

TO MY SON,
ARTHUR WOMACK VON PREUSSEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

While I have used a map of the palace at Knossos as a template for that which Stephan and his family inhabit, scholars disagree about the function of each room, so I've found it more helpful to think of the palace as an imaginary space in which the myth happens. It isn't "real", or "historical": simply a framework on which to stretch a story, like a tapestry.

For clarity, I have employed the Greek names for the main characters that have come down to us in the received myth: Minos, Pasiphaë, Ariadne, Theseus. Theseus's companions have names from Greek poetry.

Minos, according to legend, had several children, one of whom was called Deucalion: I have imagined him as my hero, Deucalion Stephanos.

I have, of necessity, invented some characters; a couple have names that come from a Minoan tablet (Bansa, Rusa); others I've given Greek names that felt appropriate to their function and

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character (Timon, Myrrah, Lysias, Lords Callias and Nicodemus.)

Myths are elastic: this is simply my version, another way into the great store of stories that is Greek mythology.

– Philip Womack

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Deucalion Stephanos – Dew-*kay*-lee-on *Stef*-an-os

Ariadne – A-ree-*ad*-nee

Minos – *Mine*-os

Pasiphaë – *Pas*-if-ay

Daedalus – *Dee*-dal-us

Icarus – *Ick*-ar-us

Myrrah – *Mirr*-a

Timon – *Ti*-mown

Theseus – *Thee*-see-us

Philoclea – *Fil*-o-klay-a

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MYRRAH'S CURSE

Before anyone had even heard of the Minotaur, before Myrrah uttered her terrible curse, we were out hunting a white hind in the forest. The hounds, led by my favourite, Patch, found her scent immediately.

We were galloping along, the branches of cypresses waving against the brightening sky. I was keeping close to the front, so they could say that I, Prince Deucalion Stephanos, had ridden bravely.

That was my full title. Most people, though, called me Stephan. I preferred it.

I was riding my grey mare, Swift, and I jumped a stream at the same time as my father, King Minos, on his black stallion, Farseeker, and I caught an expression of pure joy in his face. He shouted out and surged ahead, so I spurred Swift on. Hunting was something we both loved.

“Imagine you’re drawing the sun’s chariot, not carrying stupid old me!” I whispered to Swift. Silly, I know,

but I liked to talk to her. She whickered and flicked her ears, as one of the huntsmen came up to us on his horse and my father sped on.

“She’s going up by the Black Lake, towards the mountains!” he cried.

Timon, my father’s steward, came panting up behind me. He was having trouble controlling his stallion. Timon’s face was shiny with sweat. He was wearing a crimson-tinged tunic, with gold glinting on his fingers.

“You are enjoying yourself, prince?” he simpered.

I nodded curtly.

“Your brother Androgeos would have been far ahead by now,” Timon continued. “He’d have scented the hind himself, he had such a good nose!”

I kicked Swift’s flanks, holding on to her mane; she whinnied and hurtled on. The feel of the hunt was filling my blood, and Timon’s veiled taunts were angering me. I could do as well as Andro. He was away, over the Middle Sea to the north, on the mainland, staying at the court of King Aegeus of Athens. I would be as good as him.

I overtook my bodyservant, Bansa, who’d somehow got ahead of me on his young mare. Bansa laughed as

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I went by. "The hind! She's white as milk!" he shouted. "Clever too."

I grinned at him.

I spotted Farseeker and my father, and urged Swift on. As I came up beside him, he turned his head and gave me a joyful smile. "Ahead!" he cried.

My father was full of the fire of the hunt. We thundered onwards through the trees, and I did my best to stay just behind him.

I was thirsty. My spear was heavy in my right arm. Bansa had forgotten to give me a water bottle and I hadn't drunk anything since the wine at the start of the hunt.

The baying of the hounds became louder, and we came out to where a small waterfall trickled down the rocks.

There was a circle of hounds – Patch, his little throat quivering with sound, and Keen, and Bounce – all eagerly barking.

Our quarry, the hind, was at bay. She couldn't get up the rocks, and she was hemmed in on all sides.

She was larger than was usual for her age and sex. Her head was raised up and, like a swan, she was pure white.

I'd never seen anything like her before – so beautiful, like a creature of moonlight.

Suddenly, I didn't want to hurt her. She was frightened, exhausted. She skittered from side to side, and jumped back, scared by the string of red feathers that the men had placed in the trees to frighten her. The dogs were barking, their jaws gaping, snapping at the air, as she evaded them.

The sun was high, and it gleamed off her flanks. There were men hidden behind the trees, waiting with nets – but now I wanted her to run, to escape.

“The prince should take the first throw!” shouted Timon.

I looked at my father. He nodded.

Bansa stood transfixed. “As white as the moon!” he said, eyes staring.

“Come on prince!” called Timon. He was beside me now. The dogs were yapping, the hind trapped.

I could feel all the men looking at me, their horses restless, their eyes keen.

The hind was slow and tired now. She could barely move. Her body was slack and the dogs were nipping at her.

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A huntsman raised his arm and I took that as a challenge, lifting my spear. My aim was good. I could get her in her flank, in the heart, in the best place. Behind me Timon was whispering – more remarks about Andro, perhaps. Hefting the spear above my head I heard my father's shouts of encouragement and all the men roaring and the whole clearing ringing with noise.

For a second she lifted her head up to me and I looked into her eyes.

I couldn't hold that milky gaze. I threw the spear, blindly. There was a pause, in which I could only make out a single dog's bark: it was Patch.

