on the horse's belly. Diomedes and the others slipped silently out of the trapdoor. Menelaus dashed toward the palace and Helen, followed by half the men. Ulysses led the others to the wall where they surprised and killed the drowsy sentries—then set a signal fire on top of the wall, summoning the army. Ulysses descended and swung open the huge gates, and the main body of troops entered Troy.

The old tales go to great lengths now giving the names of Trojans slaughtered in the sack of the city and the manner of their deaths. But it is sufficient to say that the men were butchered, houses looted and burned, and, finally, the women and children borne off into slavery.

Of all the Trojan princes, Aeneas was the only one to escape the massacre. Heedless of his own safety he lifted his old father, Anchises, to his shoulders, and carried him through the burning city. And the Greeks were so struck by his courage that they let him go.

He boarded a ship and sailed away into a series of strange adventures. After years of hardship and incredible danger he came to a fair land and founded a city later to be called Rome.

Cassandra was taken back to Mycenae as Agamemnon's slave. But she was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, on the same night that she knifed her husband in his bath. Cassandra had warned Agamemnon this would happen but he hadn't believed her.

Paris was presumed dead after the sack of Troy. But some say he fled, and lived under other names in other lands, protected always by Aphrodite.

Helen went back to Sparta with Menelaus and lived happily there as Queen. She explained to her husband that she had been abducted by force, kept in Troy against her will, and he chose to be convinced. She kept her beauty always and was much admired by the princes of Hellas who often found occasion to visit the royal palace in Sparta.

Cressida disappears from legend after the war. It is believed that she was taken to Argos by Diomedes, but what happened to her there nobody knows.

As for Ulysses, his real troubles began after he left Troy. It took him ten years to get back to Ithaca, and his adventures were so many and so marvellous they take another book to tell.

The flames that consumed Troy burned for seven years. They burned so hotly that the Scamander turned to steam and hissed away—and Poseidon himself retreated from their awful heat,

shrinking his sea. Where the beautiful waters of Troy's harbor once flowed is now a parched and empty plain.

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About the Author

Bernard Evslin (1922–1993) was a bestselling and award-winning author known for his works on Greek and other cultural mythologies. The *New York Times* called him “one of the most widely published authors of classical mythology in the world.” He was born in New Rochelle, New York, and attended Rutgers University. After several years working as a playwright, screenwriter, and documentary producer, he began publishing novels and short stories in the late 1960s. During his long career, Evslin published more than seventy books—over thirty of which were for young adults. His bestseller *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths* has been translated into ten different languages and has sold more than ten million copies worldwide. He won the National Education Association Award in 1961, and in 1986 his book *Hercules* received the Washington Irving Children’s Book Choice Award. Evslin died in Kauai, Hawaii, at the age of seventy-seven.

