

Chrysanthi, 466 BC

Another ordinary day for an extraordinary young girl comes to its welcome close. Using her staff Chrysanthi prods the small herd of goats along the path homeward. She skips along as daylight dwindles. This preference for twilight is only one aspect of her disparate nature. She stops and surveys the horizon, a wrapped white headscarf leaving only piercing brown eyes exposed.

Myths are mere tales are they not? It is I who commands Helios.

Her stern unblinking stare indeed compels the sun to sink behind Mount Taygetos. Another sunset observed with little sentiment or finer feeling.

The sooner Helios drives his chariot out of sight, the better. The star-lit sky frees my musings.

Helios steers his sun-chariot into the realm of Oceanus. Tomorrow, his sister Eos, goddess of the dawn, will reopen the gates, releasing him once again into a salmon pink sky. Lampus and Phaeton pulling his sun-chariot as he strains at the reins to keep them on a preordained path.

Or so goes the myth. It is as good an explanation as any for the day-night cycle. Chrysanthi is not alone with her dispassionate regard for sunsets. Veneration of Helios is unlikely here where they merely signal an end to another day's labours. Myths are primarily regarded as parables that reveal truths about human behavior, faulty or laudable. She does not know all myths, but enough to regard them as simply a way of understanding life in this world with clarity, tales that advise rather than dictate. They are not dogma.

The goats cluster around her feet and stare up at her, each wearing that inquisitive stare all goats seem to have. Gently, she pokes them along and continues homeward, satisfied that the stars will soon fill the night sky and lift her above the dust she trods. A daily routine such as this might easily bring on boredom when time and being are felt most acutely. Such thoughts for Chrysanthi, however, are kept at bay by the anticipation of a thousand points of light.

This is Messinia, a deeply indented mountainous peninsula in southern Greece that is home to her village, Agrianos. Tiny and tightly gathered, it lies in an amphitheater of thickly wooded slopes. Groves of olives and figs, a vineyard plump with panicles of grapes, small fields of grains, chickens, a few sheep and the goats supply the market in Thuria, the nearest large town.

Both it and the surrounding countryside are, in the minds of their inhabitants, two parts of a larger whole. Chrysanthi's main contribution to all of this is tending the goats. There are other sundry tasks, but this one is the least troubling and most enjoyable.

Three short-tempered brothers make sport of teasing her. When they tire of this, they argue with each other. Today, they have been delivering their products to sellers in Thuria's market while their father, Nikomedes, inspected the more lucrative olive grove and fig trees. Her mother Kleonike prepares the evening meal.

I hope there will be some of that delicious goat milk cheese. There will be if my brothers have not already stuffed it down their stupid throats.

The gods supposedly sent Aristaios, son of Apollo, to teach Greeks the art of cheese making, but Chrysanthi doubts this. Did not her precious mother learn cheesemaking from *her* own mother? And *her* mother before her? Of course. The kitchen and garden are her world, one she could move about blindfolded. It is a world where every step can be habitually made, even during moonless nights when what light there is feebly flickers from terra-cotta oil lamps. Her daughter's world is much larger, one in which she can skip from the soil to the stars.

Lofty thoughts of how the vault of the night sky can seem to both inspire or diminish are never entertained by the inhabitants of this small village. Stars are regarded from a more practical viewpoint since their positions cue agrarian activity. It has long been known that the brightest star in the sky, the Dog Star, rises a little earlier each day. There will then be that one dawn when it rises *just* before the Sun, marking the beginning of the hottest and driest part of the summer. From this point onward it will be above the horizon during daylight hours, thereby adding its own heat to that of the sun, a sign it is now unwise to plant anew. In this way, this star, part of the 'large dog' constellation that accompanies the hunter Orion, designates this period as the 'dog days' of summer.

The linking of stellar motions and planting schedules is simplified by the grouping of stars into recognizable shapes and figures, nearly fifty in all to these ancient Greeks. Many of these constellations hold the remains of god-favored heroes such as Hercules or Perseus, turning the night sky into a realm of consecration. Then there is the mysterious band of light known as the milky circle, *galaktikos kýklos*, that spans the sky from horizon to horizon. No one knows what *this* might be.

There are the three basic patterns of stellar motion during the course of a single night. Each star moves along a curved path or arc. Stars with longer arcs are visible for most of the night while others moving through shorter arcs spend less time above the horizon. Then there are those that move through circular paths, thereby never rising or setting.

Chrysanthi knows all this. After all, night after night, year after year of seeing *every* star there is to see, how could one *not* recognize patterns in their movement? Even the motions of the wandering stars, the *planetos*, have their own cycles and paths. They all move in the same direction along a slim band of the sky, the zodiac. Whatever or wherever they are, they too have a reassuring consistency that matches seasonal rhythms on the ground.

