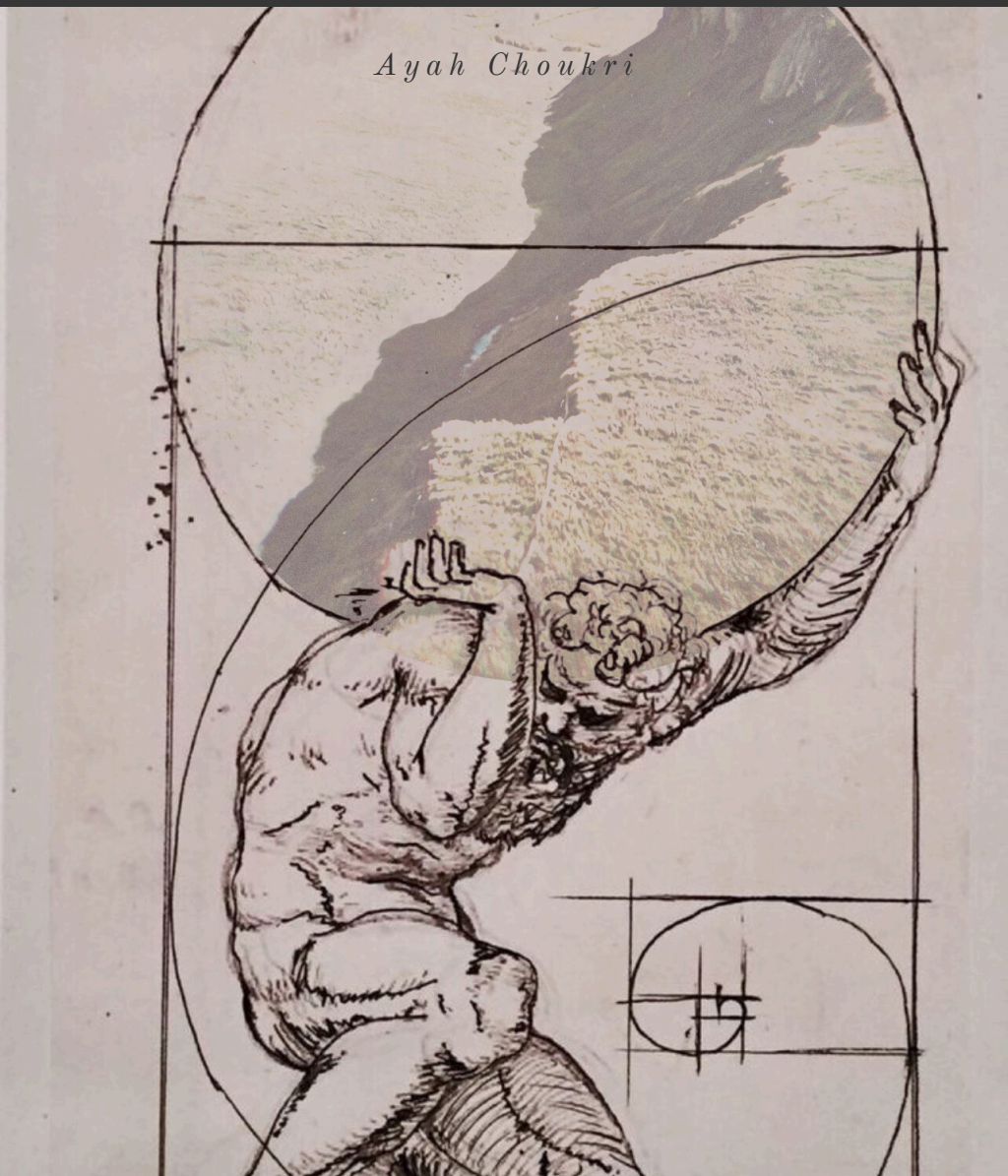
THE EDGE OF THEIR WORLD

4 Greek Legends surrounding Morocco

Ayah Choukri



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Introduction

There are places ancient civilisations wrote about that no longer exist. And then, there's Morocco. A key to the door that connects (or seperates depending on who is locking it) East and West ; an earthy kiss between two very different waters - or, like King Hassan II once called it himself, "a tree whose roots delve deep into Africa and whose leaves breathe in Europe".

This is not a history book ; or at least, not in the conventional sense.

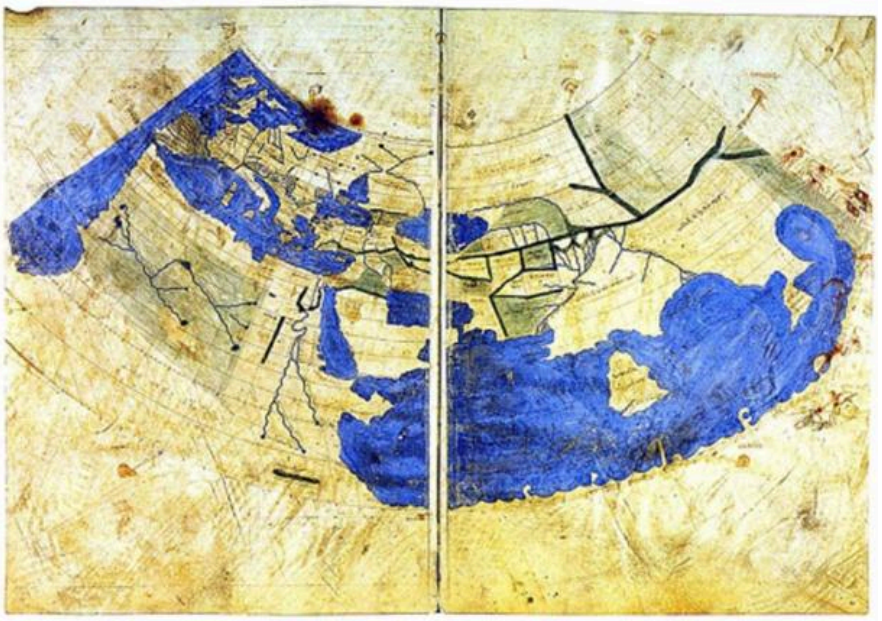
Though I've had to browse through "historical" sources to gather its stones, what you will find in the pages that follow are nothing but a collection of borrowed stories, fragments of legends… very old ones. A retelling of myths that the Greeks, architects of Western myth, told about far-off lands they couldn't reach but dreamed about.

When they looked towards Northwest Africa, beyond the Pillars of Heracles (what we now call "the Strait of Jibraltar") they vividly imagined an "elsewhere" filled with magic and mysticism ; giants and golden apples (or oranges depending on the source) ;

The kind of furniture you find in the mental apartments of old men on the blink of death (or bottle-weary ones), when they look at very distant coastlines and start drawing gods into the gaps.

