

MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Apollodorus: The Library (Bibliotheca)

Vol. 6 Crete, Thebes, and the Cursed Houses

Chapters 21-24

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 21: Europa's Bull, Minos's Labyrinth, and Pasiphae's Shame

Heracles burns on Mount Oeta and rises to Olympus. His story, for now, is complete. But Greek myth does not pause between heroes. It flows like a river, and its current carries us backward and forward simultaneously, connecting every tale to every other.

So we turn from the pyre on Oeta to an island south of Greece, where the greatest civilisation of the ancient world was built on a foundation of divine favour, broken promises, and a monster that should never have been born.

The Bull from the Sea

Europa (*yoo-ROH-puh*) was the daughter of **Agenor** (*AJ-eh-nor*), king of Tyre in Phoenicia. She was lovely, as daughters of kings tend to be in these stories, but her beauty was of a particular kind: the kind that stops Zeus in his tracks.

The king of the gods had learned, through centuries of romantic entanglements, that mortal women were more easily approached when he did not appear in his true form. He transformed himself into the most beautiful white bull anyone had ever seen. The creature's hide was like fresh snow, its horns like polished ivory curling gently from a broad forehead. It moved with a grace that seemed impossible for so large an animal.

Europa was gathering flowers in a meadow near the shore with her companions when the bull appeared. It knelt before her, mild as a pet, and something in its dark eyes invited trust. She climbed onto its back. The bull rose and walked to the water's edge.

Then it ran into the sea.

Europa clung to the broad back as the bull swam across the open water. The mainland receded. Her companions screamed from the shore. Sea foam sprayed around them, and the Nereids rose from the waves to escort them, riding dolphins and singing. Europa was terrified, then awed, then strangely calm. When a god carries you across the sea on his back, panic eventually gives way to wonder. She watched the coastline of her childhood shrink to a thin line and then disappear. Whatever life awaited her on the island ahead, she understood that she could never go back to being the girl who had gathered flowers that morning.

They reached the island of **Crete**, the largest and most ancient of the Greek islands. There, beneath a cypress tree on a Cretan hillside, Zeus revealed himself. The bull was gone. The god stood in its place, and Europa understood. She bore him three sons: **Minos** (*MY-nos*), **Sarpedon** (*sar-PEE-don*), and **Rhadamanthus** (*rad-a-MAN-thus*). The continent across the sea would one day bear her name. Europe begins here, with a princess on a bull's back, carried across the wine-dark sea.

Europa remained in Crete and married **Asterius** (*AS-teer-ee-uhs*), the king of the island, who raised her sons as his own. When Asterius died, the question of succession arose. Minos wanted the throne. But so did his brothers.

The Sign from Poseidon

Minos prayed to **Poseidon** for a sign that he was the rightful king. He asked the sea-god to send a bull from the ocean, promising to sacrifice it in Poseidon's honour.

Poseidon answered. A magnificent white bull emerged from the waves, so perfect that it seemed carved from pearl and moonlight. This was no ordinary animal. It was a divine gift, and divine gifts come with conditions.

Minos looked at the bull and made the oldest mistake in myth. He decided it was too beautiful to kill. He kept it for himself and sacrificed a lesser animal in its place.

Poseidon was enraged. The god of the sea had a gift for proportionate response, and his vengeance was precise. He did not strike Minos down. He did not sink Crete into the ocean. Instead, he made Minos's wife, **Pasiphae** (*pa-SIF-ay-ee*), fall in love with the bull.

This was not love as mortals understand it. It was a curse, a divine madness that consumed Pasiphae utterly. She was the daughter of Helios, the Sun, and she had been a queen. Now she was a woman obsessed with a creature that could not return her passion. The poets who told this story were not interested in titillation. They were interested in the horror of desire made monstrous by divine punishment.

Daedalus and the Wooden Cow

Pasiphae called for **Daedalus** (*DED-a-luhs*), the greatest inventor and craftsman in the world. Daedalus had come to Crete from Athens, where he had been forced into exile for a crime we will return to shortly. In Crete, he found a patron in Minos, who valued his genius even as he feared it.

Daedalus constructed a hollow wooden cow, realistic enough to deceive the divine bull, and fitted it so that Pasiphae could hide inside. The result of this union was a creature that should never have existed: the **Minotaur**, called **Asterius** after the king who raised him, half-human and half-bull.

The Minotaur was born monstrous. It had the body of a man and the head of a bull. It did not speak. It knew only hunger, and its hunger was for human flesh. Pasiphae's curse had produced not a child but a weapon, aimed not at her but at everything Minos loved.

Minos could not kill the creature. It was, after all, the product of his own broken promise. Some say he still loved his wife and could not destroy what her curse had produced. Others say the gods would not permit the killing of a being they had engineered.

Whatever the reason, Minos chose concealment over destruction. He asked Daedalus to build something that would contain the monster forever, and Daedalus, who understood better than most what it meant to create something terrible, accepted the commission.

The Labyrinth

Daedalus designed and built the **Labyrinth**, a maze so complex that no one who entered could find their way out. It was more than a prison. It was a work of architecture so elaborate that it approached art, and so confusing that it approached madness. The corridors doubled back on themselves. Stairs led nowhere. Rooms opened into identical rooms. Sound travelled in impossible directions. A man might hear running water and walk towards it for hours without finding the source.

At the centre of the Labyrinth, in a chamber where no natural light reached, the Minotaur lived and waited. Minos sent criminals and prisoners to feed it, but the creature's appetite was never satisfied.

The Labyrinth became the dark mirror of Cretan civilisation. Above ground, Knossos was the most advanced city in the Greek world, with its vast palace, its running water, its storerooms of olive oil and wine, its fleet that dominated the Mediterranean. Below ground, in Daedalus's masterpiece, a monster fed on the innocent and the guilty alike. Civilisation had built not just a palace but a prison for its own shame.

