

# Aquila the Eagle

Okay, so—imagine you’re an ordinary bloke in ancient Greece. A shepherd, in fact. And maybe you’re pretty good-looking, at least according to your girlfriend down at the shearing shed.

One morning, just on sunrise, you’re in the hills herding sheep, as shepherds do, and suddenly the sky goes dark and there’s a huge blast of air, and a honking great eagle swoops down and grabs you in its talons and yanks you into the sky.

Now imagine the eagle flies straight up and you’re cold and the Earth is far, far below and getting farther, so everything looks *very, very small*, and you can barely breathe and you’re thinking, What the hell, and then the eagle drops you in a place called Mount Olympus, which turns out to be where Zeus lives.

And you’re given the job of “cup bearer to the gods”.

That’s right: the gods like the look of you, so they’re letting you cart their mead around. You get to be, essentially, the ancient Greek equivalent of a drinks trolley.

I like the randomness of Greek mythology. Later, Zeus put the shepherd up in the sky as the constellation Aquarius.

It was a bit of a habit with Zeus, putting stuff in the sky.

I don't remember this because it was before I was born, but in the 1970s, NASA's Pioneer 11 space probe zoomed past Saturn and Jupiter, taking pictures and sending them back to Earth. After that, the probe just kept going.

And—here's a nice connection with the shepherd-stealing eagle—in four million years' time, give or take, Pioneer 11 will fly past Lambda Aquilae, which is the sixth brightest star in the Eagle constellation (and, incidentally, the 270th brightest star in the sky).

Mind you, NASA won't know anything about it (that's assuming NASA still exists, which is unlikely but you never know), because for a long time now the probe hasn't had enough power to transmit anything back to Earth. It's on its own out there.

Is it just me, or is that fairly sad and tragic?

There's a mental picture I have of Dad, alone like that space probe, on the mountain with the wind screaming around and snow covering him and sometimes, I guess, uncovering him. Wherever he is.

It's not one of my best-loved images. In fact it's worse than lousy, but I don't suppose I'll ever get rid of it.

It's a strange thing, having a famous father who's dead.

For most of my life, my father was a genius. Everyone said it—internet, TV, random strangers. Climbing sites called him a luminary, a natural, a brilliant climber with legendary stamina.

He went up and down Everest and K2 half a dozen times each, but what made him more famous were the trips in between, when he figured out radical new routes on lower but harder peaks.

When he got into mountain guiding, the bloggers loved that too, saying it was another step in his stellar career.

I remember one time when the local paper called him the Prince of Peaks. Dad read out the article in the kitchen, waving his arm for emphasis, but he was laughing and the newspaper was crackling so much that Mum had to grab it and start again so we could hear what he'd actually said.

After that, every now and then Mum would stop what she was doing, raise her fist and yell, "Hero of the Hills!" or "Star of the Slopes!" or "King of Climbers!"

She thought it was hilarious.

Then, 356 days ago at 2.00 p.m. Nepal Standard Time, my father and one of his clients decided to abandon their summit attempt and go back down the mountain.

No one really knows what happened after that. Later, searchers found the client—dead. But Dad's still there. Somewhere.