They called it "the edge of the world" : surely it was the edge of **theirs**. You see, the world as the Greeks saw it was much like a terrestrial disk : one big ocean, *Océanos*, formed a belt around the inhabited world: *oikouménē* , and the coasts of present-day Morocco would have been the western frontier between waters and land.

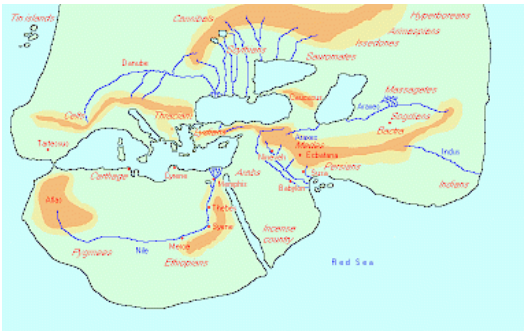
There, was something they couldn't quite name... But the brain is a machine that produces meaning to breathe coherence into chaos. So, like anyone else, really, they created names, drew lines outside of which was the "elsewhere". And with that comes a lot of projection, a good dose of imagination.

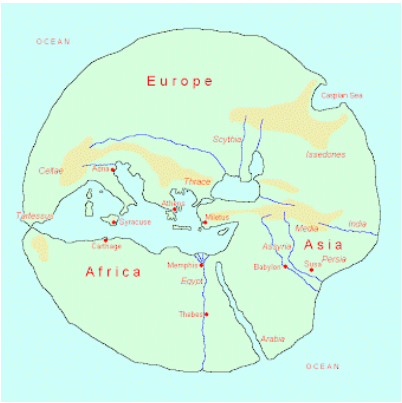


"A Byzantine Greek world map according to Ptolemy's first conic projection"

Herodotus of Halicarnus (c.484 - c. 425 BCE), who didn't quite believe the myths but couldn't stop recording them either, saw the world as made of three continents : Europe, Asia and Libya (Africa, the size of which he definitely underestimated much like the Mercator's map). He believed Libya, inhabited by the "Libyans" (Imazighen), was encircled by the sea, as Phoenicians were reportedly able to sail around it (*Histories*, book IV, 42 by Herodotus). While he was more familiar with its eastern flank, the West remained somewhat of a distant question mark on the map ; though the Greeks had been in contact with Northwest Africa and had some limited knowledge of the ancient Amazigh peoples, or Libyans as they called them. Herodotus, for instance, took notes from Greek expeditions that stretched from the Egyptian borders to the promontory of Soloeis - what we now call "Cape Spartel" in Tangier. In his accounts, he describes a tribe : the *Maxyes*, who shaved the left side of their skulls and let their hair grow on the right. A parallel was drawn by historians with the inhabitants of the Rif, in the Amazigh tribes of Morocco who used to wear at one point in time, for centuries, hair on the right side, just like the *Maxyes*. Similary, goatskin is described by Greek and Roman writers as a traditional Libyan garment, and the *tabandja*, an apron that covers the chest and belly, was for a long time worn by Moroccan Amazigh hunters and warriors. Herodotus also mentions northern regions of Morocco on numerous occasions, recounting the Carthaginian journey of Sataspes who had been ordered to sail around Libya, only to cross the Strait of Jibraltar known as the Pillars of Hercules (Heracles)n, and round Cape Spartel in present-day Tangier or the promontory of Soloeis, ... (*Histories*, XLIII)

But still, for the most part, the West was a blank space to the Greek. It's always the same logic : the more they looked away from Greece, the stranger the world became to them.





Hecatius (left) VS. Herodotus' (right) world maps.

And so, this "elsewhere" (which has no precise location up until this day) became sort of like a canva ; a stage onto which they flung the products of their imagination, their gods, their dreams and nightmares. And naturally, monsters always live far away enough not to answer back, but close enough to haunt their maps still and keep them on their toes.

Now, before anyone raises a finger : yes, these myths are somewhat attributed to the Greeks. And yet here I am, a Moroccan woman dusting them off (and I’m still not entirely sure how to even pronounce “Hesperides”).

Truth betold, I find it fascinating how the same legends that were written in ancient Athens, inscribed in their scrolls only to survive to see today, have circulated orally, for thousands of years, amongst Amazigh tribes (though we know very litle of the) and were an integrate part of their folklore, under different names (Antaeus = Anti in Libyan folklore). I'm not trying to prove the origins of these stories by any means and will happily let the academics discuss them as I am certainly not qualified. But let's

just say I wouldn't be too shocked to learn that these myths don't truly belong to anyone ; that they are nothing but traveling stories, from north to south, mouth to mouth, guest to host. That human imagination just has a tedious yet comforting way of coming back to the same conclusions, in every mind.

Also, a simpler and more personal motive behind this Ebook is... I've always had a thing for fiction ; the kind that knows it is fiction and doesn't pretend to be anything more than that. The kind that tells you straight up "I'm lying, but only because the truth wouldn't sit still and you look like you need a distraction from all your questions right now". Fiction walks around barefoot and lets you follow it without asking for much, and it allows you to hear the places you travel to or hear of, **ask** for stories to be made about them.

That is, it seems, how the Greeks worked their legends (or so I suppose, though I must admit I donnot know much about them at all) : they might have come across something foreign like a tall and silent peak in the northafrican horizon, (say, the Toubqal mount?) and have somehow imaigned a Titan beneath it punished by Zeus, god of their gods, holding the heavens up for eternity.

I suppose you could say I'm stretching, having inhaled one old book *de trop* and am now hallucinating Atlantis off the coast of Tangier, and you wouldn't be too far off. I, too, have a weakness for wonder, which is what brought upon this Ebook.

Of course, North Africa doesn't need to be mythologized. It does not stretch itself to be poetry : it is a poem to itself. But the point is, it doesn't take too hard of a look to see why people as foreign to this land as one can be, decided to draw their gods **here**. I understand how one might look at our corner of the earth and say "yes, that's pretty much it. This, is where we will place the edge of things ; this is the door that men, tired of reason, inevitably end up walking through, hoping to misplace their souls among the divine on the other side". You feel me?

