

# Gaia

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Gaia's parents didn't want to talk to their daughter about death for a couple more years. Sheltered as they had kept her, she had made it to seven years old without ever seeing so much as a dead fly. But when they found her in the garden holding her limp, lifeless, pet duck Quacker, they no longer had a choice.

They had both come out of the house together to check on their eight year old daughter. Gaia had been playing outside the front of the house with her animals, as was her favourite pastime. And there was plenty to play with. Ducks, goats, dogs, tortoises, anything that breathed Gaia wanted to bring back to the family estate. Whether it was to be purchased from a market where Gaia saw it suffering in a small cage, or just lying injured on the road. Gaia wanted to bring it home and nurture it.

Gaia's parents were two of the richest royals in all of the Greek city of Argos, but even they were close to running out of space (and grass) to support Gaia's ever expanding pet sanctuary. They had tried to get her to limit her intake of the sick and lame animals, but she had always refused to budge. When Gaia's father noticed the pet duck, his heart sank for his child, but he quietly thanked Plutus for the chance to dissuade his daughter of what he saw as her naive plan to save every animal on Earth.

Gaia held Quacker close to her chest. The little girl wasn't crying, but her body seemed to shiver without being cold, and her stomach felt like there were ants crawling inside. Quacker had been her favourite. Each of the other 72 animals had been her favourite as well, but Quacker had been her most favourite.

"It's just the natural way," said Gaia's father. He had one hand on Gaia's shoulder, and with the other was trying to discreetly remove the dead duck from Gaia's hands. "But also it's been dead overnight so maybe we shouldn't be touching it, sweetie."

"Yes I agree," said Gaia's mother, standing several steps back. She had always been proud of her daughter's love for all things living, but she wanted the dead animal - which had already begun to smell - gone from her garden as soon as possible. "We should bury it hon'."

"No," said Gaia, "He won't be able to play with Swimmer and Flapper if he's underground."

"Sweetie," said her father. "He can play with some new duck friends. Up in... Duck-Elysium."

Gaia looked up at her father, confused. "Elysium? So she can meet with Aunt Agata?"

"Oh," said her father. "I'm not sure Hades brings over visitors."

Gaia's father cracked a cheeky grin, he was very pleased with his little remark. He wiped it off his face within seconds though, once he saw Gaia's eyes begin to water.

“Sniff. Quacker is with Hades? Sniff.”

“No,” said Gaia’s father. “I meant your au-” But Gaia had already run off, further into the garden.

“Aunt Agata is chilling with Hades, eh?”

Gaia’s father turned around to see his wife staring at him with her arms crossed.

“Oh come on,” he said. “You liked her even less than I did.”

Gaia’s mother walked up to her husband and jabbed a finger into his chest.

“She’s my Sister,” she said. “I don’t care how many wars she started, or how many ships she may or may not have sunk. She’s royalty, and she prayed to Plutus every day. She is up in Elysium, not down in gods-forsaken Tartarus!”

“Woah,” said Gaia’s father. “Not in front of Gaia -”

They both turned, realising the same thing together. They stared out into their vast garden, and despite seeing two goats, three dogs, two ducks - still living- and more flightless birds than a fox could eat in a year, they were missing two very important things. Their daughter, and one dead duck.

The trees whistled in the wind as Gaia ran down the road. She still held the body of Quacker in her arms, gripping firmly as she scurried away from her house as fast as her little legs could carry her. Her feet grew sorer and sorer on the gravel, but she pushed on.

She was not going to let her mum and dad bury poor old Quacker. And she certainly wasn’t going to let him spend eternity with Hades. Quacker had been a good duck, and he deserved better. Besides, he was the only one of the ducks that didn’t bite her whenever she tried to pet them.

The road, which had been mostly straight up until now, took a turn to the right as it hit the base of a hill. Untouched grass, firs and pines made the hill itself bright green. Gaia looked down where the road went to the right, it was more of the same boring colours for many hours before it reached the city. The hill on the other hand looked fresh and alive. If anywhere was safe from Hades, it would be high up on a hill and surrounded by living things. Gaia looked back and saw her parents in the distance running up the road. She looked down at Quacker, then with a deep breath, she began to run up the hill.

