

Ursa Major (The Big Bear) and Ursa Minor (The Little Bear)

Ursa Major is one of the oldest constellations and has more named stars in it than any other constellation. It has many names, but the bear is the most common. In Greek mythology, the king of gods, Zeus, saw a beautiful woman named Callisto. His secret visits to earth to meet with her made his wife, Hera, jealous.

One day, as Zeus was walking through the forest with Callisto, he saw his wife Hera coming. He was not able to hide Callisto in time, so he turned her into a large brown bear. When Hera arrived, she saw only Zeus walking by himself through the forest. She looked around, searching for someone with Zeus, but saw only an old brown bear. Hera told Zeus it was time to go home to Mount Olympus with her. Zeus did not want to go because he wanted to change Callisto back into a human before leaving. But Hera did not let Zeus stay, so he left Callisto as a large brown bear.

Zeus did not know that Callisto had a son, Arcas, who was a great hunter. He was in the woods hunting that day and he saw this great big brown bear. He put an arrow to his bow, took careful aim, and shot that great bear through the heart. Arcas watched the bear as it died change back into the form of his mother, Callisto, with an arrow through her heart. Arcas began to cry loudly because of what he had done. When he realized that it was Zeus that had changed her into the bear, he got very angry. Zeus was afraid that Hera would hear Arcas crying and so he went down to earth to try to quiet Arcas down.

Zeus needed to hid what he had done, so he changed Callisto back into a bear and placed, as a constellation, into the northern sky as the Big Dipper. He then changed Arcas into the small bear (the Little Dipper). As Arcas was being placed into the sky, he turned to look at his mother Callisto (now the Big Dipper). That is why the Little Dipper is curved toward the Big Dipper, so that Arcas can watch over his mother Callisto forever.