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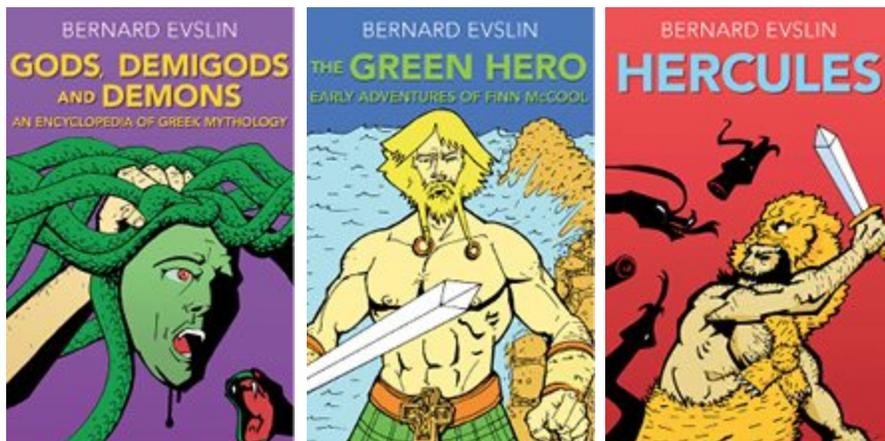
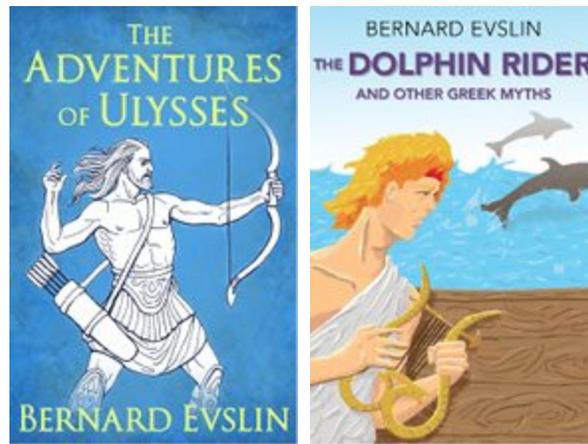
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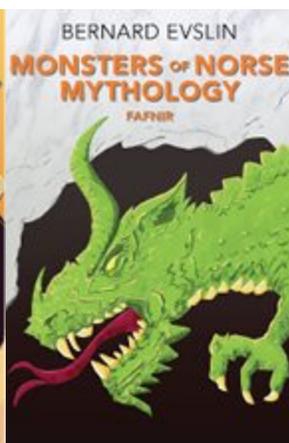
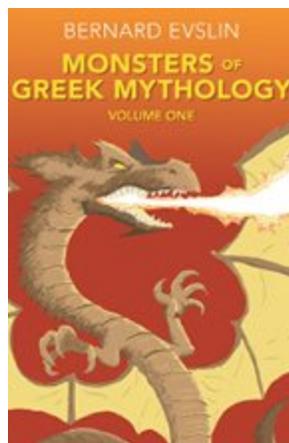
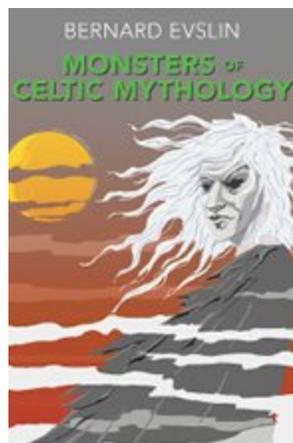
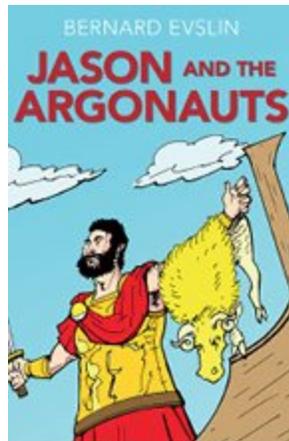
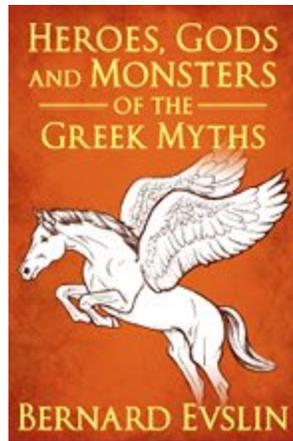


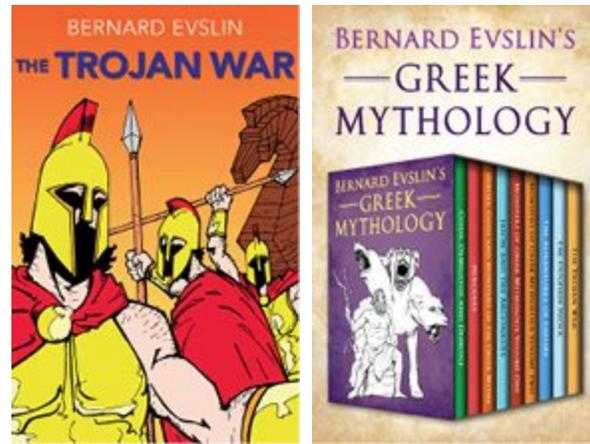
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