The soles of her feet found relief in the soft grass. But her legs found hard work in the steep incline. She planned to reach the top. She had never reached the top of the hill, But she had been to the other side whenever she had taken the road to the city. If it was shorter than it

was wide, then it wouldn't take too long to reach the top. Although the trees made it impossible to gauge just how far she had gone and how far she needed to go.

Inside the forest, there was more of a rustle than a whistle. The sound was as calming and consistent as the feel of the grass on her feet and the sight of green around her. Nothing changed for a long time, the only indication of any time passing was the memory in Gaia's mind. Her mind eventually began to tune out the rustle of the wind, and it became silent to her.

It was in this state of serenity that she noticed an extremely quiet, but immensely peculiar sound. Just for a few seconds, she caught the tinkling of coins behind her. She snapped around at the sound, but there was nothing.

Gaia knew that the hill was too small for any large animal to live in. But it wasn't the animals that worried her. Her parents had taught her the higher you walked, the closer you got to the gods. And the gods loved to play tricks on little boys and girls.

But at the same time, perhaps that would be her only chance to save Quacker. She didn't know much about the gods, but if there was a god or a goddess of life, then surely they would help.

Finally, the hill began to level out. Exhausted, Gaia laid Quacker on the grass and fell to the ground at what was her best guess for the highest point on the hill. She closed her eyes. Maybe this was when she was meant to pray for help.

She heard something. It was the same sound as before. Perhaps it was just her imagination. But it kept going this time. It got louder and louder, now it was no longer just coins. Some of the tinkles were softer, as if from a small gold chain. Some were louder, as if from stones clanging against one another. The sound came closer, it was almost above her before it stopped. She was too scared to open her eyes now. Maybe it was Hades, come to take Quacker away.

A long time passed. Gaia could sense someone standing over her, watching her. Then just as Gaia was about to open her eyes she heard a voice. It was smooth like butter, and yet also a bit whiny, as if they were growing impatient.

"Rise, my child," it said. "I don't have all day."

Gaia finally opened her eyes. There was a man standing above her. A very tall man with long, curly hair and very refined features. He was covered head to toe with jewels. He had earrings with pearls, a necklace with an emerald, rings with crystals and Gaia could barely see the material of his cloak underneath the embroidery.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Who am I?" The man raised an eyebrow. "My child, you must be dazed and confused. Maybe this will help you remember."

The strange man picked Gaia up onto her feet and took a step back. As he did, Gaia noticed that the grass didn't bend underneath his steps, instead it just disappeared into his feet as if he was just a mirage. The man turned his head slightly to the side and raised an arm into the air, his fingers poking at odd angles. His pose reminded Gaia of the marble sculptures in the city. It reminded her of something else too. She had to think, but after a few moments she came to her conclusion.

"Plutus!" she shouted. "The god of wealth and abundance." She smiled at her realisation, but then she pulled away from the man. "You're not going to play a trick on me are you?"

"I am Plutus. Yes," he said, maintaining his pose for a while longer. "But don't worry, child. I can never lie." He looked into Gaia's eyes. "As a god, my words are binding, even if they don't mean what I intended, so I have to be very careful about what I say."

"So what are you here for?" said Gaia.

"My child, you called upon me," said Plutus. "You came to my domain and prayed for help. And seeing as how devout and..." Plutus paused and looked at a particularly large golden ring on his thumb. "...Generous your parents are in their offerings, I consider it my duty to answer your request personally."

Gaia gasped. "I can ask you for anything?" she said. She looked at Quacker, lying on the ground. "Anything at all?"

Plutus puffed out his chest. "Anything in the world. Anything you can imagine... short of making you a god yourself. Not that I am incapable, just the other gods would be unhappy about it." He looked down at the duck on the ground. "As it is, I heard you saying what you really wanted as you climbed up the hill. You want to restore life?"

"You can really do that?" said Gaia.

"I can make you do that," he said. "A little taste of our godly power. I can make anything you touch come to life. But I must warn you to be careful what you wish for, the power to reverse death is normally only reserved for us gods." He held out his hand to Gaia. "You can shake my hand and receive the power, or you can leave your pet here and return home."

As soon as Plutus had extended his arm Gaia grabbed it with both hands so aggressively Plutus almost fell over despite being three times taller than the girl.