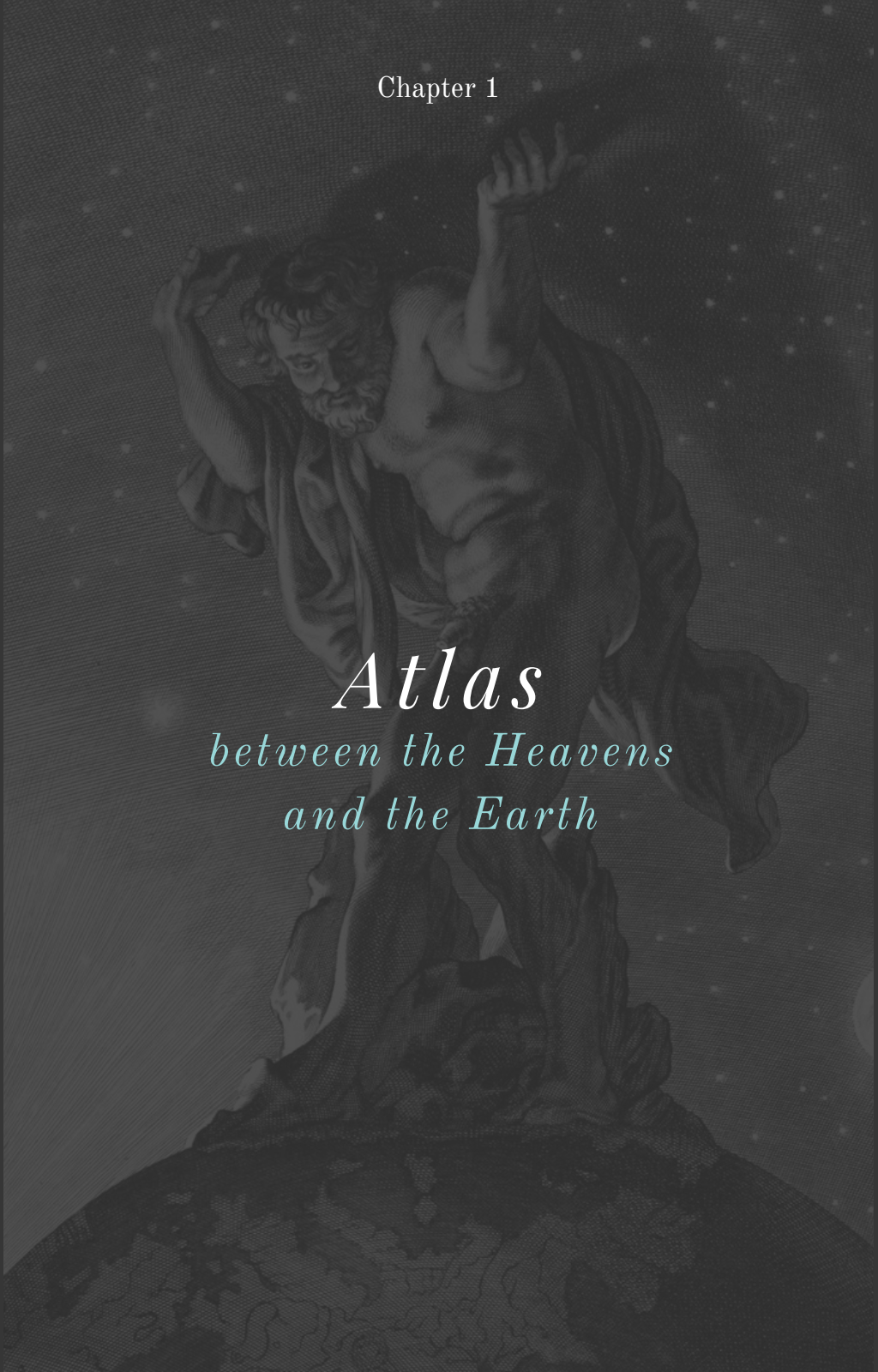
And you, yourself, might also get it if you too have stood, completely still, time and time again (almost every summer in my case) under the hottest August sun, on the coastline of Fnideq between Tetouan and Sebta (Ceuta, Spain), waiting for your family to come back from the market, looking up at the Strait of Jibraltar (or what we can see of it) and thought to yourself "well of course they invented stories about this place. What else could they do?"

However, I do want to point out that if what follows isn't an attempt at having Morocco claim any of these stories, it does claim something : they all leaned west, undeniably. And most of the literature agrees that the Greeks, when they dreamed, pointed in this direction, where they believed their road disappeared.

They called it "the edge of the world" : the land bordered by the Océanos (οκεανός). So, if you'll let me, I'd like us to walk a little closer to the shore.

Here are 4 Greek legends that have seemingly decided to make Morocco their home.

Chapter 1



Atlas

between the Heavens and the Earth

Chapter 1

Atlas: between the Heavens and the Earth

❝ *Once more at the distance of ten days, there is a salt hill, a spring, and an inhabited tract. Near the salt, is a mountain called* ***Atlas****, very taper and round ; so lofty, moreover, than the top (it is said) cannot be seen, the clouds never quitting it either summer or winter. The natives call this mountain "the Pillar of Heaven" [...]* ❞

- *Histories* (*), 4.184.3-4, Herodotus.

According to historical records (*), some ancient Imazighen, or Libyans, referred to mountains and hills as *zegeri*.

There are *zegeries* in Morocco that point towards the sky like a knife. Mount Toubqal, for instance, slices that grand blue screen with the kind of pride that comes from holding up the heavens for too long.

We call them the Atlas Mountains. The Imazighen called them *Darar*, regular plural of *Dar* ; *adrar* : mountains. They're the teeth of North Africa. But thinking of them as mere geography would be quite boring, frankly. As we just mentioned, they're bones : specifically, the fossilized spine of a Titan with poor political instincts who lost a war he thought he had all the chances to win, and instead became a lesson inscribed into Africa's fangs.

Atlas, son of a Titan and a nymph, and a titan (or giant) himself, had the audacity to stand up against Zeus, god of all gods in Greek mythology : the old and noble error of fighting on the wrong side of a war you did not chose. Along with his brother, Menoetius, he placed his bets on an older world and sided with the ancient order of Cronos, Zeus' father, to take down his son, and the Olympians.

Hope is for poets, and Atlas was nothing of such. So, what drove him to defy divine authority?

According to some versions, Atlas ruled over a land beyond the pillars of Heracles : Atlantis. Only, the Olympian gods sent a deluge that overwhelmed the entire island in one day and one night. Atlas, who escaped, joined the Titanomachy, a war that was a less about justice than about jurisdiction. And it all started with Cronos famously swallowing five of his children whole, one after the other, as soon as his wife, Rhea, gave birth to them : Hestia, Demeter, Hades, Hera and Poseidon ; except for the youngest, Zeus, whom Rhea, as a desperate attempt to keep one of her babies alive, replaced in the hands of Cronos with a stone, which he inhaled like an ogre.