Feature of the Labyrinth	Description
Construction	Built by Daedalus, the world's greatest inventor
Layout	Corridors that double back; stairs leading nowhere; identical rooms
Purpose	To contain the Minotaur and hide Minos's shame
Prisoner	The Minotaur - half-man, half-bull - fed on human tribute
Architect's fate	Daedalus became a prisoner of his own creation

Daedalus's Crime

To understand the man who built the Labyrinth, we must go back to Athens. Daedalus was an Athenian by birth, descended from the royal line of **Cecrops**. His skill was unmatched. He invented the saw, inspired by the spine of a fish he found on the shore. He invented the compass, copying the design from a snake's hollow bones. He created moving statues so lifelike they had to be chained to prevent them from walking away.

He had a nephew named **Talos**, also called **Perdix** (*PER-diks*), who showed signs of surpassing his uncle's talent. While watching Daedalus work, the boy invented the

potter's wheel and the chisel. Daedalus saw the future clearly: a world in which his nephew's name would eclipse his own. In a fit of jealousy, he threw Talos from the Acropolis.

Athena, who favors inventors, caught the falling boy and transformed him into a partridge. The bird that bears his name still avoids high places, nesting in low hedgerows. Daedalus was tried for murder and exiled from Athens. He fled to Crete, where Minos gave him sanctuary. But sanctuary, as Daedalus would learn, can become its own prison.

The Death of Androgeus and the Athenian Tribute

Minos had a son named **Androgeus** (*an-DROH-jee-uhs*), a young man of such athletic brilliance that he won every event at the Panathenaic Games in Athens. His success inspired jealousy and fear. On his return trip home, Androgeus was killed, either by the Athenians themselves or by the **Marathonian Bull**, the same fire-breathing beast that Heracles had captured on Crete and released on the mainland.

Minos grieved, then armed for war. He attacked Athens and prevailed. As punishment for his son's death, he demanded a tribute every nine years: seven Athenian youths and seven Athenian maidens, sent to Crete to enter the Labyrinth and be devoured by the Minotaur. The tribute served a purpose beyond punishment. It was a demonstration of Athenian submission. Every nine years, the greatest city in mainland Greece sent its children to feed a Cretan monster. Athenian mothers watched their sons and daughters board the black-sailed ship with a dread that no sacrifice to any other god could match. The tribute ship was the most feared vessel in Attica. It carried not trade goods but human lives, and its destination was a maze from which no one had ever returned.

The Boy in the Honey Jar

Minos had another son, **Glaucus** (*GLOW-kus*), a small child who fell into a jar of honey and drowned. His nurse discovered the body too late. Minos, desperate, called upon seers to restore his son. **Polyidus** (*pol-ee-EYE-dus*), a Corinthian prophet, found the body in the honey jar and was shut inside a tomb with it, commanded to bring the boy back to life.

While waiting in the darkness, Polyidus saw a snake crawl towards Glaucus's body. He killed the snake. Another snake appeared, carrying a magic herb in its mouth. It placed the herb on its dead companion, and the snake returned to life. Polyidus took the herb and applied it to Glaucus, and the boy breathed again.

Minos was grateful, but he was also a practical king. He demanded that Polyidus teach someone else the secret of resurrection. Polyidus taught Glaucus himself. Then Minos sent the seer away, and Glaucus promptly forgot everything he had learned. Some knowledge,

it seems, cannot be retained even when it has been directly experienced. The secret of bringing back the dead was lost again.

Minos's kingdom was magnificent and cursed in equal measure. He was the most powerful ruler in the Mediterranean, his navy unmatched, his laws the fairest in the Greek world. Yet beneath his palace, the Minotaur waited. Every nine years, the tribute arrived from Athens. Every nine years, fourteen young Athenians walked into the Labyrinth and never walked out. The greatest civilisation of the age fed its shame with human lives. And somewhere in that maze, half-man and half-bull, the monster dreamed of nothing but hunger.

Map: The Island of Crete Crete lies at the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea, roughly 160 miles south of mainland Greece. The island stretches 160 miles east to west and varies from 7 to 37 miles north to south. Its mountainous interior includes peaks rising above 8,000 feet. The northern coast held the great palace complexes - Knossos, Phaistos, Malia - while the southern coast remained more rugged and isolated. The island's position made it a natural crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa, and its civilisation became the most advanced of the Bronze Age Mediterranean.

Mythology Note: Minoan Civilisation and Knossos The myth of Minos reflects the historical Minoan civilisation of Bronze Age Crete (roughly 2700 - 1450 BCE), which predated classical Greek culture by nearly a thousand years. Sir Arthur Evans excavated the palace at Knossos beginning in 1900 CE, revealing a complex of over a thousand rooms that may have inspired the Labyrinth myth. The Minoans developed Linear A (still undeciphered) and Linear B (an early form of Greek) writing systems, built advanced plumbing and drainage, and created art dominated by bull imagery. The famous "bull-leaping" frescoes show athletes vaulting over bulls, suggesting that the cultural memory of Minoan bull-games may have evolved into the monstrous Minotaur. When the Mycenaean Greeks conquered Crete around 1450 BCE, they inherited and transformed these stories, turning a lost civilisation's grandeur into mythic warning.

Discussion Questions 1. Minos breaks his promise to Poseidon because the bull is "too beautiful to sacrifice." How does this decision connect to other moments in Greek myth where characters choose beauty or desire over duty? 2. The Minotaur is born from a curse, not from any choice of its own. Is the monster a victim, a villain, or something else entirely? 3. Daedalus invents the Labyrinth to contain a

monster, but he eventually becomes a prisoner of Crete himself. What does this say about the relationship between creators and their creations?