And then the men shouted. Through their cries I heard the hind's moan of pain. I looked up, barely wanting to see.

Timon was clapping his hands. My father was shaking his spear in triumph.

I'd got her. I'd got the hind. The thought seared through me, making my whole body tingle. I'd got the hind.

My spear was sticking out of her flank. The blood was spotting her whiteness. She staggered and fell to

her knees, and the other huntsmen went in to finish the job, the dogs awhirl around them.

My father rode up to me and clapped me on the back. "A fine shot, Stephan!" he said. "Fit for a prince!" He grabbed my arm in congratulation.

His approval washed over me. But somewhere inside me, I also felt sick. I'd killed that animal, that beautiful creature, and maybe we would never see anything like her again.

"Stephan!" shouted Minos, and the men took up the cheer. As they shouted my name, excitement and pride spread through me to see them all standing around me, some holding nets, some with knives, while the dogs pestered the hind's corpse, waiting for their reward. I was elated.

The men cheered once more, then slowly returned to their tasks. My father stayed with me for a second.

He was about to say something, when a sharp, wailing sound, like the lamentation of women at a funeral, chilled the clearing. At first I thought it might be the hind giving out its final cry, and my stomach twisted. But it couldn't be. The keening was much, much harsher

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than anything a hind could produce, more harrowing than anything I'd heard at a funeral. My father released my arm. He turned round, slowly and deliberately. Swift shivered beneath me.

From out of the trees, into the clearing, came a woman, screaming.

"Who is she?" someone said.

Tall and veiled, she was shouting something I couldn't understand. She tore off her veil and it floated away from her into the trees. Everything paused.

"It's Myrrah!" cried a voice. "The priestess. She lives by the Black Lake!"

We had passed her house on the way – a low, wooden thing, smoke billowing out of the roof. I hadn't given it a moment's thought.

The entire crowd of hunters fell silent. The dogs, cowed, turned away from the hind. The huntsmen's hands were dripping blood.

Only Myrrah's insistent screams pierced the air.

Now I could make out a word – a name, among the screams. "Dictynna... Dictynna!"

Dictynna – the hunt goddess. She was calling the name of the hunt goddess.

My father got off his horse and handed me the bridle. He walked calmly through the crowd of hunters. I dismounted as well, and gave the horses to one of the huntsmen to tend.

My father and I went right up to Myrrah. Only then did she stop wailing, and the silence rang like thunder. Her black hair was uncoiled, hanging loosely around her face.

“Violation!” Myrrah screeched. “Dictynna is violated! The white hind is killed...”

My heart jumped in my breast. Now I was so close to Myrrah, I could see her clearly. Her face was frozen, and the voice that came out of her mouth was deep and gravelly and somehow different. It was as if someone else were speaking.

“I have a message from the gods,” she said. “A message from the Mother herself. It came to me this morning in the half-light. It came through the fires and the fumes, and it came in blinding strength.” Her voice was lower now, but in the silence it seemed as if it could be heard everywhere at once, between the trees and from the sky above.

“There is a curse on you, and on the whole House of Minos!”

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The words sank through the air like stones thrown into a lake. Sickness spread out through my body from my stomach. I wanted to retch. Nobody spoke.

My father's face briefly crumpled, then set solid again. There was a deep sadness in his eyes that I had never seen before. It was only there for the smallest moment, but it felt to me as if I had stared into the far reaches of the cosmos, into the places where the gods lived, into somewhere beyond time. He blinked, and the feeling passed.

He stretched out a hand, almost as if he were about to hold Myrrah's.

"Take away that woman," shouted someone. Hunters moved forward uncertainly.

"Wait!" My father's voice rang out imperiously. Everything, and everyone, halted. Time swallowed us all.

"Please, forgive my men," said my father, gently. He motioned to an attendant, who hurried forwards with water. Myrrah pushed away the beaker. She remained, arms held out in front of her, like some figure built to scare away birds. "What is the curse?" asked my father. I could sense the strain in his voice; I hoped that nobody else could.

She pointed her finger at me and at my father.

“There is death in your house, King Minos. There are things twisted out of joint. The stench of darkness is in your minds. And none of you – none of you – will escape it.”

A breeze rustled through the trees, and its rushing filled the world.

“I see a confusion full of blood! I see corridors, twisting, turning! Lines filled with blood!” Her voice was loud, ringing, fierce, and an arc of spittle came from her mouth.

“Is there no way out of the curse?” asked my father.

“I see no way out of the curse.”

My father, always a king, bowed to her. He offered to have an attendant lead her on a horse to a resting chamber in the palace, but she refused.

No way out? I thought. No way out of the curse?

Myrrah looked at me. Hunters were levelling their weapons; lords were glaring; attendants were panicking. Bansa was poised and ready, his body making an arrow towards me and the woman. Myrrah strode towards me slowly, each step seeming huge.

“In your face I see two things,” she muttered. There was a stink on her like smoke and sacrifice.

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"What are they?" I asked, trembling, as the noise and shouts and bustle continued around me.

"A monster," she said.

Me? A monster?

"And death."

The word pricked me like the tip of a knife.

Timon approached, more swiftly than his overweight frame seemed capable of. He touched the priestess on the shoulder, and she seemed to grow limp, and clutched at him. He led her away, leaving me standing on my own, the dogs barking around me, my hands slippery with sweat, with a dark taste in my mouth.

I was a thirteen-year-old boy, the son of a king. I had killed a white hind. And I'd been marked by a priestess, for death.

Photo: Tatiana von Preussen



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