"I suppose you agree then," he said.

"Yes," said Gaia. "When will it start working?"

"It already is," said Plutus. He pointed to the duck. "Try it out."

Gaia knelt down over Quacker and placed her hands on his body. She expected him to jump

into the air and run around flapping his wings, but instead he stayed cold and unmoving. But as she held him he began to grow warmer and warmer. The frays on his feathers disappeared and his plumage became neat again. Slowly, the duck opened his eyes.

Then it did go crazy.

Quacker bit Gaia on her hand before violently shaking as if it were in the mouth of a fox. Once it was free of Gaia's grip, the duck unfurled its wings and smacked Gaia in the face, causing her to fall backwards onto the ground. Then the duck paddled off to the hillside from where Gaia had hiked.

With its wing fully outstretched, and the confidence of the eagle of Zeus, Quacker launched off into the air, before promptly plummeting out of sight.

Gaia ran to where the ground started sloping away and watched as her pet hopped down the hill, trying and trying as it was, to achieve something physically impossible, to fly.

"Wait," she yelled, and she went to run down the hill. But she was pulled back by a grip on her arm. She turned to see Plutus staring directly into her eyes.

"Remember what I said," he said. "Some powers are best kept for the gods."

Then he let her go, and without giving much thought about what the god had said, she set off after the duck.

Down the hill she stumbled more than ran. Nearly always a few steps behind the duck, and whenever she did manage to catch up to it she wasn't able to clasp her hands around the frantic animal. The domesticated duck was acting as wild as a feral pig. Together they made a ruckus that Gaia suspected her parents could hear from the house, and it lasted all the way to the bottom.

Only once racing the road did the duck stop. It hesitated at the road, stunned by the change in environment and Gaia took the chance to lunge and wrap the duck up in her arms. It protested with flapping and quacking for a few moments, but Gaia kept hugging tightly until it calmed down.

"You're all good now, Quacker," she said. "Now we can go home and prove Mum and Dad wrong."

Her parents were nowhere to be seen. So Gaia walked down the road back to her house, all the while never letting go of Quacker.

From the fence outside the estate Gaia still couldn't see her parents around. So she pushed open the gate, but just after she walked through, the gate slammed shut as if some mystical hand had pulled it back.

Gaia jumped in fright at the sight of it and she ran up the stone path to her front door. On

the way she tripped on a loose stone and sprawled her hands out to catch herself before her palms smacked onto the ground. Quacker ran off into the garden free, but Gaia didn't care, he was inside the fence.

Gaia stood up and dusted herself off. Looking down, she noticed the stone step her hands had landed on was shaking inside the ground, as if it was trying to free itself.

Gaia shook her head and walked up to the door of her house.

She pushed it open, then looked inside for her parents. But within seconds, the door slammed itself shut again. Then it opened. Then it closed again. Before Gaia's very eyes, the door seemed to swing around as if it were...

But it couldn't be.

A door couldn't be alive. Nor could a fence or a stone.

Gaia remembered what the god had said to her. As a god, my words are binding. even if they don't mean what I intended.

Gaia looked at her hands. She expected them to be sparkling with some power, to at least glow a little. But they just looked like her plain old hands. Slowly, she lowered them and lightly touched one of her own sandals.

Instantly the cords began to tighten around her toes. She lifted her leg up in fright and tried to shake it off but it didn't let go. Once the sole was off the ground it began to slap the back of her heel. Not only was it moving, but it didn't like her either.

After a lot more shaking, Gaia reared her foot back and leaned into an almighty kick. Finally, her agitated shoe flung off into the distance.

Then she ran, all the way through the garden, all the way down the road. She climbed, slowly and steadily up the hill. Daring not to touch the ground, she hiked up the hill without using her hands for balance.

Plutus was still there, calmly waiting for her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Plutus grinned. "I don't know what you are talking about, child?"

"You tricked me," she said. "I knew you would. I'm not just bringing animals to life, I'm bringing everything to life."

"Well that's what you wished for didn't you?" said Plutus, "No one specified animals. 'Everything you touch will come to life.' I told you my words were binding, even if they don't mean what I intended... Or what you intended."

“Well, fix it.” said Gaia, she stomped her foot on the ground.