Chapter 22: Cadmus and the Sown Men - How Thebes Was Born

Europa was carried away on the back of a bull, and her father Agenor was never the same. He sent his sons to search for her, commanding them not to return until she was found. One of those sons was **Cadmus** (*KAD-muhs*), a young man of patience and purpose, who would fail to find his sister but succeed at something far stranger. He would give Greece one of its greatest cities and one of its most terrible curses.

The Oracle's Cow

Cadmus searched the known world. He crossed seas and mountains, asked at every port, and found no trace of Europa. Eventually his wanderings brought him to **Delphi**, the navel of the earth, where the Pythia sat on her tripod breathing the vapors that granted prophetic sight. He asked about his sister. The oracle gave him a different answer entirely.

Do not trouble yourself about Europa, the Pythia said. Follow the cow. Where she lies down, build a city.

This was not what Cadmus had asked. But you do not argue with Delphi. As he left the temple, Cadmus saw a cow walking slowly before him. She was marked with a white crescent on her flank, like a sliver of moon against dark hide. He followed her through Phocis, across Boeotia, through valleys of oak and fields of wildflowers. The cow walked with purpose, as if she had been walking towards this destination long before Cadmus was born.

At last she lay down. She did not graze, or drink, or rest in the shade. She simply folded her legs and settled onto the earth, and Cadmus understood that this was the place. It was a broad plain in Boeotia, good earth for a city, with a spring nearby and hills for defence. He would call this place **Thebes**.

But before he could build, he needed water for a sacrifice to Athena. He sent his companions to the nearest spring, which rose from the earth near the plain.

The Dragon of Ares

The spring was sacred to **Ares** (*AIR-eez*), the god of war, and a dragon guarded it. Not a serpent of ordinary kind, but a creature of divine origin; some said the offspring of Ares

himself. When Cadmus's men approached with their jars, the dragon rose from the rocks and struck. It killed them all.

Cadmus waited. When his men did not return, he went to find them. He discovered their bodies at the spring's edge, and the dragon coiled among the rocks, its scales glittering like bronze shields. Cadmus was not a warrior by nature. He was a searcher, a traveller, a man who had spent years asking questions rather than fighting battles. But grief and necessity can make warriors of anyone. He fought the dragon and killed it.

Athena appeared to him then, grey-eyed and solemn. She told him to take the dragon's teeth and sow them in the earth. This was strange counsel, but Cadmus had learned to trust divine instruction. He pulled the teeth from the dead dragon's jaw and scattered them in the soil like seeds.

From each tooth, an armed man sprang up, fully grown, clad in bronze, holding weapons. They were called the **Spartoi** (*SPAR-tee*), the Sown Men. No sooner had they emerged from the earth than they began to fight one another. This was their nature: born of violence, they knew nothing else. They attacked each other with the fury of men who had no past, no memory, no purpose beyond the moment of their making.

Only five survived: Echion, Udaeus, Chthonius, Hyperenor, and Pelorus. These five became the ancestors of the Theban nobility. From them descended the five great families of Thebes, and their blood ran in the veins of every Theban king who followed. They were born from dragon's teeth, and Thebes would never forget it. The city was founded on a battlefield before it was a city at all.

Genealogy: The House of Cadmus

Generation	Name	Role	Spouse
1	**Cadmus**	Founder of Thebes	Harmonia
2	**Semele**	Mother of Dionysus (by Zeus)	-
2	**Ino**	Leucothea, sea-goddess	Athamas
2	**Agave**	Mother of Pentheus	Echion
2	**Autonoe**	Mother of Actaeon	Aristaeus
2	Polydorus	King after Cadmus	Nycteis
3	**Dionysus**	God of wine ("twice-born")	Ariadne
3	Pentheus	King, denied Dionysus	-
4	**Labdacus**	Brief king	-
4	**Laius**	Father of Oedipus	Jocasta

Generation	Name	Role	Spouse
5	**Oedipus**	The tragic king	Jocasta (unwittingly)
5	Eteocles / Polynices	The warring sons	-

The Divine Wedding

Cadmus had killed a dragon sacred to Ares, and blood demanded payment. He served Ares for eight years, what the ancients called an "eternal year," a cycle longer than ordinary time. Some stories say he labored as a slave to the war-god. Others say he simply kept watch at the spring where the dragon had died, acknowledging that the land demanded its price for every foundation.

When his service was complete, the gods gave him a gift that no mortal had ever received. **Zeus** granted him **Harmonia** (*har-MOH-nee-uh*) as his wife. She was the daughter of **Aphrodite** and Ares, a child of love and war together, and her name meant what it sounded like: harmony, the fitting together of disparate parts into a whole.

Their wedding was attended by all the gods. This was the only wedding in all of mythology where the entire Olympian pantheon descended to celebrate a mortal marriage. Apollo played his lyre. The Muses sang. Hermes danced. Demeter blessed the fields. Even Hera smiled, though her smile was always complicated.

Hephaestus gave Harmonia a wedding gift: a necklace of unimaginable beauty, crafted in his divine forge. It was golden, set with gems that shifted colour like oil on water, catching the light of every candle and star. But it was also cursed. Some said Hephaestus fashioned it in bitterness, knowing that Harmonia's mother Aphrodite had betrayed him with Ares. Others said the curse was older than the gift, woven into the metal itself. Whatever the origin, the necklace of Harmonia brought sorrow to every woman who wore it. It would pass through generations like a disease in beautiful disguise, and its shadow would fall across Thebes for centuries to come.

Semele and the Thunder

Cadmus and Harmonia had five children: four daughters (Autonoe, Ino, Semele, and Agave) and one son, Polydorus. The daughters were beautiful, as daughters of harmony tend to be. The youngest, **Semele** (*SEM-eh-lee*), caught the eye of Zeus.

