

COVER NOT
FINAL

Stories from Around the World

Mythical Tales

Written by Laura Sampson

Illustrated by Lilla Bölec

MYTHICAL TALES



*To Sam, whose joyous, insatiable story-appetite daily inspires mine, and to all
the myth-tellers I adore; your work unlocks universes in my heart – L.S.*

*Magnia dolupit esequae non eataese rumquaes ad qu
dolupit esequae non eataese rumquaes ad – L.B.*



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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

People often use the word 'myth' to describe something they think is the opposite of 'true'. The universe born from a giant egg? Never. A river turning into a giant serpent? Nonsense! But like other kinds of stories, mythical tales help us understand the world, and ourselves. Whether sung, spoken or read, myths speak about how things came to be, often carrying truths so important that we can recognise them as clearly today as when they were first written down, sometimes thousands of years ago. Because stories – especially mythical tales – are the number-one way our imaginations find truth, and create meaning.


A mythical tale is a special kind of story that explains how people, landscapes and invisible things like stories themselves, came to exist. They are big, long and often without beginnings or endings, but in this book you'll find short episodes from some of my favourites, from all over the world. Creation stories of how a particular society imagined the universe came to exist. Stories of gods whose powers – like nature – are huge, unpredictable, cruel and yet awe-inspiring at the same time. Also stories of mythical creatures – dragons, giants, talking wolves – magical objects, fierce battles, epic journeys, and stories of the moon and heavens.

Most myth-stories were written down long ago, before countries and nations had boundaries anything like they do now ... but not always. Some stories in this book have the huge scope and universal feeling of ancient myths but they are much more recent. These inspiring tales (sometimes called 'national myths') were invented to unite groups of people, explaining why certain battles were fought, how countries were established, and what values its people should hold. They can seem just as timeless, and feel just as true, as ancient myths. Stories, especially mythical tales like these, are powerful things: I invite you to read, tell and hear as many as possible!

Laura Sampson

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THE FIRST WORDS

A Quiché-Maya tale from South America

The world's different cultures and traditions all have many stories to explain the creation of the world, and the creatures who live here. Sometimes, the world emerges from an egg; in other myths, land comes up from under the sea, or from the branches of a giant tree. In this story, everything begins with sound – when two voices, belonging to two creator beings, speak words of force and power. But what happens when they need to hear words in return?

In the beginning, Tepeu, the shape-shifting Creator and Gukumatz, the feather-winged serpent, lived in the sky above a below that was nothing but emptiness and rolling dark water. Together, they had an idea.

"I am beautiful, and I wish to create something beautiful," said Gukumatz to Tepeu.

"I take many shapes, and I wish to create reflections of them all," said Tepeu to Gukumatz.



They knew what to do. It was easy, really. All they had to do was speak to the emptiness so that it would hear. So Tepeu and Gukumatz spoke and their words echoed all around.

"Let it be done! Let the emptiness be replaced by the Earth!"

SNAP! In that instant, Earth became a reality, emerging like a cloud out of water.

"Craggy mountains! Green plains! Deep valleys! Canyons! Forests! Vegetation! Fruits!" Everything they could think of they said, and everything they said was created.

Gukumatz shook their scaly feathers and said, "My friend, it was good that we agreed on this. This new place is magnificent!"

"My friend, we have only just begun!" replied Tepeu. "Now we have set things in motion, there is Time. This darkness above you is called Night – the first night before the Dawn of Creation. But night will fade. If we the Creators want to be part of our new world, we must make beings that move and think before the First Sun rises. They will live here and worship us with words like our own."

So Tepeu and Gukumatz spoke more words and suddenly the seas and rivers were full of fish and other creatures, flashing silver under the water.



THE FIRST WORDS

"Yes, more!" the Creators shouted.

Out of the mountains walked four-legged mammoths, while lizards and crocodiles slithered from shores and valleys.

"More!" they cried.

