

Constellation Tales From Around the World



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Phaeton and the Swan

it rises so steeply that my horses can hardly climb. Then, it soars so high that even *my* heart trembles with fear. Finally, it charges down – one false move and you would dive headlong into the sea. Ask me for anything, but not this.”

But Phaeton had been waiting for this day for years and, besides, there was no time to lose. The gates of dawn were already peeking open, spreading its rosy glow across the world. So, reluctantly, Helios agreed. The horses were yoked to the chariot, and, taking the reins, Phaeton sped off, dizzy with delight.

Suddenly, disaster struck. The horses were used to a heavier load and, unburdened, they ran wild. From high to low, low to high, the chariot veered, and where it touched the Earth, it set it ablaze. Mountains erupted with fire, rivers and lakes dried up, deserts were scorched, and whole forests burnt to the ground. Swept along by the fiery will of the horses, terrified Phaeton called on the gods for help.

The gods knew that they must act quickly if they were to save the Earth. Mighty Zeus seized a thunderbolt and hurled it at the chariot, shattering it into pieces. Wreathed in flames, Phaeton was thrown through the sky until he plummeted to his death in the river far below.

When Cygnus, Phaeton’s closest friend, learned of his fate, he searched for many days until he came upon the Sun god’s chariot, lying broken and burned. Again and again, Cygnus dived into the water, yet however how hard he tried, he could not swim deep enough to reach Phaeton. Exhausted, and overcome with grief, Cygnus wept for his dead friend. Phaeton’s sisters, too, gathered on the riverbank and wept, until eventually they were transformed into poplar trees and their tears turned to golden amber.

Moved by Cygnus’ sadness, great Zeus took pity and appeared before him. “If I transform you into a swan you shall be able to swim more strongly than

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any man,” he said, “but never again will you take human form.”

Cygnus paused, imagining living his life forever more as a swan. Then, he remembered his dear friend, and solemnly he agreed. As he stood at the water’s edge, his mouth became a rounded beak and white feathers hid his hair. His neck grew long, and his arms became powerful wings, while his feet were now grey and webbed. This time, when he plunged into the raging waters he could swim with ease. And so, swiftly, gently, he retrieved Phaeton’s body.

Zeus had been watching from the heavens and was so impressed by Cygnus’ sacrifice that he placed him among the stars. There, he flies, still, through the Milky Way, singing his sad swansong in memory of his friend. And, to this day, earthly swans can be found ducking their slender necks beneath the water, while poplar trees grow tall beside the riverbanks.





PEGASUS

The White-Winged Horse

A TALE FROM ANCIENT GREECE

Soaring high among the stars shines Pegasus, the white-winged horse. Ridden by heroes on their daring adventures, he carries thunderbolts for the king of the gods. The rising of his constellation marks the coming of spring and, in Greece, the season of thunderstorms. His story begins long ago, in the kingdom of King Polydectes.



For many years, Perseus lived in Polydectes' palace and was eager to repay the king's hospitality. At a great feast held in the king's honour, Perseus promised to bring him a priceless gift – the head of Medusa. This would be no easy task, even for the greatest of heroes. For Medusa was a hideous monster, with scratching claws of bronze, scaly wings and fangs like great boar tusks. Worse still, around her head writhed a ring of snakes, flickering and hissing like living flames. Anyone who dared to look at her would instantly be turned to stone.

It was Athena who had transformed Medusa and her two sisters into monsters, and it was Athena who now came to Perseus' aid. Along with magic



The White-Winged Horse

winged sandals, a sickle and a helmet of invisibility, she gave him a gleaming bronze shield, as well as a piece of advice.

“Never look at Medusa directly,” she told him, “only at her reflection.”

So, Perseus sailed to the furthest edge of the Western Ocean, and the entrance to the Underworld. The air was thick with the stench of sulphur and lava spewed from cavernous cracks in the Earth. All around stood the petrified remains of unwary visitors, frozen still like sinister statues. It was in this dreadful place that Perseus discovered Medusa's lair.