This was not unusual. Zeus had loved mortal women since the beginning of time. What made Semele's story different was the timing and the price. **Hera**, ever watchful,

discovered the affair. She did not confront Zeus directly. Instead, she disguised herself as Semele's nurse, an old woman with kind eyes and a voice full of concern.

Are you sure he is truly a god? the disguised Hera asked. Any man can claim to be Zeus. If he loves you, demand that he show himself as he shows himself to Hera. Swear that he will come to you in his full divine glory.

Semele, young and trusting, made Zeus swear by the **Styx**, the oath that even gods cannot break, to grant her any wish. When she asked him to appear in his true form, Zeus understood what would happen. A mortal cannot look upon the full glory of the king of gods and survive. But the oath was sworn. He came to her chamber in thunder and lightning, in the raw power that shakes mountains and splits trees, and Semele was consumed.

She burned in an instant, her mortal body unable to bear what her divine lover truly was.

But Zeus was quick. Semele was six months pregnant with his child, and the god would not let the child die. He snatched the infant from her womb and, in an act that defies ordinary understanding, sewed the child into his own thigh. There the baby grew to term, nourished by divine blood and will. When the time came, Zeus undid the stitches and a boy emerged - **Dionysus** (*dy-oh-NY-suhs*), the god of wine, of ecstasy, of the boundaries between madness and joy. He was called the Twice-Born: once from his mother's womb, and once from the thigh of his father.

Hermes carried the infant to **Ino** and **Athamas**, Semele's sister and brother-in-law, and persuaded them to raise the boy in secret, disguised as a girl. But Hera's vengeance was not finished. She drove Ino and Athamas mad. Athamas hunted his elder son Learchus as though he were a deer and killed him. Ino snatched the infant **Melicertes** from the fire, ran to the sea, and leaped into the waves with her dead child in her arms. The gods took pity. Ino became **Leucothea**, the white goddess who protects sailors in storms, and Melicertes became **Palaemon**, a sea-god of harbors.

Zeus, meanwhile, hid Dionysus more thoroughly. He transformed the child into a kid goat and had Hermes carry him to the nymphs of **Nysa**, who raised him in secret until he was old enough to claim his divinity.

The Serpent's End

Cadmus and Harmonia watched their children destroyed, one by one, by divine madness and divine love. They had founded a city, introduced the Phoenician alphabet to Greece, and given their people laws and writing. They had done everything that civilisation required. And civilisation had rewarded them with sorrow.

In their old age, they left Thebes and travelled to the land of the Encheleans, where an oracle declared that Cadmus and Harmonia would lead the people to victory against the Illyrians. They did. Cadmus ruled there, and a son **Illyrius** was born to them. But the gods had one final transformation in store.

Cadmus and Harmonia were turned into serpents. Not as punishment, for they had done nothing to deserve further punishment, but as a kind of divine translation. They retained their human minds within their serpent bodies, recognizing each other still, and Zeus sent them to the **Elysian Fields**, the paradise of heroes. Some say they slithered into a cave and vanished from mortal sight. Others say they were carried to the Isles of the Blessed, where the greatest souls dwell in eternal spring.

Their city remained. Thebes stood on the plain of Boeotia, with its seven gates and its dragon-born aristocracy, its alphabet and its laws, its temples and its spring where a dragon once waited. The house of Cadmus would produce kings and tragedies in equal measure. The necklace of Harmonia would pass from mother to daughter, each wearer more unfortunate than the last. And the child born from Zeus's thigh would return to Thebes one day, demanding worship, and would not be denied.

> **Mythology Note: The Founding of Thebes** The myth of Cadmus and the Sown Men reflects archaeological evidence of Phoenician influence in Bronze Age Greece, particularly in Boeotia. The "dragon's teeth" may encode memories of armed settlers or indigenous warriors absorbed into the new city. Thebes was one of the most powerful Mycenaean palace sites, and its foundation myth, a Phoenician prince bringing writing and civilisation to Greece, preserves a genuine historical memory of cultural transmission from the Near East to the Greek mainland.

> **Discussion Questions** 1. Cadmus follows a cow to found a city and sows dragon's teeth to create its first citizens. What do these strange origins suggest about how the Greeks understood the relationship between civilisation and violence? 2. The necklace of Harmonia is beautiful but cursed. Can you think of other stories where a gift brings more sorrow than joy? What does this theme tell us about Greek attitudes towards divine gifts? 3. Semele asks Zeus to prove his love by showing his true form, and it destroys her. What does this story suggest about the dangers of seeing divine truth directly? ?

Chapter 23: Dionysus, Oedipus, and the Curse of the House of Cadmus

Thebes was built on dragon's teeth and blessed by gods, yet no city in Greece suffered more. The curse that haunted it was not written on any wall. It lived in the blood of its royal family, passed from parent to child like an inheritance of sorrow. Two stories illustrate this better than any others: the tale of a god who destroyed his own kin, and the tale of a man who destroyed himself.

The God Who Was Born Twice

Dionysus grew up on Mount Nysa, hidden among nymphs who nursed him on honey and hymns. **Hera** found him more than once and sent madness upon him, but the nymphs protected the boy, and he survived. When he grew to manhood, he discovered wine. Some say a shepherd gave him the first grapes. Others say he found them himself, pressing the fruit and watching the juice ferment into something that made men laugh, weep, and forget their names. This was his gift to humanity, and it was as powerful as the fire Prometheus had stolen.

Dionysus travelled east. He went to India, to Phrygia, to Lydia, and everywhere he went he carried the vine. He conquered not with armies but with ecstasy. Where he walked, music followed. Where he stopped, women left their looms and their hearths to dance in the wilderness, wearing fawn-skins, carrying ivy-wreathed staffs called thyrsi, losing themselves in the god's presence. These were the **Maenads**, the madwomen, and their devotion was the most ancient and most terrible kind of worship.