Lucky he forgot to chew.

Growing up in the margins, Zeus returned, disguised as a servant, with a strategy to rescue his brothers and sisters. In a goblet, he served Cronos a vomitive, handed to him by his cousin Metis, pretending to offer him wine. The latter emptied himself completely of his swallowed lineage, as well as the stone he had confused for his youngest. And before you know it, a war is declared : on one side, the Father and his Titans ; on the other, the Son and his own private army of monsters.

Atlas, failing to understand that power shifting hands is an absolute necessity, he chose to side with Cronos. Unlike his older brother who clearly wasn't the sharpest tool out of the box, Prometheus predicted the issue of the rebellion and out of pure opportunity, fought on Zeus' side.

And when the Titans lost, punishments were handed out by Zeus himself, who got emboldened by his victory. Menoetius was sentenced to eternity in the Tartarus, an abyss where gods stack all of their bad ideas hoping to forget about them, while Atlas was condemned to stand at the westernest edge of the world and hold up the sky.

A titan who tried to stop time from doing its thing, sentenced to hold its passage forever -Zeus, ever the dramatist.

And where did the Olympian gods send him for his eternal punishment, his head crowned in snow and his feet chained to the ground? On the African soil, what the Greeks called "Libya" and most specifically in present-day Morocco. His body became the cold, defeated axis of the universe.

*

Later on, Perseus, son of Zeus, hero of all heros before the days of Heracles, arrived "where the world was said to end", carrying the fresh head of Medusa which he had just slayed - a Gorgon with living snakes in place of hair whose gaze, still capturing the look of terror, turned mortals into stone. That head had already petrified monsters and men indifferently.

Young, victorious, Perseus found Atlas there, shoulders bent in true administrative resignation. And there, in northern Morocco, things went south somewhere between resentment, miscommunication and extreme fatigue.

Something that Atlas did or said didn't sit right with Perseus (we're not too sure what). Perhaps the giant felt some type of way about his persecutor's son showing up to mock him. Or perhaps Perseus mistook Atlas' weariness for arrogance in the impatience fashion of the young. In any case, Perseus decided to punish him without much thought into it. The petrifying eyes of the dead Gorgon met the look of horror on Atlas's face, before parcels of came to cover and crystallize it.

Atlas turned into stone. His massive form frozen in place, the African soil became his tomb : a grave of schist, gneiss and quartz ; and just liket that, the Atlas mountains, silent and grey, were born.

*

From "myths" to "maths", there's only one letter.

As myths have a way to refuse to stay still, so did the tale of Atlas. From mythological, it became mathematical, or shall we say geographical.

On their maps, the Greeks and Romans had Morocco's mountain range bear that name. In their usual fashion of turning landscapes into legends, they named their Titan after them.

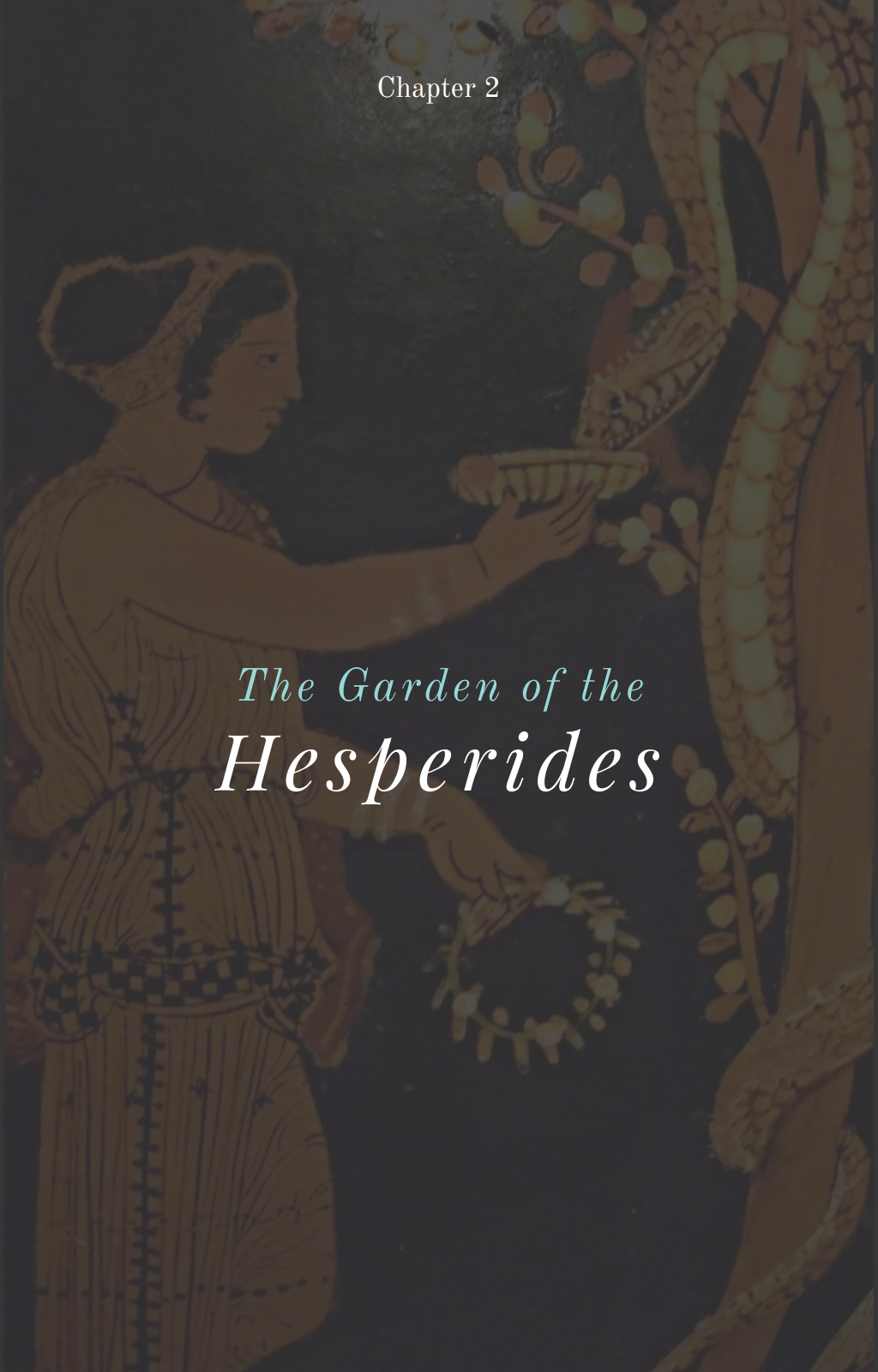
And later on, early Arab or Andalusian geographers also seized the sacred topography of the region and recorded it in detailed maps and accounts, like Al Bakri (11th century) or Al Idrissi (12th century).

