



STORY: BIG BEAR AND LITTLE BEAR, A ROMAN MYTH

Retold by Dianne de Las Casas

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“Star light, star bright
First star I see tonight
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have this wish I wish tonight.”

There are 4 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy. These stars have fascinated earth people since the beginning of time. Virtually every culture has constellation stories, stories about the stars. The Greeks and the Romans were well known for their constellation myths. There are many stories about the stars. One such tale is that of Big Bear and Little Bear, told by the Romans in Italy. This story also illustrates the great love between and mother and her child...

Diana was the goddess of the moon. She surrounded herself with handmaidens - beautiful wood nymphs and water sprites that helped her. Their world was a world of sisterhood. Diana was not fond of men and required that her handmaidens stay away from them.

Her favorite handmaiden was Callisto. Callisto was useful, beautiful and clever. But Callisto betrayed Diana and fell in love with Jupiter, the god of all gods. Callisto bore Jupiter's child and had a baby boy. When Diana found out, she was furious.

Diana stood above Callisto, who cowered on the ground and cradled her baby. Diana roared, “You have disgraced me! Not only have you lied to me, you have betrayed the sisterhood of Diana!”

Callisto wrapped her arms protectively around her infant son and held him even closer. “Diana, even I cannot resist the charms of the King of Gods. What am I to do now?”

Diana pointed to the forest and said, “Go. Go, Callisto and never return.”

So Callisto rose and held her son close to her chest. She ran from Diana's fury. But Diana's anger was unforgiving. She cursed Callisto as she ran away and Callisto found herself running on three legs, carrying her baby in one arm. She stopped and looked at herself. She was covered in dark brown fur and had big paws with claws. Diana had turned her into a bear!

Callisto knew that she could not care for a human son in her animal form. So she made the painful decision to leave him to the care of his father.

She bent down and whispered into his ear, “I will call you Artus, my little one. Your father is Jupiter the Almighty. He will care for you. I will always love you. Maybe one day, we will meet again.”

Callisto wrapped the baby in soft moss and laid him on the warm floor of a dry cave. With a sad growl, she left.

Jupiter watched from on high and though he was sorry for the trouble he caused Callisto, even he, King of the Gods, could not undo Diana’s magic. But he did care for the boy. He made sure that Artus was well provided for, always clothed, fed, and sheltered. Jupiter loved Artus but never did he tell the boy the sad story of his mother.

When Artus grew up, he became a fine young man. Jupiter made him King of Arcadia. One of Artus’ favorite pastimes was hunting. He was a skilled hunter. He could stalk rabbits through the snow without leaving footprints. He could follow swiftly behind a deer and hit his target with an arrow. And he could even wrestle the strength of a bear and win. He had conquered many animals in his hunts but his favorite conquest was always the bear.

One day, when Artus was 16 years old, he went hunting in the forest of Arcadia. He was chasing a stag into the wood when he came to a clearing. Sitting on the ground chewing a honeycomb was a large bear with shiny brown fur. It was Callisto.

She looked up and snarled at the intruder. When she saw the young man’s face, she realized it was her own son from so many years before. “Artus!” she thought, “you have come to me!” She stood up on her hind legs with her arms open, ready to embrace her long lost son.

Artus, however, did not know that the huge bear standing before him was his mother. He thought, “If that bear wraps its arms around me, I shall die!” Quickly, he grabbed his bow and arrow and pointed at the bear’s heart.

Jupiter looked down from heaven in horror. Mother and son were meeting for the first time and they were about to kill each other. Callisto, not knowing her own strength, could crush Artus in a motherly embrace. Artus, not knowing the bear was his mother was about to pierce her through the heart with his deadly weapon.

Quickly, Jupiter reacted. Just as Callisto was wrapping her arms around Artus and just as Artus released the deadly arrow, Jupiter pulled Callisto into the sky. He yelled to Artus, “She is your mother!”

Artus called to Jupiter, “My mother! My mother! I never knew her. Please do not take her from me again. Let me go with her.”

Jupiter’s heart melted with love and compassion for the young man and granting Artus’ wish, he pulled Artus into the sky. Artus was changed into the same form his mother took. He was turned into a bear. There in the night sky, you will see how Jupiter honored Callisto and Artus. They are Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, Big Bear and Little Bear. They are constellations,

beautiful clusters of stars in the sky for all of the world to admire and a testament to the love shared between a mother and her child.