He returned to Thebes at last, the city of his mother's family. **Pentheus** (*PEN-thee-uhs*), son of Agave and Echion, had succeeded to the throne. He was a practical king, suspicious of divine claims, and he refused to acknowledge Dionysus as a god. He forbade the Bacchic rites, imprisoned the god's followers, and mocked the stories of miracles. He was, after all, the grandson of the dragon's seed. Thebes had been built by warriors, and Pentheus thought like one.

Dionysus did not strike him down with lightning. That was not his way. Instead he drove the women of Thebes into frenzy and led them to the slopes of Mount **Cithaeron**. Among them were his own aunts: Agave, Autonoe, and Ino. They became Maenads in truth, tearing apart wild animals with their bare hands, drinking milk and honey from the rocks, their hair unbound, their voices lifted in cries that were half-song, half-scream.

Pentheus climbed the mountain to spy on them. He dressed in women's clothes at Dionysus's suggestion, thinking to observe unseen. But the Maenads detected him. In their divine madness, they fell upon him. His own mother Agave led the attack, and when the ecstasy faded, Pentheus was dead. Agave, holding what remained, did not understand at

first. She thought she carried the head of a lion or a wild bull. When recognition came, it was too late. The god had demonstrated his power in the most terrible way possible: by making a mother destroy what she loved most.

Dionysus had proven his divinity. Thebes would worship him forever after, building theaters in his honour where the stories of its own destruction would be performed for centuries. But the cost was a king torn apart by his own family, and a grief that would echo through the generations. The god did not rejoice in what he had done. He was not cruel by nature. But he was a god, and gods demand recognition. To deny divinity is to invite consequences that mortals cannot foresee.

> **Theater Sidebar: Greek Tragedy and Thebes** The city of Thebes was the setting for more Greek tragedies than any other location. Aeschylus wrote *Seven Against Thebes*, Sophocles wrote the three *Theban Plays* (*Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*), and Euripides wrote *The Bacchae* about Pentheus's death. Thebes became synonymous with tragedy because its founding myths contained all the elements that Greek playwrights found compelling: divine curses, impossible choices, family destruction, and the relentless working of fate upon human lives. When Athenian audiences watched a Theban tragedy, they were witnessing their deepest fears about civilisation itself.

The Woman Who Boasted Too Much

Before we turn to the second half of this chapter, there is another Theban story that belongs here. **Niobe** was the daughter of **Tantalus** and the wife of **Amphion**, who with his brother Zethus had built the walls of Thebes with the music of his lyre. Niobe had seven sons and seven daughters - fourteen children in all, a blessing so great that it became her ruin.

She boasted publicly that she was more blessed than **Leto**, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, who had only two children. The boast was not whispered in private. Niobe stood in the temple of Leto herself and announced to the assembled Thebans that her fourteen children made her greater than any mother in Greece, including the Titan goddess who had borne the divine twins. Leto heard. The goddess was not offended on her own behalf alone; she called upon her children. **Apollo** shot the seven sons dead as they hunted on Cithaeron. **Artemis** shot the seven daughters in their own house. One by one they fell, struck by divine arrows that never miss, until all fourteen lay dead.

Niobe wept until there were no tears left. She went to her father Tantalus's home at Sipylus and prayed to Zeus to end her grief. The god transformed her into stone, but even as stone she wept. A spring flows from the rock to this day, and its water tastes of salt. In Greek, to weep like Niobe means to grieve without consolation, to lose everything that made life worth living and still remain alive.

The Oracle of Doom

Thebes needed a king after the death of Amphion. **Laius** inherited the throne, a descendant of Cadmus through Polydorus and Labdacus. He married **Jocasta** (*joh-KAS-tuh*), daughter of Menoeceus, and for a time Thebes knew peace. Then Laius went to Delphi and received an oracle that would define the city's destiny.

Do not beget a son, the Pythia said. If you do, he will kill you and marry your wife.

Laius understood. He also understood that human nature is weaker than divine warning. One night, flushed with wine, he lay with Jocasta, and she conceived. When the child was born, Laius pierced the infant's ankles with a brooch and gave him to a shepherd with orders to expose the child on Mount Cithaeron and leave him to die. The shepherd took the baby but could not bring himself to abandon it entirely. Instead, he gave the child to a herdsman in the service of **Polybus**, king of Corinth.

The baby's ankles were swollen from the wound where the brooch had pinned them together. The Corinthians called him **Oedipus** (*ED-i-puhs*), which means "swollen foot." Polybus and his wife **Merope** raised him as their own, and Oedipus grew to manhood believing himself the prince of Corinth. He was strong, intelligent, and proud - qualities that would serve him well and destroy him completely.

The Crossroads

Oedipus heard a rumor that he was not the true son of Polybus. He asked his parents, but they would not or could not give him a straight answer. So he went to Delphi, as so many troubled Greeks did, and asked the oracle who his parents were.

The oracle did not name them. Instead it said: You will kill your father and marry your mother.

Oedipus was horrified. He loved Polybus and Merope. The thought of harming them was unbearable. So he did what seemed the only reasonable thing: he fled Corinth. He would never return, never see them again, and by this act of filial love he would make the prophecy impossible.

He travelled towards Thebes. At a place where three roads meet - a crossroads near the border of Phocis and Boeotia - he encountered an old man in a chariot. The old man's herald ordered Oedipus to make way. Words became threats, threats became violence. Oedipus, young and strong and proud, killed the old man and all but one of his servants. The old man was Laius. The servant escaped into the wilderness with the truth locked in his heart.

Oedipus did not know. He continued towards Thebes, a man who had just destroyed the prophecy by refusing to go home, not understanding that the father he had killed was not the father he had fled.