He waited until the sisters were sleeping. Then, hovering above Medusa in his winged sandals, he lifted Athena's shield to catch the monster's reflection and carefully took aim. Lightning fast, he brought down the sickle and cut off Medusa's head. Medusa's sisters sprang up, roaring with fury, but Perseus, wearing his magic helmet, escaped unseen, carrying his gruesome gift. And from the blood of slain Medusa, two magical beings appeared – one a warrior, Chrysaor, golden sword in hand; the other Pegasus, a gleaming white horse, with a mane that flowed like snowfall.

Gliding through the skies on feathered wings, Pegasus never faltered or grew weary. Once, landing high on Mount Helicon, he stamped his hoof on the ground, causing a spring to burst up. From this spring came the nine Muses, goddesses of music and poetry. When the Muses began to sing, the sound that filled the air was so beautiful that the land, sea and sky all stood still. Even mighty Mount Helicon began to rise into the air until Pegasus brought it back down to Earth with a kick of his heel.

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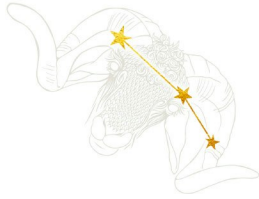
For years, the fearsome Chimaera – part-lion, part-goat, part-snake – had terrorised the land of Lycia, snorting great flames that scorched the countryside.

The White-Winged Horse

In despair, the king sent the hero Bellerophon to kill the beast. No one had ever approached the Chimaera and survived to tell the tale but, once again, Athena stepped in to help. In a dream, she appeared to Bellerophon, holding a gleaming golden bridle. When Bellerophon awoke, he found, to his great surprise, that the bridle lay in his hand. He tracked Pegasus down to a mountain stream, slipped the bridle over the horse's head and leapt on to his back. Then, whisper quiet, Pegasus spread his soft, white wings and rose into the air, parting the clouds with his hooves.

On they flew through the skies to the Chimaera's cave. Pegasus swiftly swooped down on the creature, while Bellerophon plunged his spear into its throat. The Chimaera was dead. To show his gratitude, the King of Lycia showered Bellerophon with honours and gifts, but all was not well. As Bellerophon's fame grew, so did his pride, until he thought of himself as equal to the gods. One day, he put the golden bridle on Pegasus and set off to fly to Mount Olympus, the home of the gods, where no human was allowed. Zeus was furious at Bellerophon and decided to teach him a lesson. He sent a fly that buzzed around Pegasus, biting him and tormenting him, and driving him quite mad. As Pegasus reared up, Bellerophon was thrown from his back, landing down on Earth in a thorn bush and in disgrace.

As for Pegasus, the white-winged horse continued his journey to Olympus where he was taken to live in the heavenly stables of Zeus. As Zeus' bearer of thunderbolts, he served the king of the gods long and loyally. Eventually, to reward Pegasus' faithful service, Zeus turned him into a constellation, one of the largest in the skies. And, on the day he took his place among the stars, legend says, a single, pure-white feather fluttered gently down to Earth.



ARIES

The Golden Fleece

A TALE FROM ANCIENT GREECE

If you look carefully at the night sky, you may notice three bright stars that make up Aries the ram, with his long curling horns. Centuries ago, people pointed at these stars and told tales of a magical fleece and a great band of heroes who travelled the seas in search of it.



Long ago, King Athamas ruled the kingdom of Boeotia in central Greece, with his wife, Nephele, goddess of the clouds. The couple had two children – Phrixus and his twin sister Helle – but their marriage was not a happy one. Soon, Athamas fell in love with Ino, princess of Thebes, abandoned Nephele and married Ino instead. Sadly for the dotting king, jealous Ino hated her two stepchildren and spent her days devising a plan to be rid of them once and for all.

One night, she ordered her servant to light a fire beneath the grain store. The flames scorched the precious seeds, so that they died as soon as they were

