

The birth of the gods

At first, according to the Ancient Greeks,
. there were no gods or people, no day or night,
in. no planets or stars. There was just nothingness
that stretched on and on forever. Then, out of
nowhere, the earth appeared. She was beautiful, with a
curved shape and a warm heart.

A split second later, the sky came into being.
He was everything she was not. While the earth was calm
and steady-going, with hidden depths, the sky was quick
and changeable, and couldn't hide anything if he tried.

The sky loved the earth so much that he wrapped
himself around her and swore they would never be parted.
And, at first, she felt the same way.

The earth's name was Gaia, and the sky was called
Uranus. When she first kissed him, he blazed red and gold,
making the very first sunset. When Uranus bent his star-
crowned head to sleep beside Gaia, he bathed her hills
and valleys in silver light.

Very soon they decided to start a family. They were so vast themselves that all of their children turned out to be immense too. First came the titans: a race of giants and giantesses so huge that they could pluck trees as if they were daisies, and sit on the mountains as if they were thrones. They were beautiful and strong, and their parents were very proud.

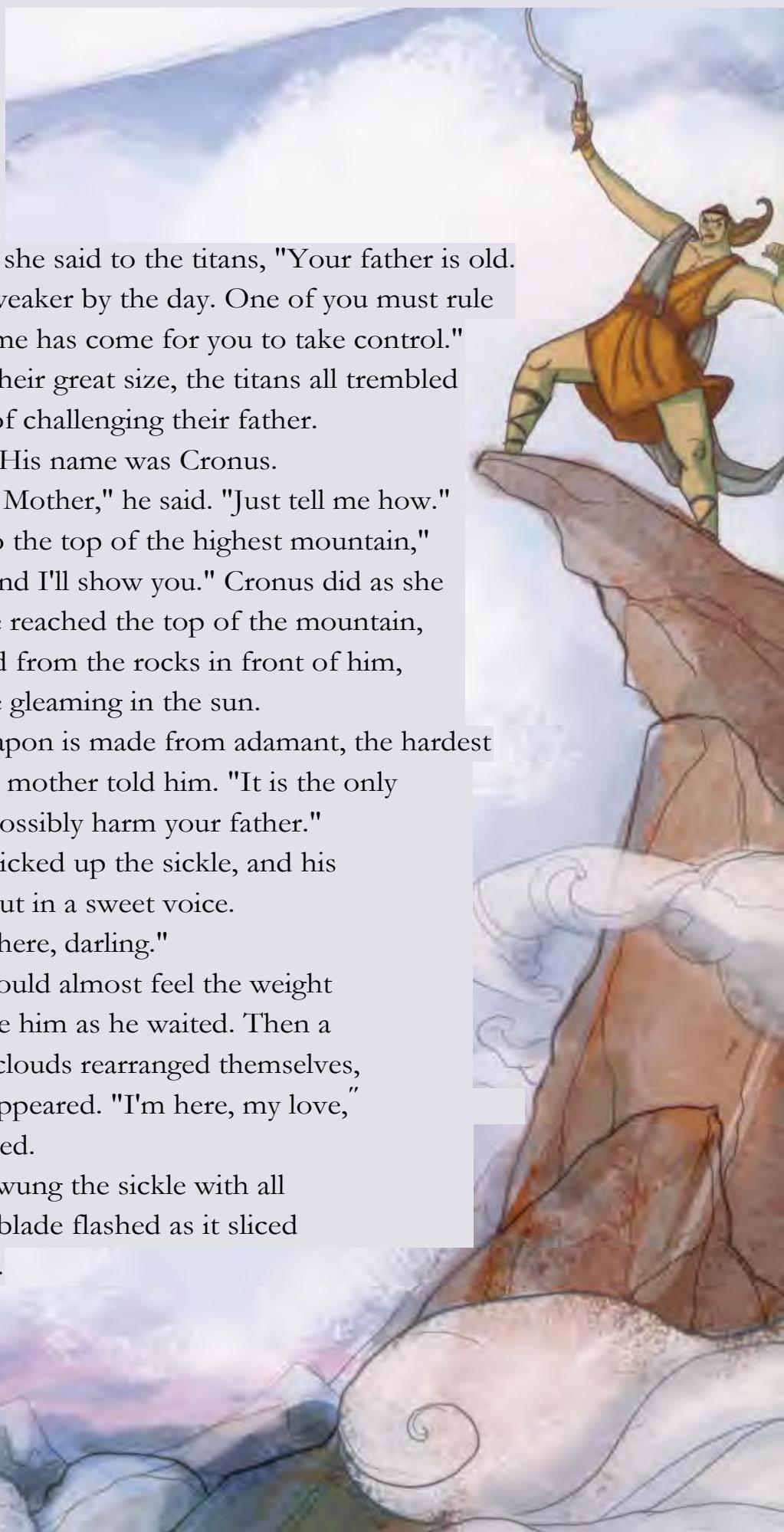
Next, Gaia gave birth to three Cyclops: stout, ugly giants who each had just one large, bulging eye. Gaia thought they were perfect, but Uranus wasn't so sure. "They're not as good-looking as their brothers and sisters," he remarked flatly.