The Riddle

When Oedipus reached Thebes, the city was in the grip of terror. A monster called the **Sphinx** (*SFINGKS*) sat on a cliff above the road and posed a riddle to every traveller. She had the face of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. Those who answered correctly would pass. Those who failed were devoured. Many had tried. All had failed. Even Creon's son Haemon had died, and Creon, who ruled Thebes as regent, had proclaimed that whoever solved the riddle would receive the throne and the hand of the widowed queen.

The Sphinx spoke her riddle to Oedipus: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"

Oedipus thought for a moment. "Man," he said. "In infancy he crawls on four limbs. In adulthood he walks upright on two. In old age he uses a staff, making three."

The Sphinx had never been defeated before. Rather than live with the shame of failure, she threw herself from her cliff and died on the rocks below. Thebes was saved, and Oedipus was made its king. He married Jocasta, the widowed queen, and together they had four children: **Eteocles**, **Polynices**, **Antigone**, and **Ismene**. Under Oedipus's rule, Thebes prospered. He was a good king, just and intelligent, beloved by his people. Years passed. The prophecy seemed forgotten.

But oracles do not forget.

> **Mythology Note: Freud and the Oedipus Complex** In 1899, the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud named his famous "Oedipus complex" after this myth - the theory that young boys unconsciously desire their mothers and view their fathers as rivals. But Freud's reading would have surprised the ancient Greeks. In the original myth, Oedipus does not know Jocasta is his mother. The tragedy is not about forbidden desire but about the cruelty of fate: every action Oedipus takes to avoid his destiny fulfills it. The Greek moral is about the limits of human knowledge and the impossibility of escaping what the gods have decreed. Freud used the myth as a metaphor for his psychological theory; the ancients used it as a meditation on fate, blindness, and the terrible price of truth.

The Plague and the Truth

A plague struck Thebes. Crops failed, animals died in the fields, and women lost their children in childbirth. The city that had prospered under Oedipus's wisdom now suffered

under a curse no one could name. Oedipus sent his brother-in-law Creon to Delphi. The oracle said the plague would end when the murderer of Laius was found and punished.

Oedipus swore he would find the killer. He questioned elders, examined evidence, pursued every lead with the same intelligence that had defeated the Sphinx. He summoned the blind prophet **Tiresias** (*tih-REE-see-uhs*), who had lived through the reigns of several Theban kings and seen futures that no one wanted to hear.

Tiresias did not want to speak. He begged Oedipus to let the matter rest. But Oedipus accused him of conspiracy, of protecting the murderer, perhaps of being the murderer himself. At last Tiresias spoke the truth that he had foreseen: “You are the killer you seek. You have married your mother.”

Oedipus laughed at him. A blind man accusing the king? But Jocasta, listening, grew pale. She told Oedipus about the oracle given to Laius, about the child exposed on the mountain, about the crossroads where her first husband had died. Piece by piece, the truth assembled itself like a mosaic of horror.

The surviving servant from the crossroads was found. An old Corinthian shepherd arrived with news that Polybus had died of natural causes - and that Oedipus had been adopted. The same shepherd who had received the infant from Thebes recognised the king he had once saved.

Oedipus understood. Jocasta understood first, and she could not bear it. She went to her chamber and hanged herself. Oedipus found her body, and in an agony beyond words, he took the golden brooches from her dress and blinded himself. He would not look upon the world that had contained such a truth. He would not see the faces of his children, born of the most forbidden union in all of myth.

Oedipus did not know Jocasta was his mother when he married her. The gods had woven his fate before he was born, at the crossroads and in the cradle. His self-blinding was not punishment for a crime but the only possible response to unbearable knowledge. He had solved the Sphinx’s riddle, the riddle of human life, but he could not solve the riddle of his own existence.

The Exile

Oedipus was exiled from Thebes, though the city owed him its salvation. He wandered the roads of Greece, guided by his daughter **Antigone**, who refused to abandon him. She was young, barely more than a girl, but she possessed a loyalty that would define her own tragedy in years to come. Together they walked towards **Colonus**, a village near Athens, where a prophecy said Oedipus would find his final rest.

The curse he had spoken over his sons before leaving Thebes would take root. Eteocles and Polynices were supposed to share the throne, ruling in alternate years. But hatred, once planted, grows faster than wisdom. Eteocles would refuse to yield. Polynices would go into exile and raise an army. And Thebes, founded on dragon's teeth, would drink the blood of its own kings once again.

> **Discussion Questions** 1. Oedipus takes every possible step to avoid his prophecy, yet each action brings it closer. Is he responsible for his fate, or is he purely a victim of the gods? Can both be true? 2. Tiresias is blind but sees the truth; Oedipus has sight but is blind to reality. What does this contrast suggest about the relationship between physical sight and wisdom? 3. The Theban cycle shows a city blessed by gods yet cursed by them simultaneously. How does the story of Dionysus complement the story of Oedipus in illustrating this paradox?

Chapter 24: Seven Against Thebes and the Sons Who Avenged Their Fathers

The curse that Cadmus planted in Thebes's soil had grown into a forest of thorns. Oedipus's sons inherited not only a kingdom but a hatred that no treaty could dissolve. **Eteocles** (*ee-TEE-oh-kleez*) and **Polynices** (*pol-i-NY-seez*) had agreed to rule Thebes in alternate years. When the first year ended, Eteocles refused to step down. Polynices was banished. He took with him the two most dangerous heirlooms in Greece: the cursed necklace of Harmonia and the equally cursed robe.