And as for Atlas himself, carrying the celestial spheres paid off, it seems, as his name endured in the stars : Atlas is one of the brightest in the Pleiades constellation, linked to his own daughters, the 7 nymphs pursued by Orion and rescued by Zeus. Just like that, his name was pinned to the sky like a medal. Eternity does have its compensations, after all.

And today, well, you who have walked our valleys (Oukaimden, Imlil), could you feel it?

The weight of the sky pressing down the land where the sun pauses before it sets?

Chapter 2



The Garden of the Hesperides

Chapter 2

The Garden of the Hesperides

❝ *So, to his dream, the pilgrim makes repine*

Failling in mire and blood amid his sighs.

To seek this gardien - destiny is thine,

But never shalt behold it anywise. ❞

- *The Hesperides*, by Thomas Walsh

There was once a garden at the edge of the world known to the Greeks. It was west of the west, that garden, both geographically - somewhere past the Atlantic and the mist rising from the Lixus river - and existentially : a place you couldn't find on a map unless the map was folded into a prayer to the Olympus.

Certainly not a garden of men, nor a garden people tend to with all kinds of pesticides, but the kind that grows only in the memory of gods. A secret heaven, Eden, reserved for those who could laugh without fearing death.

Apart from the ambrosia smells that ran through its springs, the true treasure kept by that garden was a fruit tree, carrying golden apples. It was Gaia, the Earth herself, who gifted these apples to Héra when she married her son Zeus, god of all Greek gods. Quite the unique wedding present - especially knowing what one bite of its yellow fruits could do. Indeed, the golden apples were a symbol of fertility but most importantly they granted immortality. You take a bite and you're for a life worthy of the gods', ever-stretching toward eternity - wherever that is.

They called it the Garden of the Hesperides and for a reason, as it was guarded by three beautiful sisters - three nymphs and their stories.

In Greek mythology, the Hesperides are associated with the West and the setting sun. Daughters of the evening, born from a sunset - *al Maghrib* - no one remembers

anymore, usually three or four in number, their names were Aegle, Erytheia, Hesperia and Arethusa. They’re often said to be the daughters of Atlas and Pleione, though other origins exist.

They were said to watch over the golden apples. But as we know, no paradise is truly complete without some kind of a doorman. And in this particular Eden it took the form of a dragon with a hundred heads in the Hesperides: Ladon. Alongside him danced and sang the Hesperides sisters, four protectors of a forbidden fruit who made it impossible to come near them.

But that was until Heracles came along.

The mighty Heracles (or Hercules, in Roman), hero of all heroes: the problem-solver, the walking muscle cramp of the ancient world. As he approached the coast of Lixus, he had already completed ten of his labors. But Eurystheus, (a bureaucrat before bureaucracy as we know it) decided two of those labors didn't count, as he accused Heracles of cheating.

In true administrative fashion he handed Heracles two additional tasks, one of which was to bring back the golden apples.

Refusing to back down, Heracles wandered as heros so often do : with more stubbornness than plan, until he eventually reached the garden. And this is where the versions diverge : some say he simply slew Ladon and broke into the garden, while others drag Atlas, father of the guardian nymphs, into the picture. I personally prefer that last bit.

Heracles, who was never one to life a weight he didn't have to, struck a deal with the great hunchback of the Olympians. Heracles asked Atlas to fetch the golden apples for him, as he was their guardians' own father and would therefore have it easy. The latter, more than ready to take a break (Chapter 1) agreed, but on one condition : Heracles would have to hold the sky for him - just for a bit, while he went in and stole the golden fruits. To which the hero agreed with all the eagerness of a man who likes to be efficient and knows how to delegate.

The Titan, who hadn't stretched his forgotten legs in a long time, paid his daughters a visit and was able to pick the golden apples with utmost ease.

But then, he had a maschievous idea : he would deliver the apples to Eurystheus himself in place of Heracles, while the latter would remain under the sky, bearing his burden for him forever. Sounded like quite the plan.

With that thought, Atlas casually revealted it to Heracles. After all, what did he have to lose, right? He was already free of his eternal punishment - or so he thought. Heracles, discomposed, momentarily flustered and probably slightly annoyed, quickly thought of something to trick the old giant. His mind raced for an answer and indeed, it came to him in no time as it always seems to for these characters. smart ploy and manifesting divine timing.

Heracles pretended to agree to do the heavy lifting forever after in place of Atlas, to accept defeat without a fight. He simply asked Atlas - a clever ploy manifesting divine timing - to hold the heavens again just one more time ; just so he could adjust his position. And, Atlas being Atlas, poor in instincts, took back the heavens.

One blink or two and before he knew it Heracles was gone, running free probably half a continent away already, apples in hand and mission accomplished ; leaving a betraying father, for all his size, dwarfed by the stupidity of what he had just done.

*

The imagined location of the garden has long been debated. Some point at present-day Libya while most consider Morocco, specifically Lixus, near what is now the city of Larache.

Perched over the mouth of the Loukkos River, Lixus was a Phoenician outpost before the Greeks ever named a god, as beneath their myths there usually is an older current running quietly.

There were older gods in Phoenician and Amazigh mythos. Stories buried in ritual rather than papyrus scrolls and books ; and Lixus is the perfect spot for all these worlds to collide, for it was one very busy stop in a web of Tyrian trade routes that exported wheat, tuna and fruits to the Mediterranean.

Lixus was in many ways a faithful mirror of Morocco history. From the 8th century BCE to the 15th century BCE, it witnessed the passing of one civilization after the other, which makes it stand as one of the most important ancient centers in Morocco.

More than 2700 years ago, the Phoenicians laid down - temporary - roots on this exact plateau overlooking oued Loukkos, as a trading post. But while they were at it, they also figured they would build, somewhere between the 8th and the 7th centuries BCE, a sacred district: the Temples Quarter. Centuries later, archeologists discovered among the ruins a structure they called "edifice H" which they identified as a temple dedicated to Melqart, a Phoenician divinity, the chief god of Tyre. A simple altar stood there. That altar, they believed, is same one mentioned by Roman historian Pliny the Elder, who wrote that in Lixus stood "an altar older than the one in Gades" (a

Phoenician colony in what is now Cadiz, Spain). Pliny called it the altar of Hercules, but that is just the Roman name. Before Hercules was Roman, he was the Greek mighty Heracles. And before that, he was Melqart : same hero in different costumes. His name, melek qart, meant "the king of the city" : the king of Tyre (present-day Lebanon).