Their next three children were even more monstrous. Each of them had fifty heads and a hundred hands. If their mother was any less pleased with them than with her other children, she didn't show it. But their father couldn't bear the sight of them. "They're hideous!" he exclaimed when he saw them. "Can't they live underground — and their ugly Cyclops brothers too? They're spoiling my view." And he pushed them back inside the earth.

Gaia was heartbroken, and wept rivers of tears at Uranus's cruelty. He was miserable at having upset her. His tears fell as rain and mingled with hers, streaming down hills and pooling in valleys to form great, salty seas.

But, however much he regretted hurting Gaia, Uranus couldn't hide how he felt. "I still love you," he told her. "But I can't love them." Gaia grew more and more resentful. Secretly, she began to plan a way to get rid of Uranus and set her imprisoned children free.





One day she said to the titans, "Your father is old. He is growing weaker by the day. One of you must rule next, and the time has come for you to take control."

Despite their great size, the titans all trembled at the thought of challenging their father. All except one. His name was Cronus.

"I'll do it, Mother," he said. "Just tell me how."

"Climb to the top of the highest mountain," she told him, "and I'll show you." Cronus did as she asked. When he reached the top of the mountain, a sickle emerged from the rocks in front of him, its curved blade gleaming in the sun.

"This weapon is made from adamant, the hardest part of me," his mother told him. "It is the only thing that can possibly harm your father."

Cronus picked up the sickle, and his mother called out in a sweet voice.
"Uranus, come here, darling."

Cronus could almost feel the weight of the sky above him as he waited. Then a wind blew, the clouds rearranged themselves, and his father appeared. "I'm here, my love," Uranus whispered.

Cronus swung the sickle with all his might. The blade flashed as it sliced through the sky.

When Uranus was attacked, drops of his blood fell into the ocean. Moments later, a figure emerged from the foaming waves. She was so beautiful it took your breath away. Her name was Aphrodite and she was the goddess of love.



Uranus's gasp of pain rang out across the universe as he was separated forever from the earth. Cronus knew that he had overthrown his father, and he watched triumphantly as Uranus's face began to fade. "It comes to us all," Uranus said sadly. "One day, you will give way to your own child."

"Never!" cried Cronus, full of the confidence of youth.

He had just set off back down the mountain, when Gaia's voice rang out. "Well done. Now he's gone, you can set your brothers free."

To his mother's dismay, Cronus shook his head. "They'll only get in the way just now," he said. "Maybe I'll do it later."

He asked another titan, Rhea, to marry him, and they decided to start a family. But despite his confidence, Cronus's father's prediction lingered uncomfortably in his mind. When Rhea gave birth to their first child, he swallowed the baby whole, before she even had time to look at it. "What are you doing?" Rhea screamed.

"Calm down, you silly thing," Cronus said. "This is the best way to keep children safe. Didn't you know?"

Rhea shook her head doubtfully. It sounded like a strange idea, but Cronus seemed so certain, and she didn't know any other titans who'd had children, so she supposed it must be normal. Still, she missed the child terribly.

A while later, she gave birth to their second child. Cronus was about to swallow it when Rhea pleaded, "Couldn't we keep the baby here just for a short time?"

Cronus frowned at her. "Don't you want what's best for our family?" he demanded. She nodded sadly, and watched him swallow the second baby whole.

In the following years, their third, fourth and fifth children were dealt with in the very same way.

When Gaia saw what was happening, she was furious with her son. "Your children aren't safe, they are trapped inside your husband," she told Rhea, "just like my children are trapped inside me."

"I knew something wasn't right!" Rhea exclaimed. By this time, she was already pregnant with their sixth child. "I'm not letting him swallow this one," she said, wrapping her arms around her belly.

When it was time for her to have the baby, she went to a cave in the mountains and gave birth in secret. The baby was a boy. Rhea was delighted with him, and named him Zeus.

New life was springing up on the earth all this time. When Rhea's baby was born, Gaia sent a team of gentle creatures called nymphs to help look after him. Leaving the baby in their care, Rhea returned to her husband. She handed him a boulder wrapped in blankets. "Here's our sixth child for you to keep safe," she said innocently, and Cronus swallowed the boulder without suspecting a thing.