The Lion and the Boar

Polynices travelled to **Argos**, where **Adrastus** was king. He arrived at night, wet from a storm, and sought shelter in the palace courtyard. There he found another exile: **Tydeus**, son of Oeneus, a fugitive from Calydon who had killed a kinsman in a quarrel. The two men quarreled over the right to shelter, drew their weapons, and would have killed each other if Adrastus himself had not appeared to separate them.

Adrastus remembered an oracle. A seer had told him that he would marry his daughters to a lion and a boar. He looked at the shields of the two strangers. Polynices carried the forepart of a lion. Tydeus carried the forepart of a boar. The oracle was fulfilled. Adrastus gave his daughter **Argia** to Polynices and **Deipyle** to Tydeus. He promised to restore both men to their native lands. Tydeus would have to wait. Polynices would come first.

The Prophet Who Knew Too Much

Adrastus began to gather an army. But one of Argos's greatest warriors refused to march. **Amphiaraus** (*am-fee-AR-ay-uhs*) was a seer as well as a soldier, and he had looked into the future. What he saw was death. Every leader of the expedition except Adrastus would die at Thebes. The walls would not fall. The city would not be taken. And he himself would descend alive into the underworld.

Amphiaraus would not go. He tried to persuade the others that the war was doomed. But Polynices was desperate, and he knew how to break the prophet's resistance. Amphiaraus had a wife, **Eriphyle** (*er-i-FY-lee*), and Eriphyle could be bought. Years earlier, Amphiaraus and Adrastus had sworn an oath: any future dispute between them would be settled by Eriphyle's judgment. It was a foolish bargain, made in friendship, and it would cost them everything.

Polynices offered Eriphyle the necklace of Harmonia. She looked upon it - gold and shifting gems, the most beautiful thing ever forged - and accepted it. She persuaded her husband to march. Amphiaraus, knowing he walked towards his own death, laid a final command upon his sons: when they were grown, they must kill their mother for this betrayal, and then they must march against Thebes themselves to avenge their father.

The Games of Nemea

The army assembled at **Nemea**, a valley northwest of Thebes, and stopped to find water. They met a woman named **Hypsipyle**, who had once been queen of Lemnos but was now a slave nurse to the infant **Opheltes**, son of King Lycurgus. She showed the soldiers where to find a spring, leaving the baby alone for a moment on a bed of parsley. While she was gone, a snake crawled from the undergrowth and bit the child. He died before anyone could save him.

His name was changed to **Archemorus**, which means "beginner of doom," and the seer Amphiaraus recognised the omen. The child's death on a bed of parsley foreshadowed the destruction that waited at Thebes. Hypsipyle was imprisoned for her negligence, though the Argives defended her as best they could. The games were splendid, but the shadow of the infant's death hung over every contest. But the army could not turn back. Instead, Adrastus held funeral games in the infant's honour - the first **Nemean Games**, which would become one of the great athletic festivals of Greece. Adrastus won the horse race. Eteoclus won the footrace. Tydeus won the boxing. Amphiaraus won the leaping and discus. Polynices won the wrestling. **Parthenopaeus** won the archery. They celebrated as if they were not walking towards their own graves.

The Seven Gates

The army reached Thebes. The city had seven gates, and seven champions were assigned to assault them. Each leader faced a Theban defender in a pairing that the Greeks would remember for centuries.

The Seven Against Thebes

Leader	Gate	Fate
Tydeus	Homoloid	Killed Melanippus; mortally wounded by Athena's withheld immortality
Capaneus	Electran	Scaled the walls; struck by Zeus's thunderbolt for hubris
Eteoclus	Neitian	Slain by Theban defenders
Hippomedon	Oncaedian	Killed by Ismarus
Parthenopaeus	Hypsistan	Slain (some say by Periclymenus)
Amphiaraus	Borraean	Swallowed alive by the earth; made immortal by Zeus
Polynices	Seventh Gate	Killed Eteocles in single combat; killed by him in return

Note: Gate assignments vary among ancient sources. This table follows Apollodorus with some supplementation from Aeschylus and other authors.

Tydeus fought with desperate fury. He was the greatest warrior among the Seven, a man who had killed fifty Theban ambushers single-handed on his embassy to the city. He wounded **Melanippus**, a Theban champion, and was himself mortally wounded in return. As he lay dying, Athena descended from Olympus. She had asked Zeus for a potion of immortality, intending to make Tydeus deathless in reward for his valor. But Amphiaraus, who hated Tydeus for persuading the Argives to march, cut off Melanippus's head and brought it to the dying man. Tydeus, in a final act of rage, split open the head and ate the brains. Athena, witnessing this savagery, withdrew the gift of immortality in disgust. Tydeus died as he had lived: brave, brutal, and starved of the divine favour he craved.

Capaneus was worse. He climbed a scaling ladder and boasted that not even Zeus could stop him from taking the city. For this hubris, the king of gods struck him down with a thunderbolt. Capaneus burned on the walls, and his wife **Evadne** threw herself onto his funeral pyre rather than live without him.

Parthenopaeus, the young Arcadian archer, fell to Theban spears. **Hippomedon** was killed by Ismarus. **Eteoclus** died at his gate. One by one, the Seven fell, until only Polynices and Adrastus remained standing.

The Brothers' Doom

The two armies, exhausted and broken, agreed to a final settlement. Eteocles and Polynices would fight in single combat for the throne. Winner takes Thebes. The armies would stand down. It was a noble arrangement, the kind of solution that older, wiser civilisations preferred to total war.

The brothers met at the seventh gate. They were evenly matched, trained by the same masters, burning with the same inherited rage. They fought until both lay dead on the stones, each run through by the other's spear. Neither ruled Thebes. Neither outlived the other. The curse of their house demanded nothing less than mutual destruction.

The only survivor among the Seven was Adrastus, who escaped on his divine horse **Arion**, a creature born of Poseidon and Demeter, swifter than any mortal steed. He fled to Athens and took refuge at the altar of Mercy, begging the Athenians to help recover the bodies of the dead.

