Mon Oct 11, 2010  THE RIVAL OF MARS
There’s a pretty crescent moon in the southwestern sky after sunset this evening. Below the moon is a star, slightly red in color. It’s Antares, and it’s a red giant star that marks the heart of the constellation Scorpius. The name “Antares” is from the Greek phrase which means, “anti-Ares,” or, “the rival of Mars.” (Mars is the Roman name for Ares, the Greek god of war.) Tonight’s a good time to compare Antares with Mars, because the red planet is fairly close by, a bit down and to the right, in the constellation Libra the Scales. It’s easy to confuse the two, because they’re about the same brightness and color; but Antares twinkles, while Mars shines steadily. Well, after all, Antares is roughly 600 light years away – that works out to about 3600 trillion miles, so we only get a little bit of light from that great distance, while at the moment, Mars is nearly two hundred and twelve million miles from earth – much closer. The moon on the other hand, is right next door, cosmically speaking: it’s a mere 237,000 miles away!

Tue Oct 12, 2010  THE SCORPION, THE ARCHER AND ORION
The new crescent moon appears in the southwestern sky after sunset this evening. The moon is now lodged in between two constellations of the zodiac – Scorpius and Sagittarius. These two mythological constellations – the scorpion and the archer, are tied together in the following way: according to myth, it was this same scorpion which stung the hero Orion the Hunter. Don’t feel too badly for Orion, he invited the attack by boasting that no animal could defeat him. The dying hero was carried up into the sky and given new life, but so too was Scorpius, just to keep him humble I suppose. Sagittarius, a fellow hunter and kindred spirit, protects his friend Orion by holding the scorpion at bay with his bow and arrow, while Orion escapes over to the other side of the sky; and you won’t see Orion tonight until around the midnight hour, after the scorpion has set. Though Sagittarius is typically pictured as a centaur, he has also been seen as a representation of a satyr, Crotus, a skilled hunter who was loved by the Muses.

Wed Oct 13, 2010  NEW CRESCENT MOON IN SAGITTARIUS
The fat new crescent moon is in the southern sky this evening after sunset. It’s now entered the constellation of Sagittarius, the Archer. Trying to imagine these fanciful mythological creatures can be really hard. With Sagittarius, you’re expected to see a centaur, half-man, half-horse, complete with bow and arrow aimed at Scorpius. Just to the west of the moon tonight are the stars that mark the bow and arrow. Below and to the right of the moon are a few more stars which trace out the Archer’s arm. In Greek mythology, Sagittarius sometimes represents Chiron, a wise old centaur who taught Hercules and other great heroes of antiquity. Most people give up trying to imagine a centaur in this part of the sky, and instead look for something known as the teapot. The stars below the moon outline the lid and the handle of a simple teapot, while the stars below and to the right are the teapot’s bottom and spout, and it’s pouring hot tea all over the western horizon.

Thu Oct 14, 2010  THE TRIANGLE AND THE SQUARE
If you go out tonight, or any clear night in the next few weeks, say about 8 o’clock in the evening; and tilt your head back until you are looking straight up at the top of the sky; there you will see three bright stars. These three stars form a large triangle; astronomers call this triangle - the triangle - must have stayed up all night long thinking up that name. Actually, it’s known as the summer triangle, because we see it best during the summer evenings, but it’s still well-placed for viewing in early autumn. The three stars are called Vega; Altair; and Deneb. Now to the east of Deneb, and about midway between the eastern horizon and the zenith, there are four stars, a little dimmer than those of the summer triangle. These four stars make a great square in the sky, and they are called, the Great Square. Woh, constellations are easy! This is actually the constellation of Pegasus, but the square’s a lot easier to see than a flying horse!

Fri Oct 15, 2010  MOON IN CAPRICORNUS
The moon is waxing gibbous in the southeastern sky this evening. It’s among the stars of Capricornus the Sea Goat, surely one of the strangest constellations of the night. The arrangement of stars here resembles a great wedge or kergchief shape, but it’s meant to portray the goat god Pan, who changed his hindquarters into those of a fish, so that he could escape down river from a monster that had snuck up behind him and caused Pan to panic. Capricornus is in a part of the sky known as “the sea,” on account of all the water-related constellations you find there. To the east of the moon is Aquarius, the water carrier. It is Aquarius’ water jug that supposedly spilled out into this region of the sky that has given rise to its name. East of Aquarius is Pisces the Fish. There’s also a dolphin, named Delphinus, above Capricornus, and still another southern fish, Piscis Austrinus, low in the south. And there’s a sea monster, Cetus, actually a great whale in that celestial sea.