Which brings us back to the myth: the Garden of the Hesperides, the golden apples, the 11th labor of Herackles... According to Greek mythology it all happened here in Lixus. But if Heracles is Melqart, and the garden is in Lixus, and so is the Quarters Temple, then myth and memory are folded into one another. Fiction dressing up the truth, yet again, so it doesn't get chased away - not that there is any truths to these gods themselves. What I mean is that myths often grow out of real places.

The dragon guarding the apple is no coincidence either: in near Eastern religions, reptilian beings like serpents or dragons were often seen as the guardians of divine knowledge.. The motif of a sacred tree protected by such figures predates the Greeks and already emerges in Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian mythologies.

*

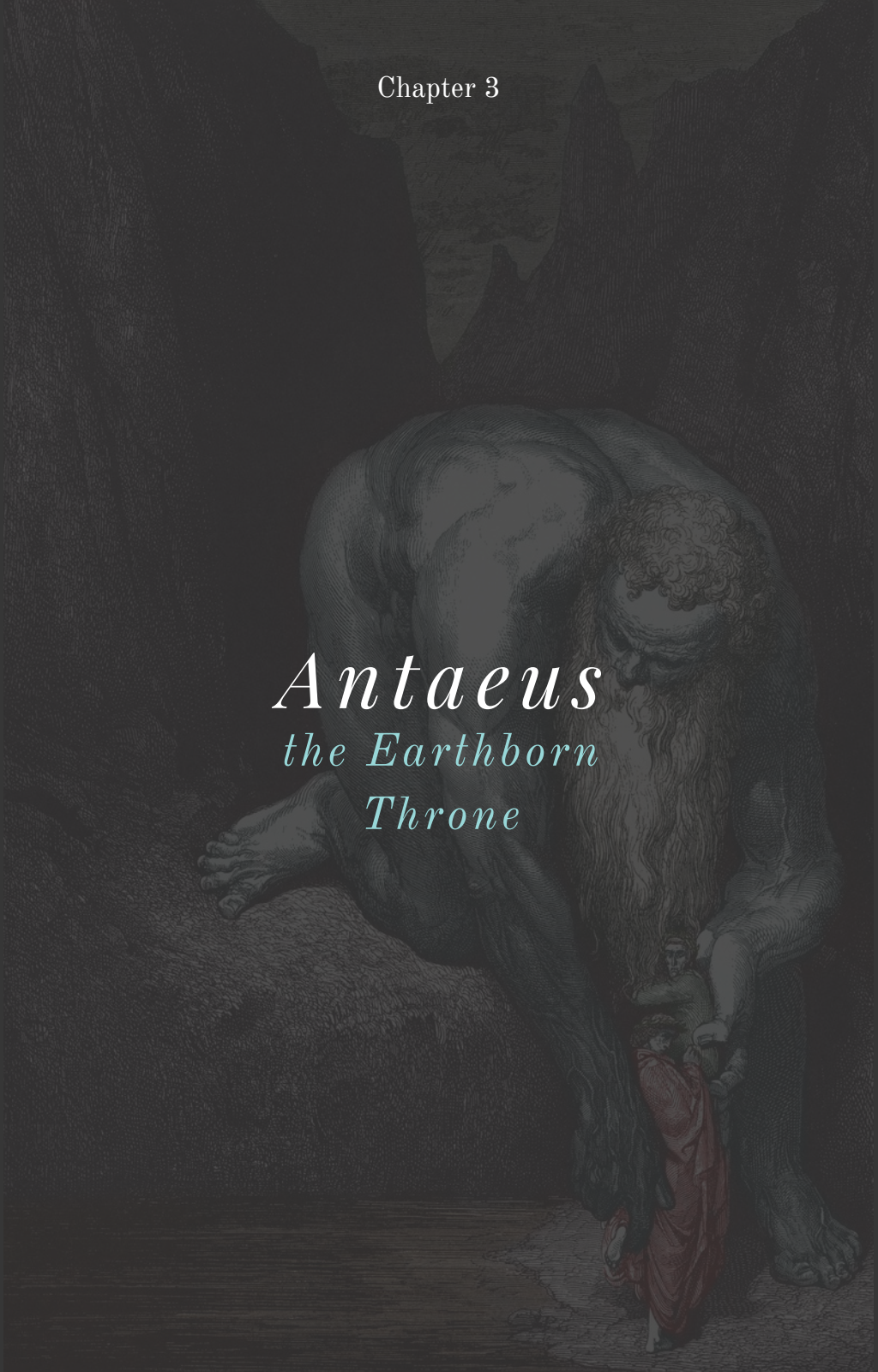
And what about the Hesperides sisters?

Well, after the apples got stolen by their own father Atlas (Chapter 1) who betrayed their trust, I suppose they no longer had anything to guard. These days, they too must be sitting in plastic chairs on the ruins of Lixus. They most likely stopped looking for heroes, as those don't come anymore, and in all fairness haven't a long time ago, somewhere between the fall of Troy and when people lost faith in collective momentum.

From this height, none of them sees the ferries sailing between Tangier and Algeciras. But I suppose they do feel the pull of the Atlantic waves pushing into the mouth of the Loukkos River, only to die in its slow, steady flow.

Sometimes, right before the sun sets, one of them might look at Europe. It might glint, more as a deadly trap, a Trojan horse, than as a promise these days - though it is always hard to tell, even for immortals.

Chapter 3



Antaeus

the Earthborn Throne

Chapter 3

Antaeus: the Earthborn King

❝ *Hercules hugged him, lifted him aloft, broke and killed him : for when he touched earth so it was the he waxed stronger, wherefore some said that he was the son of Earth.* ❞

- *Bibliotheca,* book II chapter V, by Apollodorus.

There is a story the ancients told about a land called Tingis (Tangier), who was said to belong to the son of the earth itself.

His name was Antaeus. And if you set foot on his territory, you didn't have many chances to leave alive.

*

Antaeus was the son of Gaia, the Earth, and Poseidon, the Sea - which is to say he was born of two things that never asked permission for anything. He didn't roar ; didn't really need to as his power came from the very soil beneath his feet. At all times, his body was silently, and heavily pressed down into the earth as if the umbilical chord hadn't been cut.