Creon and Antigone

Creon, Jocasta's brother, became king. His first decree was devastating in its partiality. **Eteocles** had died defending Thebes; he would be buried with full honors. **Polynices** had attacked the city; his body would be left for dogs and birds to devour. No one would bury him on pain of death.

This was more than harsh. It was impious. In Greek belief, the unburied dead could not cross the river into the underworld. Their souls wandered forever, hungry, lost, denied the peace that death should bring. Polynices had been a traitor to Thebes, but he was still a human being, still Antigone's brother, and the gods required that the dead be honoured.

Antigone (*an-TIG-oh-nee*) could not accept the decree. She was young - barely more than a girl - but she possessed a moral certainty that no law could shake. She went to her brother's body under cover of darkness and scattered earth over it, a symbolic burial, the minimum ritual required to release a soul. She was caught by guards who had been watching the body, expecting someone to defy the decree. Creon, her own uncle, sentenced her to be entombed alive in a cave outside the city. She would have food and water, but she would be walled inside, left to starve or suffocate in the dark. It was a death without blood, which made it somehow worse - a slow erasure rather than a clean execution.

She did not beg. She did not repent. She told Creon that the laws of the gods were older than the laws of kings, and she accepted her fate with the same certainty with which she had defied him. A young man named **Haemon**, Creon's son who loved her, tried to intercede and failed. Antigone was sealed in her tomb, and there she hanged herself rather than wait for starvation. Haemon, finding her body, killed himself beside her. Creon's wife, learning of her son's death, took her own life as well.

One defiant act of conscience had destroyed three lives and broken the king who had decreed it.

The Sons Return

Ten years passed. The sons of the Seven - called the **Epigoni**, the "After-born" - grew to manhood in Argos and in the cities of their allies. They had been children when their fathers marched to Thebes, too young to fight, old enough to understand that something terrible had been taken from them. They remembered their fathers' deaths and the oath that bound them, sworn at funeral pyres and in temples, that they would return to Thebes when they were old enough to fight and finish what their fathers had begun. **Alcmaeon**, son of Amphiaraus, led them. He had already fulfilled the first part of his father's command: he had killed his mother Eriphyle for betraying Amphiaraus with the cursed necklace. The Furies pursued him for this matricide, but Apollo had commanded it, and the contradiction between divine orders tore at his mind.

The Epigoni marched against Thebes with better omens than their fathers. They were younger, stronger, and luckier. In the battle that followed, Laodamas, son of Eteocles, killed **Aegialeus**, son of Adrastus, but was himself slain by Alcmaeon. The Theban resistance collapsed. Tiresias, ancient and blind, counseled the Thebans to flee. They abandoned their city by night, taking their women and children, and travelled far to the north where they built a new city called Hestiaea. Tiresias himself drank from a spring along the way and died, his long service to Thebes ended at last.

The Epigoni entered Thebes, plundered it, and pulled down its walls. They sent a portion of the spoils to Delphi, including **Manto**, daughter of Tiresias, whom they dedicated to Apollo. The city that had been founded on dragon's teeth and divine weddings, that had produced Oedipus and Antigone, that had resisted the greatest army of its age, now lay in ruins.

Alcmaeon's story did not end with victory. The curse of matricide followed him like a second shadow. He wandered Greece pursued by the Furies, their snake-hair and burning eyes visible only to him, their whispers audible in every crowd. He was purified first by one river-god, then another, but purification from matricide is never complete. He married daughters of kings who coveted the necklace of Harmonia, and each marriage brought new bloodshed. A king named Phegeus took him in and gave him his daughter Arsinoe,

but when Alcmaeon tried to move the necklace to Delphi as the oracle commanded, Phegeus's sons murdered him for the treasure.

His own sons, **Amphoterus** and **Acarnan**, were still young, but the gods made them grow to manhood in a single day so they could avenge their father. They killed Phegeus's sons, recovered the necklace and the robe, and at last brought them to Delphi where they were dedicated to Apollo. The cursed objects that Hephaestus had forged for Harmonia's wedding, that had destroyed Semele and Jocasta and Eriphyle and so many others, were laid to rest where no mortal could wear them again.

The house of Cadmus was finished. Thebes had fallen twice: once to the sons, and once to the grandsons. The dragon's teeth that had sown its warrior aristocracy had sprouted a harvest of blood that no amount of time could exhaust. The city would be rebuilt, as cities are, but its golden age of myth was over. The stories had all been told, the curses had all been paid, and there was nothing left to do but remember.

> **Mythology Note: Aeschylus and the Seven Against Thebes** The story of the Seven was immortalized by Aeschylus in his tragedy *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BCE), the third play of a tetralogy that included *Laius* and *Oedipus* (both lost). Aeschylus added the powerful device of assigning each champion to a specific gate and giving them distinctive shields with boastful emblems - Capaneus's carried a naked torch-bearer with the inscription "I will burn the city." The playwright's brother Cynegeirus died at the Battle of Marathon, and scholars have detected in the play's imagery a meditation on the heroism and futility of war. The Theban saga, for all its mythic elements, was always about the terrible cost of pride.

> **Discussion Questions** 1. The cursed necklace of Harmonia passes through five generations, bringing destruction at every step. Is the necklace a genuine magical curse, or does it simply represent the inherited nature of violence within families? Can you think of real-world parallels? 2. Alcmaeon kills his mother because Apollo commanded it, yet the Furies punish him for matricide. How does this contradiction reflect the Greek understanding of justice and divine will? 3. The Theban saga spans five generations from Cadmus to the Epigoni. Looking back across all the chapters you have read, what patterns do you see in how Greek myth treats the idea of generational curse? Is there any way to break such a cycle?

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