The last rays of the sun beam across the landscape to briefly bathe whitewashed buildings with a golden hue. The enveloping darkness reduces the day's heat and ends its duties. Even Pan, the god of the woods often blamed for mysterious sounds causing contagious fear, becomes silent. Silence grows in the countryside and in the village lanes. For Chrysanthi, though, it is the overwhelming silence of the night sky that is the most deafening.

The goats are coaxed into their pen. Her favorite, Xanthe, is so-named for her bright golden-yellow color. Farm animals are rarely named, but Xanthe is special. Soft quick bleats indicate she is happy whenever Chrysanthi approaches.

What makes you so attentive Xanthe? The tiny unknowable universe that is your consciousness is as large a mystery as that of the night sky overhead.

With the goats placed in their pen for the night, she sits for a moment at the base of a familiar cedar, the woodsy scent mixing with the anticipation of a bejeweled sky.

A cool breeze takes possession of her. Peeling away the wrapped headscarf to feel it all the more, she stares into a darkening cerulean hue. Her musing drifts to thoughts of a punishment by the goddess Athena:

The stars are my friends, but not mine to control. Maybe the goddess Athena is real after all. I cannot help but recall the tale of how she punished a mortal who assumed he was her equal. He suffered the consequences.

*'So, you claim you are as a god? Right, then. You **shall** live forever, but with one difference. Your night sky will always be empty, a vast dark void. No stars nor moon shall ever be visible to you again but for one night every thousand years.'*

What an exquisite punishment! To lose sight of the stars is to lose one's very soul! The night is only the absence of sunlight, but beyond the night is the realm of the true Darkness. This is the realm of Hades and the journey there is a descent that leaves behind all that is good and what this poor soul was condemned to suffer.

'Chrysaaanthi!'

Thoughts evaporate.

'Chrysaaanthi!'

'Here my mother!'

She stands, stretches and with a sigh, takes one last look overhead. For a moment she imagines the stars have disappeared leaving the sky completely black, a fearful thought that shudders through her. With her staff now held

in a tightened grip, she continues homeward.

The path is only dimly lit by starlight, but no matter. She knows each step and makes her way to the farmhouse. Its familiar shape resolves itself with light from lamps flickering in open windows. Entering the small courtyard, she splashes cool water from the central trough over her face, washes her hands and enters. A seat awaits at a table laden with bread, salted fish, cheese, olives, olive oil for dipping and figs for dessert. Meat is for the wealthy.

'You boys leave some cheese for your sister or it will be you who will milk the goats.'

'Yes, mother, says Damalus, taking the largest piece from the plate. Takis and Yanni, exchange smirks and share his mocking behavior. Chrysanthi's unblinking stare cowers Damalus and he places the cheese back on the plate.

She ponders her mother's threat. After all, if tending the goats can be considered a punishment what is *she* to make of this since it is *her* task? It is a mothers's misplaced jibe in this oppressive male dominated environment.

'The goats are healthy?' asks Nikomedes, without looking up as he tears off a piece of bread from the loaf.

'Yes, my father, they fatten well.'

Can he never think of anything else to ask of me?

'Good, good,' he replies, brushing crumbs from his beard. 'Perhaps we will select one to share with our neighbors at the next celebration, whenever or whatever that is.'

But not Xanthe. I will spirit her away first.

'Is that wise father? Their cheese is so delicious. Perhaps a lamb instead?'

'Lamb? Then lamb it is, but that will have to wait for a truly special day,' he says, shrugging as he answers before stuffing his mouth again. Chrysanthi knows this is his way of saying it will never happen.

The slow dance of shadows accompanies meandering conversation. After one particularly long silence, Damalus perks up.

'Oh. I heard something interesting in the market today. Well, maybe not all that interesting, given the source.'

Heads turn his way.

'It was that boor Ephialtes. He claims to have seen something odd in the sky and asked if *we* had seen it. Well, I have not, anyway. He says it was a stranger, *enas xinos*. That was an odd thing to say, was it not?'

'Ephialtes, the fishmonger?' asks Takis.

'The same.'

'I doubt this. He drinks too much. *Alkoolikos*.'

'And he stinks of fish,' adds Yanni.

'He doesn't drink wine *that* much. Well, no more than you or I. Anyway, I believed him,' says Damalus to introduce the thought that drinking a lot of

wine is not such a bad thing

'The day time or night time?'

'In the night of course. Well, that's what he said, anyway. It was bright, something new, with a shiny streak or a tail or something.'