It is easy to think of "strength" as something innate a man carries with him or hammers into his muscles with pushups ; into his eyes with ambition ; into his heart with grief. But I quite like the way Antaeus defines, or embodies the origin of strength : it is something you receive. Because as the legend puts it, as long as long as his feet were planted firm on the ground, open to receive, nothing and no one could defeat Antaeus : his mother Gaia nursed him with every breath and his veins pulsed with tectonic force as his muscles with seismic rage.

His kingdom stretched over the cliffs of the Rif region, but his feet could have eeasily rested upon the coast of Tangier - for what stronger soil on Moroccan land could bear the pressure of such a force?

He lived quite independently from the gods and their moodswings, was pretty immune to the sweet perfurme or mortal recognition.

Only, Antaeus had somewhat of a grim obsession: each time a foreigner would come wandering into his kingdom, he would challenge them to a wrestling match. If they lost (which he knew they would), he would kill them without a second thought. Wrestle or die : simple yet deadly. Then, he would crush their bones, and their skull joined the pile he built in homage to his father Poseidon like a warning. A pile that grew until Heracles (Hercules) put a stop to it all.

*

Heracles was the sort of hero who entered a room and made the gods feel smaller, if that's even possible. On his way to the Garden of the Hesperides in search of the golden apples (Chapter 1), and before he could get to Lixus, he had one stop to make: the kingdom of Antaeus, Tingis. Heracles had been tasked with defeating the giant as part of his Labors.

And so they met between the mountains and the sea, possibly near the cliffs of Tingintan peninsula. Antaeus stood there without a trace of fear as he had seen so many men fall before him, while Hercules tried to throw him to the ground again and again, but each time the giant would hit the earth and rise stronger, as his feet kissed Gaia who gave him new life.

That is when Hercules understood : he couldn’t defeat Antaeus on “Moroccan” soil. You can’t kill a man who belongs to his land. Perhaps that was the metaphor all along (or at least that is how I like to see it)

So he did what no man had ever dared to do before : he lifted Antaeus off the earth, picked him up from the only thing (and only one) that loved him unconditionally, and suspended him between sky and soil, between heaven and home like a lost soul. Antaeus broke and the earthborn finally died. Cause of death ? Disconnection.

Something to think about.

*

The Greeks believed Antaeus was buried near present-day Tanger (Tingis). Roman travelers claimed locals still visited his grave as they found a pile of rock so vast no ordinary man could have filled it.

That place may still stand roughly 50 kilometers from Tangier, a place called Msoura, a rather mysterious megalithic site with dozens of stone monoliths forming a massive rock around a central tumulus. Some of those stones tower over 5 meters tall.

Archaeologists debate its origins. Some believe Msoura predates the pyramids ; some suggest it was a sacred Amazigh site that was possibly tied to solar cycles or burials. But others prefer the legends (clever of them). Greek historians, travelers and geographers like Strabon (*Geography*, book 17), Plutarch (*Parallel lives*) all mention it in their accounts.

An interesting take at Antaeus' myth can be found in the writings of Lucan, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39-65 AD) a short-lived Roman poet. In his *Pharsalia*, Lucan recounts in great detail of the civil war between Julius Cesar and Pompey the Great ; and while this portrayal is rooted in historical events, the writer added in elements of classical mythology, perhaps as a strategy to pass down messages.

One such reference is the battle of the hero Hercules (Heracles) with Antaeus, which he evokes in Book 4 of *Pharsalia. From it, he draws* a parallel to the military clash between Roman general Gaius Scribonius Curion (c. 84 BCE - 49 BCE) and king Juba I of Numidia (c.85 BCE - 46 BCE) that happened in Ras-ed-Der (Cape Bon, present-day Tunisia). Lucan incorporates terms like *vires* (strength) and *robor* (muscle, power) thorough his portrayal of the events, terms that describe Antaeus' power in the myth. In both the mythical and historical battles, the attachment to the land plays a crucial role in determining their outcome : on one hand, Juba, much like the earthborn king from the Rif region, draws his force from his knowledge of the Land (Numidia). On the other hand, Curio, much likes Heracles, fails to recognise this connection - though, *un*like Heracles, the Roman general never wakes up to the strategic value of the ground. That misjudgment is what ultimately leads him to defeat. His forces were crushed by Saburra, Juba's military commander, and Curio died at age 35.

Under the plum of Lucan, the brief moment during which Hercules felt defeate by Antaeus before figuring out his weakness, becomes an allegory for the broader theme of Rome's decline. Although the giant loses, Lucan's takeaway from the myth, applied to Curio's defeat, can be read as his critique of the Roman political class at the time ; disconnected leaders who viewed the world through tactical lenses and failed to stay grounded in fundamental values.

❝ Seen this way, the Antaeus episode belongs to a series of episodes in which Caesar and the Caesareans are depicted as villains in their political designs, by virtue of their treatment of nature, always with Rome as the central issue of the depiction. [...]

Curio's excessive trust in the camp for its omen goes hand in hand with blindness about the terrain. ❞

- *Curio and Antaeus: the African Episode of Lucan Pharsalia IV*, by Charles Saylor

It is also said that when the land used to be administrated by the Romans under the name “Mauritania Tingitana”, Roman soldiers would carefully avoid disturbing the site. The local Amazigh populations treated it as holy ground.

Though his name comes from Greek/Roman myth, the spirit of Antaeus exists in Amazigh oral tradition, as in some very ancient North African legends, the story of a giant “protector” who cannot be defeated unless lifted from the land exists, though his name varies.

Chapter 4

Calypso

the Patient Love

Chapter 4

Calypso of Sebta: the Patient Lover

❝ *The blue goddess then spok : "Stop tormenting yourself with sorrowful regrets. I will you on your way right now. But first, build a large raft. [...] You will safely return to your distant land."*

The patient Ulysses [...] replied with steady words : "Goddess, you speak of leaving like it's nothing. [...] I will not unless you swear to me, by your sacred word, that you are not sending me to some new doom".

At once, Calypso, gentle and calm, took his hand and said to the wary hero: "I swear by the Styx [...] that I am not plotting any further harm. What I ask of you, I would do myself. [...] I am fair, and deep in my heart there is kindness, not cruelty." ❞.

- *The Odyssey*, Chant V "*Ulysses' raft*", by Homer.

Some prisons are made of a selfish desire to own and control another's life ; others are made of kindness… and the most tedious ones are made of both.

They called her “Calypso”, from the Greek word *kalypto* meaning “to hide”, and that is what she did, for a while. But in Sebta (Ceuta, Spain) even the sea knows there are sorrows you cannot drown - heartbreaks that feel like a country you wake up exiled from without knowing when or how you crossed the border.

