



LOST AT SEA

The Story of Ceyx and Alcyone



ING Ceyx, son of the morning star, walked along the shore with his wife, Alcyone, daughter of the king of the winds.

“I must leave in a few days on a long sea voyage and travel to the Oracle of Delphi,” King Ceyx told his wife. “But I promise I will be gone for no more than two months.”

Alcyone turned pale. She knew the rough winds in the open seas were very dangerous. “My father, Aeolus, rules the winds — I know what force he can unleash in a bad storm. I beg you, if you love me, don’t go!”

King Ceyx assured Alcyone of his love for her and promised to return soon, but she would not be consoled. A few days later, when he stood in the stern of his ship and waved good-bye, she flung herself down on the sands and wept bitterly. Then she dragged herself home and began her long wait for her husband’s return.

One night, as King Ceyx’s ship sailed upon the open sea, the waves began rising. “Pull in your oars! Lower the sails!” the captain shouted.

But the men could not hear him, for the winds had begun to howl, and thunder rumbled in the sky. Ocean spray leapt for the stars, as lightning lit the night. Then the sea turned yellow, and the heavens poured water in great torrents, as waves crashed in on the king's ship.

Ceyx's last thoughts were of Alcyone. He cried to the gods, "Wash my body to my wife over the sea!" And he called her name again and again, until a great arc of water took him down to the dark depths of the ocean. And then there was no more lightning and no more starlight; everything was pitch-black.

The morning star did not shine the next day, but hid behind the clouds, grieving for his drowned son.

Alcyone was counting the days until Ceyx returned. She wove a beautiful robe for him and a dress for herself to wear when he came home. Every day she burned incense and prayed to Juno, the goddess who protects married women, asking her to bring her husband home safely.

Hearing Alcyone's prayers, Juno felt pity. Finally she summoned her messenger, Iris, the rainbow goddess. She instructed Iris to travel to the god Sleep and ask Sleep to send Alcyone a dream, telling her that her husband had drowned at sea.

Iris took off at once, trailing her thousand colors across the sky, until she touched down upon the twilight lands of the Cimmerian country. There the god Sleep lived in the hollow of a mountain. When Iris arrived at Sleep's cave, she heard no birds singing or dogs barking or geese cackling. Only the river, Lethe, whispered sleepily in the twilight as Iris stepped past poppy beds and entered Sleep's cave.

The rainbow goddess pushed aside the empty dreams in her way, then came upon Sleep, snoring in a great ebony bed. Iris

awakened the slumbering god and bid him send a dream to Alcyone. After Sleep agreed, Iris soared back to Mount Olympus, trailing her rainbow colors across the sky.

Sleep roused Morpheus, one of his thousand sons, the one who could best imitate humans. He instructed Morpheus to fly to Alcyone. Then the god returned to his bed, letting his drowsy head sink down again into the land of dreams.

On silent wings, Morpheus took off through the twilight. When he finally came to the home of Alcyone, he assumed the face and body of King Ceyx. He slipped into Alcyone's chamber and stood before her bed.

Ceyx's ghostly beard dripped with sea water, and tears ran down his face as he bent over his sleeping wife and whispered, "Oh, my love, do you see me? Have I changed in death? Cherish no hope for my return. My ship went down in a storm far out at sea, and I died, calling your name. Arise now and weep for me."

In her sleep, Alcyone wept and tried to take her husband into her arms, but it was no use. She clutched the air and cried out for him, until her own voice woke her. Alcyone realized she'd been dreaming, but fearing her dream might have been the truth, she wept until dawn.

When light crept into her bedroom chamber, Alcyone rose and slipped down to the shore, to the place where she had last seen Ceyx, standing in the stern of his boat, waving to her.

As she stared at the sea, Alcyone spotted something floating on the water. She stepped closer and saw a man's body on top of the waves. "Oh, poor sailor," she said, "and poor wife, if you're married."

When the waves washed the body closer to shore, Alcyone saw it was her husband. She cried out, "Oh, my love! Why have you come back to me this way?"

FAVORITE GREEK MYTHS

Then she rushed into the sea. And though the waves broke against her, she did not go under. Instead, she began beating the water with giant wings. Then, crying out like a bird, she rose into the air and flew over the sea to Ceyx's lifeless body. When she touched her husband's cold lips with her beak, he also became a bird, and the two of them were together again.

Since that time, every year, for seven days before the winter solstice, the waves are quiet, and the water is perfectly calm. These days are called *halcyon days*, for during them, the king of the winds keeps the wind at home — because his daughter, Alcyone, is brooding on her nest upon the sea.