Chrysanthi's curiosity warms.

'Where? I mean, in what location? At what time?'

'Why don't you ask him yourself, Chrysanthi? I believe he is unmarried, as are you.'

This crude phrasing of her father's question is nothing new. His concern for her marital prospects centers around *his* happiness, not hers. There might well be economic benefits to her marriage into a more prosperous family. Fish sell well here.

She looks down at her plate, biting her tongue.

Takis finally replies to her question.

'Certainly well past sunset and forget about asking him about where, but he did say it was higher up. He steps out to use the privy about the same time every night.'

'You can ask him when that is, Chrysanthi,' says Damalus, bringing sniggers from his brothers,

Ephialtes as a husband? I can smell his fish breath from here.

'Anyway, who knows if it was there the night before or if it will be there tonight. Maybe. Maybe not,' he adds with an indifferent shrug.

A few scraps of cheese remain.

Too much thinking. Not enough paying attention.

Kleonike catches this.

'Takis, take that plate of cheese in front of you and pass it over to your sister', she says in a familiar scolding monotone.

He obeys, eyes rolling before doing so.

The topic of market prices for olives comes to the fore, but Chrysanthi's thoughts are elsewhere.

How can they not have any interest? I must see this for myself!

She looks at the plate and with a small sigh, picks up the last piece of cheese.

Being the only daughter, she has her own room. Small, but it is a retreat from irrelevant conversation and distractions. On this night, however, there is a distraction.

Does Ephialtes's story speak of an intrusion?

Body and mind twist about, the thin blanket wrapping around her like a winding sheet.

How long have I been lying here? How long before sunrise?

The small bed is positioned to maximize the view of the passing stars through the only window. She imagines the stars taking turns to look in on her as they drift by. The Pleiades come into view. The Pleiades! Their position indicates how much longer it will be before Helios again appears in the morning sky.

She pads over to the window, bare feet chilled by the stone floor. No strange object presents itself, at least not from this direction. The Pleiades, now fully visible, recall lines written by the poet Sappho.

*The moon has set,
and the Pleiades;
it is midnight,
the time is going by,
And I sleep alone.*

The Pleiades say sunrise is not for some time yet. The soft ring of a goat's bell floats in from the darkness. Xanthe? All creatures should be asleep in this deepest part of the passage through the realm of Nyx. Nyx, born of Chaos, is the goddess of the subduing darkness that makes even Zeus tremble. Her children are Disease, Strife and Doom, all eager to spread devastation.

Nonsense. I am not the least bit afraid to step out into the darkness.

She slips into her sandals and wraps the blanket about her, looking as a pilgrim might who is about to take that first step. The goats, huddled together, are light sleepers. Her approach is sensed more through smell more than sound. An awakened Xanthe steps nearer with a soft bleat.

'No, Xanthe, it is too early,' she says in a loud whisper.

Xanthe tilts her head, staring as Chrysanthi steps away and disappears along the starlit path. Upon reaching the cedar tree she finally looks up and staggers.

This is what Ephialtes saw!

It is *not* the moon, *not* a star, nor even one of the wandering stars, *aster planetos*. It is new, different. A stranger.

A bright, round, fuzzy-edged object sits in Hercules, outshining everything around. Making a fist, she holds out her arm. The end of an upraised thumb just covers it. The streak of light extending from it reaches well past the boundary of Hercules' realm.

Is it moving or did it just somehow appear in this spot?

There is one thing about it that is similar. Like everything else in the heavens, it too is dead silent. It gradually becomes clear there is no change in its appearance or position, at least on this night. She returns homeward,

head bowed in thought. In just one moment of one night, these familiar cycles of stars are confused by the appearance of a new object, silent yet expressive.

*Is this a message from some god? A message to **me**? What god would ever think of me?*

The next night it *might* have moved, but there was no doubting this by the third. It has drifted westward about two thumb's worth against the background of stars. But there is something else. It has dimmed.

Life in Messinia is never chaotic, never random. The stars too always repeat their expected motions. Recurring patterns take place in the soil, in life and in the stars. Change, yes, but it is a repetitive reassuring change.

How does this new object fit with all this?

There is one thing she does conclude.

It, like me, is different.

In the next few nights it recedes into a black nothingness.

Is there no one I can ask about this? Certainly not anyone from around here.

The normal night sky returns, whatever normal is. She heads homeward on this last night of observing it, unfulfilled. Feeling the need to return to the familiar, she stops by the goat pen.

You know what this strange thing was, don't you, Xanthe? But you will not speak of it.

Xanthe stares back, head cocked, silent and still. At that very moment, Helios breaks the horizon, bringing the sun once again into view.