A goddess, a sorceress and yet another guardian of the “edge of the world”, Calypso was a woman of great beauty. If you ask me, they always say that about women they don't quite understand.

Of course, she also lived at the edge of things - quite on brand - unlike princesses and other goddesses who lived in lavishing palaces and temples. Her home was probably a dark humid cave carved in the hard rock of Jbel Moussa, one of the two mythical mounts forming the Pillars of Hercules. She probably spent her days looking down upon the Mediterranean from her mighty spot, somewhere between the last rock and the first wave.

She was the embodiment of patience, stillness. Even the god Hermes with his winged sandals and a reputation for outrunning time itself, couldn't help but pause before her garden. For a moment, forgot what he came to say, absorbed by the beauty of her solitude and the quiet gravity of her space.

She lived surrounded by beauty. It is true that nature often tries to make up for the things we lack. And Calypso lacked company.

According to Homère, she was yet another daughter of the titan Atlas. In Greek mythology, parents and their offsprings often led very seperate lives, each taking their own course in life - unless of course, like Antaeus, they were still on their mother's insurance plan.

Calypso didn't inherit much from Atlas ; yes, the father carried the passage of time on his shoulders, but somehow not high enough, it seems, to keep his daughter from having to bear it herself.

Calypso’s island, acccording to some ancient geographers, layed in the far western see just off the coast of North Africa : Oggygia, a land many believed was Sebta (Ceuta). And so, this is where we set off for this chapter.

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In his Odyssey, Homère described Calypso as a nymph of extreme beauty mysteriously living in isolation on a remote island. And when Ulysses washes up on her shore like many men before him (half drowned by war and full of stories longing for an ear to listen to them), shipwrecked and weary, he was the last fool standing after gods and monsters had eaten his crew.

Calypso found him there, lying in the sand like a wounded bird. He might have told her he wanted peace. That he was tired of wandering from war to war, on the brick of desperation. So, she stopped time around him and gave him seven years.

Seven years of "captivity". She held him with the absence of war, not like you would a prisoner, quite the opposite - which, to a shipwrecked, disillusioned soldier like Ulysses, felt like heaven.

Calypso made sure that he felt comfortable enough to stay, and distracted enough to forget how to leave, like a man who says “soon” and never really packs his bag.

When Hadès used deception to trick Perséphone into remaining by his side, when Circe used magic to attract men into her trap, Calypso used mornings. She gave Ulysses bread, honey, olives, figs, her bed, silence, stillness, and the kind of peace that

feels almost shameful when you lived in chaos for far too long. Offered him immortality, a cottage in paradise where the sun has its last stop before setting. Never asked about Troy, nor mentioned his previous fights or how much much blood was on his sword. Instead, she let the war bleed out of him on its own for 7 years, because, what is time, really, when nothing ever hurts? After all, she even offered him immortality, if he was willing to have it.

For 7 years, she sang to him as he would cry on her lap, each morning on the shore, staring at the sea. And when he stared, truth is he wasn't there with her: he was gone in soul. His, was hanging over the vast expanse of the Grand Blue Sea, trying to find his way back home to Ithaca ; missing his wife, Penelope, whose name he whispered in his sleep, on Calypso's very bed.

This kind of peace Calypso offered can feel like exile, stagnation, death, when peace isn't what you want. In Oggygia, Ulysses had everything but the very thing he longed for : and so, of course, he had nothing at all.

There's a bitter truth here that the gods surely were aware of when they decided to intervene : no one wins at that game, not even the gods themselves. Calypso could never win, for a river that floods its banks drowns both the land and the bridges making it impossible to return. The villagers pack their things, flee and settle elsewhere, or remember more vividly a place where the waters ran slower in contrast. Similarly, love must know how to pull back, if it is to last. And the more Calypso gave, the more Ulysses wanted to run.

One day, Hermes landed on Sebta like a proper mailman from Olympus who has seen it all. He paused for a brief moment, like we said earlier, taken aback by the beauty of Oggygia, before coming back to his sense.

Calypso without rising, knew who he was, as God recognise each other - loneliness, too. In Homère's version, Hermes sat next to her as she offered him food : ambrosia, the finest nectar, the usual divine fare. Surprisingly, he for once took his time and ate while she waited.

When he was done, had cleared his throat and fully ccaught his breath, Hermes, ever the gentleman even when he would deliver bad news, delivered his decree: Zeus sent, Calpyso. Said to let the mortal go. You're being ridiculous. It's nothing personal. You must know *even the gods don't get to keep what they love.*

Calypso, too, paused, and didn't scream nor lash out. She simply replied: your Gods are jealous, Hermes. That's all. She made him remember Orion and Jason, all these men goddesses had dared to love before they were taken away from them. She knew it

wasn't personal : just a war on happiness, signed by the Olympian gods. Said no one lets a woman keep a man too long if she hasn't "earned him" through grief.

But then her attitude changed when she looked over Hermes' shoulder only to see Ulysses on the shore cryign - again.

Without any more resistance, Calypso nodded the way women do when they've already understood something long before it's been said and simply pretended not to all along. That man had never been hers. And she loved him enough to spare him a life of misery by her side. So she said, "I'll let him go. I have no ships, nor do I know of any sailor ; but I will show him how to build one, and himself into one."

In an ultimate love gesture, she made Ulysses a small boat with her own hands, filled it with food and drinks, just the right amount to last him a couple days, and with all the silence she knew he preferred to her presence. As always, Ulysses thanked her with that same absence and left her the way people always leave those who give too much: without a second thought.

Calypso understood : *even the gods don't get to keep what they love*. That is the price to pay for expecting anything of you've granted mortals free will to : you will watch them decide to ignore you for themselves. But what she failed to understand was that no amount of power can compete with the ache of a man who has already chosen where he wants to die. That laundry on a line in Ithaca, no matter how smelly it might be, could be worth more than immortality if it was the last thing he could still choose.

Her very name meant "to conceal", to bury what men could never bear to know. Perhaps her heart, too, was one of those treasures that were meant to remain locked away beyond reach.

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Bringing back Plutarch or Strabo, and Roman geogrpahers : many believed Oggygia to be a real place somewhere beyond their known world. Some placed it in the Canary Islands, others in Madeira, but most pointed to Sebta (Ceuta) or to Perejil, the small island off its coast. That is where they imagined Calypso’s cave.

Again, if you walk along its coast, you can still feel it : the stillness of something (or someone) patiently waiting for the sun to set - *al Maghrib* - and for the Mediterranean to maybe bring back an old, repentant lover.

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