Plutus raised an eyebrow. “It can’t be fixed,” he said. “Not by anyone except a god more powerful than me, and that my dear child, is not you. You should have listened when I said not to trifle with the natural order of the gods.”

“So I’m going to be like this forever?” Gaia looked at her hands, and at her shoeless foot. “But I won’t be able to touch anything. Is there nothing you can do?”

Plutus looked up at the sky, a smile crept onto his face as he thought. “Well, another promise should be able to counteract it.”

“Great,” said Gaia. “Just stop the powers and stop my house from moving around, as long as I get to keep Quacker.”

“Unfortunately that’s not possible,” said Plutus. “I can’t make an exception for the duck.”

“What?” said Gaia, “Why?”

For the first time, Plutus sat down. His head was exactly level with Gaia’s.

“You can’t save every animal,” he said, just like Gaia’s mother had. “It’s just nature.”

The image of Quacker when she had found him resurfaced. She had come out and saw him on the ground. His feathers were everywhere and there were bite marks on his throat. And he had his eyes closed. She saw the fox scamper into a hole near the fence. Gaia was shocked, Quacker had been the best of ducks, why did he get the worst of luck. Foxes were so rare around the estate, and this one had been even rarer. A silver and gold fox, just like the one on her mother’s vase.

The vase of Plutus.

Gaia stared at Plutus. She thought to herself that perhaps Plutus had tricked her even further than he was admitting.

“Have you learnt your lesson, child?” said Plutus. He extended his hand out again. “If so, shake my hand again and everything will return to as it was before.”

Gaia squinted at Plutus and kept her hands by her sides.

“Well?” said Plutus. “Are you going to shake my hand? I have important things to attend to.”

Gaia stayed silent. She was still thinking. Thinking about Quacker, thinking about Plutus’s trick, thinking about the fox that she had seen before, and thinking about her mother. She looked Plutus up and down again, noticing his silver and gold robes.

She smiled slightly before speaking.

“Return to as it was before?” she said. “Is this some other trick, that could mean anything.”

Plutus sighed. “No, child,” he said. “The things you brought back to life will go back to death or inanimacy. There are no tricks.”

“I don’t trust you,” said Gaia, “You said your words are binding, exactly as they are said. Now you’re being vague. Maybe it could go wrong again.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” said Plutus. “Don’t you lecture me child, the only reason your power went wrong is because I was teaching you not to mess with natural law. Now shake my hand.” He thrust his hand out further.

Gaia folded her arms and looked away.

“Shake my hand you petulant child,” said Plutus. “To be honoured with a visit from a god, and yet you simply waste my time. If you don’t shake my hand then I will simply leave you with your curse forever.”

“What if I make the deal in my own words,” said Gaia.

“Make it then, and with haste, child.”

Gaia held out her hand.

“Everything that I have touched...” she said

Plutus held out his hand.

“That is alive but used to be not...”

They grabbed each other’s hand.

“Shall return to death.”

They shook. The tingling sensation disappeared from Gaia’s hand.

“Good,” said Plutus. “That’s exactly what I intended anyway, you only wasted our time. Now begone, child. I have other matters to attend to.” He stood up and began to turn away from Gaia.

“It might not mean what you intended,” said Gaia.

Plutus turned back. He stared at Gaia.



“What do you mean?” he said.

“You planned all this,” said Gaia. “Didn’t you?”

“I have answered that already,” said Plutus. “I needed to learn that you can’t save every animal on this planet. That is why I gave you your power.”

“No,” said Gaia. “Not just the wish. Even before that. You were the fox weren’t you. Quacker’s death wasn’t natural at all, you killed him.”

“It was natural,” said Plutus.

“You’re lying,” said Gaia. “You were the fox. It’s not a natural fox, it was silver and gold. Silver and gold like the one on Mum’s vase, the one with you on it too. You killed my duck, and showed up when I was scared and sad, all just to trick me. Well your lesson doesn’t mean anything now, you said I need to learn to live with natural causes but if you killed him on purpose then it wasn’t natural was it?”