In the trees birds swooped and called, in every size and colour. When they had finished, the Creators spoke to their creations. "Creatures of the Earth, you live because of our words! Now, raise your voices and speak to us!"

The animals raised their voices. The new air filled with braying, twittering, honking, clicking, bellowing, quacking, roaring and trumpeting.

But those were not the words Tepeu and Gukumatz were hoping for. "NO no, speak WORDS! Say 'Tepeu, Gukumatz, Creators, we praise you!'" they cried.

The animals increased their volume, but they could not form the words. Tepeu and Gukumatz were angry. "If you can't speak our names, we will make other beings – and YOU will all be their servants!"

So, the two gods tried again. They searched the new world, lit by moon and stars, collected mud and clay from the riverbeds and spoke again. "Clay, form and grow and bring forth people!"

The Clay obeyed – it shaped itself into beings that stood on two legs, had two arms, hands and shoulders and heads with hair and eyes facing forward.

"People of the Clay! You live because of our words. Now, raise your heads to the sky, lift your voices and speak to us!" ordered Tepeu and Gukumatz.

But there was a problem with these beings too. The clay was soft and fragile, and none of these new beings could turn their heads or open their mouths without breaking.

"These people cannot do what we need them to. We must try again."

So, Tepeu and Gukumatz spoke the words to undo what they had made. The first rain fell and washed the clay away. But it didn't wash away the new trees.

"Ah, so wood is a much better building material!" the Creators agreed. "Wood, carve yourself and bring forth people!"

And the wood obeyed. The shapes that emerged from the wood stood straight and tall against the green grass and grey mountains. These new people woke up, walked the earth, heard its sounds and spoke to each other. But when Tepeu and Gukumatz commanded them to speak, they seemed not to hear. Not one head raised! Not one word of praise for their Creators!

So, they ordered those beings into the trees, to chatter and swing and play. Then, as the sun peeped golden over the horizon for the first time, Gukumatz and Tepeu had their best idea yet. "Those high ears of corn growing out of the ground in white, brown and gold, let's make our beings from those!"

So, they mixed the corn with oil and water, and once again spoke the words of creation. One by one, these new beings – people – came to life, and the first thing they did, without being asked, was raise their heads to the sky and called out thanks to their Creators.

"We have done well," declared Gukumatz and Tepeu. "These people will do nicely. The world belongs to us, and we belong to its people! They will never see past the horizon as we can, and that will inspire them. May they move towards it in their dreams and with their own creations!"

We did, and we still do.



SHED SKINS

An Oromo tale from Ethiopia

Have you ever wondered why so many snake characters seem to exist to steal, deceive and lie to people? One reason might be that many real snakes are poisonous, or dangerous in other ways – scary creatures always make good stories! But this story gives another reason, and it has to do with a certain superpower: the unique ability a snake has to shed their skins.

In the jewelled garden of paradise, a messenger bird named Holowaka sat perched in the branches of a sacred tree, black and white wings folded neatly behind them. They listened as the Creator spoke.

"I have looked down on the world and I am delighted with my work. My creations are beautiful beyond compare. Everything is as it should be – the land, the sea, the creatures... No, wait! One thing still needs my attention."

"What would that be?" replied Holowaka.

"People, Holowaka, People!" declared the Creator.

"People?" Holowaka asked, wondering why anyone would even look at the world below, when everything was so perfect right here. Every day, Holowaka flew through Paradise, bringing stories and messages from the Creator to the other gods, spirits, and beings who inhabited Paradise. It was a good job, an important job – that was enough for Holowaka.

"Yes, people! Of all the creatures, People are my greatest creation. They stand tall: their limbs are long, their eyes shine like jewels, and their rich brown skins soak up the sun. However, time will make them fade. They will shrink, their skins will go dry and wrinkly, and their lives will come to an end ... unless we do something about it!"

"What will you do?" Holowaka asked, stifling a yawn. The Creator was always busy creating.

The Creator rubbed his hands together with delight and beamed.