The baby Zeus was so powerful that his cries shook the very mountains, but nymphs standing guard outside the cave caught them in soft clouds so that his father wouldn't hear. Those inside the cave comforted him with songs, and fed him on milk and honey.

Nymphs were beautiful, magical girls who never grew old. They came into being along with the trees, rivers, mountains and lakes, and it was their job to take care of nature,



Tree nymphs were known as dryads.

.. Naiads were (water nymphs.





Rhea visited her son whenever she could. She told him all about his grandparents, and about what his father had done. Zeus grew up very quickly, and as soon as he was old enough to leave his hiding place, he went to see his father.

"Who are you?" Cronus asked the youth who was glaring at him with a thunderous expression.

Without word of an explanation, Zeus punched Cronus hard in the stomach. "Your time's up, Father," he said. The giant doubled over and out of his gaping mouth sprang the boulder he'd swallowed, followed by five of his children, now fully grown.

Together, Zeus and all his brothers and sisters turned to face their father. They were young, powerful and very, very angry. Cronus took one look at their six, glowering faces and knew at once that he was beaten.

Cronus was banished from the face of the earth, and the brothers and sisters set about exploring it. As they went, they discovered that they each had their own amazing powers, that set them above all other beings. Zeus and his siblings were the first gods.

Zeus adored playing with the sky. He loved to shape thunder clouds with his bare hands, and send thunderbolts across the sky in dramatic flashes. When his brother, Poseidon, saw the rolling oceans, he parted the waves with his hands to discover a whole host of startled creatures at the bottom. Their sister, Demeter, found she had green fingers, and spent days coaxing flowers into bloom and trees into fruit.

Some say Cronus was the same 3.1 as Chronos, which means 'time'. Some even say that he still exists, lurking at the edges of the universe, swallowing everything he can lay his hands on. Perhaps it's true. In the end, everything is swallowed up by time.

The earth herself, their grandmother Gaia, watched peacefully as they tried out their various powers. "Finally I can go to sleep," she thought, "and trust my family to keep everything safe." But there was one thing she had to take care of first.

"Will you at last set my children free?" she asked Zeus, and she told him about the one-eyed cyclops and their hundred-handed, fifty-headed brothers all imprisoned within her.

"Of course I will," Zeus agreed.

Gaia opened up a gateway so that he could enter the earth and travel deep underground. So along with his two brothers, Poseidon and Hades, Zeus set off to rescue his monstrous uncles.

Deep inside, they discovered a whole different world to the one above. It was lit with an eerie light instead of the sun, and its fields were full of gemstones rather than flowers. "It's wonderful down here," said Hades. "I feel right at home. Let's call it the Underworld."

Even further down, there was a series of warm, pitch-black caverns. Here they found the hundred-handers. Although these monsters were pleased to hear that they were free, they had grown to like living underground. So they decided to stay.

"In that case you can be the guardians of this place," suggested Zeus. "We'll make it a dungeon for those who have done terrible things in their lifetimes." The hundred-handers agreed, and the caverns they guarded came to be known as Tartarus.



The Underworld became the place where the shadowy souls of humans went after they died. It was made up of many different realms. While criminals were sent to Tartarus, heroes and good people entered the beautiful and carefree Elysian Fields.



The gods went on to have children of their own — more gods and goddesses, including:



Athena,
the goddess
of war, who
sprang to life
out of Zeus's head,
fully grown, armed
and dangerous...

--Dionysus, the God of wine, who was born out of Zeus's thigh...



and Poseidon's son, Triton, a sea God who was born with a fish tail instead of legs.



Next, Zeus and his brothers went to find the cyclops. They had made their home in the gleaming seams of metal beneath the mountains, but were terribly squashed and unhappy there. Overjoyed to be set free, they followed the three gods back up to the earth's surface.

Once the rescue was complete, Zeus decided the next thing to be done was to divide up his father's kingdom between his brothers and sisters. He took the heavens for himself, and asked his most beautiful and loyal sister, Hera, to join him. She became the goddess of marriage and faithfulness. Poseidon was given the oceans to rule, and Hades the Underworld. Demeter's role was to tend to all growing things. Their youngest sister, Hestia, didn't want a realm to rule, and so it was agreed she should look after the hearth and home.

The cyclops were so grateful to the gods that they presented them with gifts. Poseidon received a trident to help him control the oceans, Hades was given a cap that made its wearer invisible and Zeus received a shining set of thunderbolts.

After that, the cyclops built a grand palace for the gods. They set it on the clouds above the world's highest mountain, and the gods named it Olympus. Demeter shrouded the top of the mountain in clouds, so that only chosen guests could ever catch a glimpse of the great palace of the gods.

Meanwhile, down below, ordinary men and women were being born and living their lives like tiny ants beneath the gods' powerful gaze...