“It WAS natural,” said Plutus. His voice boomed and he rose to his full height and stared down over Gaia. “My will is nature. My decisions are law. When I take the shape of a fox, I am as hungry and as wild as any fox that roams the forests of Greece. Yes, I killed your duck. I clutched its throat and dragged it into the afterlife. Because I have wars to settle and kings to meet and I am not going to wait around for some beast in your garden to have a heart attack. I will not waste such time to teach a child a basic lesson on life and death, no matter how much gold your mother offers.”

Gaia’s eyes widened. “My mother told you to do this.”

“No one tells me,” said Plutus. “I am a god, and I reward those who are faithful. And your parents are very faithful.” Plutus twisted the largest ring on his hands. “Some want power, some want prosperity, while your mother wants you to stop wasting all of her land to take care of every stray animal you see rotting to death on the road.”

“I’m not wasting anything, they need someone to take care of them-.”

“Quiet,” said Plutus, “Waste your mother’s land on your naive mission then. I have no time for you anymore.”

Gaia stood her ground.

“Leave!,” Plutus bellowed. The trees shook as he spoke. “Or I will feast upon every animal you own. Return to your home now, child.”

“No,” said Gaia.

Plutus stepped forward towards her.

“Leave or I will throw you down this hill myself.”

“Give me my duck back. I order you.”

“Do not order me. I am treating you with patience grander than most gods could ever muster. But if you dare disrespect me I will have no qualms with unleashing wrath on even a small child such as yourself.”

“Do it then,” said Gaia, “If you aren’t going to bring my duck back to life, throw me off the hill.”

Plutus’s arms whipped around and grabbed Gaia by the shoulders. As if he was lifting a feather, Plutus plucked Gaia off the ground and raised her into the air. His hands felt like the strong jaws of a wolf, holding so tightly it caused her pain, but Gaia refused to cry. Plutus carried her over to the slope of the hill.

“You have erred, child. No longer will your family bask in my providence. Your parents will learn just how much they have relied on my blessings for their wealth. Their lands will become barren, their titles will be lost and their fortune will shrivel up. And I will personally rip my teeth into each and every mongrel in your little sanctuary. Only because you are a child I will refrain from striking you down right h- ”

Plutus dropped Gaia and she fell to the ground, landing on her back just short of where the hill began to drop away. She sat up and saw Plutus clutching his wrist. A thick black line, shaped as if it was one of his veins carved from his shoulder to the tip of his finger.

“Arrgh!” he said. “What curse is this?” He looked around at the hilltop at the trees, he looked up into the sky and then at the ground. “ Artemis? Hades? Whoever you are who is maiming me, show your face.”

“A god isn’t hurting you,” said Gaia

Plutus looked at Gaia. Another black vein was streaking across his forehead. “But you’re just a child,” he said.

“You should have been careful what you wished for. Everything I touch returns to death.”

“What are you talking about?” said Plutus. “You didn’t bring me to life.”

“I didn’t say anything I brought to life. I said anything that used to be dead. And you used to be dead, so you will be again. Unless you give my back my duck.”

“You terrible chi-” Plutus stopped speaking to yelp in pain as he fell to his knees. Coal-black marks appeared across his body as if an invisible fire was immolating him.

He gasped. “Only a god can undo a wish.”

Gaia spoke. Her defiant, childish tone morphed into powerful defiance.

“Then make me a god.”

Plutus lifted his head. The marks had spread over half of his face and only one eye looked at Gaia, the other stared straight forward, lifelessly. “G-god of what.”

“I don’t care,” said Gaia. “Make me the goddess of the whole world. Just give me the power to bring back Quacker”

Plutus crawled towards Gaia and placed his hand on her face.

“I bestow thee the powers of a god. I make thee, Gaia, a goddess. A goddess of life, of nature and of animals. A goddess with more power than my own.”

Plutus’s hand fell from Gaia’s face and he collapsed to the ground. But just as he did Gaia felt his words turn into a surge of energy that washed over her. The world flashed into a bright gold all around her. The weight of her body and the touch of the ground disappeared as if she had begun to float. Suddenly she could feel everything. The trees and the birds in them. The grass and the earth, and the bugs and beetles within. The power and knowledge was immense, but at the same time it felt natural and easy to Gaia.

She waved her hand and Plutus rolled onto his back. The burns faded from his skin and he awoke gasping.

And the new goddess of the Earth floated back down the hill to play with her pet duck in her garden