"My best idea yet! I will give them a secret superpower, so that they will never wear out, or fade, or die."

"What kind of power?" asked Holowaka.

"The secret of how to shed their skins! And you, my dear Holowaka, will be the one to deliver it. Fly down, find one of the People, whisper the secret into their ear, and return to me. Long, dark, shining People – my greatest creations are unmistakable! Go, now!"

Holowaka obeyed, opening their wings and gliding through the space between heaven and earth, wing tips spread wide. The hot, bright sun cast rainbow patterns over the bird's feathers. Holowaka flew until they could see the curve of the globe, shining blue and green. Closer, over mountains and valleys. Closer still, until finally animals came into view, moving across the savannas, deserts and jungles in every direction, as small as ants. But which ones were People? Holowaka had never been down to the world before – never even looked down from their perch in Paradise, so they had no idea what they were looking for, apart from the Creator's instructions.

The Creator's words echoed in Holowaka's mind as they soared down through the blue sky, sharp eyes sweeping across the land for what the Creator had told them to find.

"People – long, dark, shining – long, dark, shining."

A tower of giraffes galloped across a grassy plain. "Long: yes. Dark, shining – no!"

Wings outstretched, Holowaka moved on. A troop of monkeys swung through a rainforest, from branch to branch. "Dark: yes. Long, shining – no!"

A shoal of silver salmon raced up a fast-flowing river. "Shining: yes. Long: maybe. Dark – no!"

Holowaka searched until the sun was low in the sky, but no creature seemed to fit the Creator's description. His empty stomach rumbled as he flew over the grassy outskirts of a forest. And then he saw it – a long, dark, shining shape, slithering after a long-tailed rat.

"Excuse me!" Holowaka cried, landing on the grass by the creature.

"I come from Paradise with a secret from the Creator above, for you the People! You ARE one of the People, aren't you?"

Snake raised his head and looked at the bird with one shining eye. He smiled a sly smile.

"A Ssssssecret? What secret?" asked Snake, willing the bird to make a mistake.

Too hungry to think clearly, Holowaka leaned in and whispered the secret of how to shed skins and live forever straight into Snake's ear. Then, as fast as possible, Holowaka spread their wings and flew up, past the treetops and the clouds, past the curve of the earth, and back to Paradise as fast as possible.

By the time the Creator noticed Holowaka's mistake, it was too late. All over the world, snakes shed their skins whenever the old ones wore out, and they never shared the secret with any other animal. So, People had to make do with just one skin, and one lifetime. The Creator gave them other gifts instead though – the power to speak and sing, to tell stories, and to create new things – almost as well as the Creator himself. But, when People found out about Holowaka's Snake mistake, they were very unhappy indeed. Many were so jealous that they took revenge in their stories and songs; when a liar, a cheat or a thief appeared, it was almost always a snake.





MĀUI SLOWS THE SUN

A tale from Polynesia

Like many trickster figures in mythical stories, Maui is always getting into trouble, but his schemes and mischievous deeds often help people in some way or another. Maui never knows when 'enough is enough' ... but that's why so many people love him and tell stories about him. This retelling of one of Maui's most famous schemes is mostly based on Hawaiian versions of the story, where we meet some of Maui's older, wiser (but no less magical) female relatives.

Long ago, soon after Maui pulled islands up out of the sea with his magic fish hook, the Sun was in a big hurry. Each day it ran across the sky on its sixteen legs, each of which shone out around it and gave people light and warmth. But the Sun ran too fast: the days were too short for anyone to finish anything. Mending fishing nets, building houses and hunting for food was far more difficult in the dark of the long nights, and making clothes was impossible. Sheets of tapa bark had to be dried in the sun to make clothes, but there just wasn't enough time. One day, Maui's mother, Hina, complained to her son.

MĀUI SLOWS THE SUN

"Every morning at dawn I lay out the bark, but sunset always comes too quickly! Things cannot go on like this."

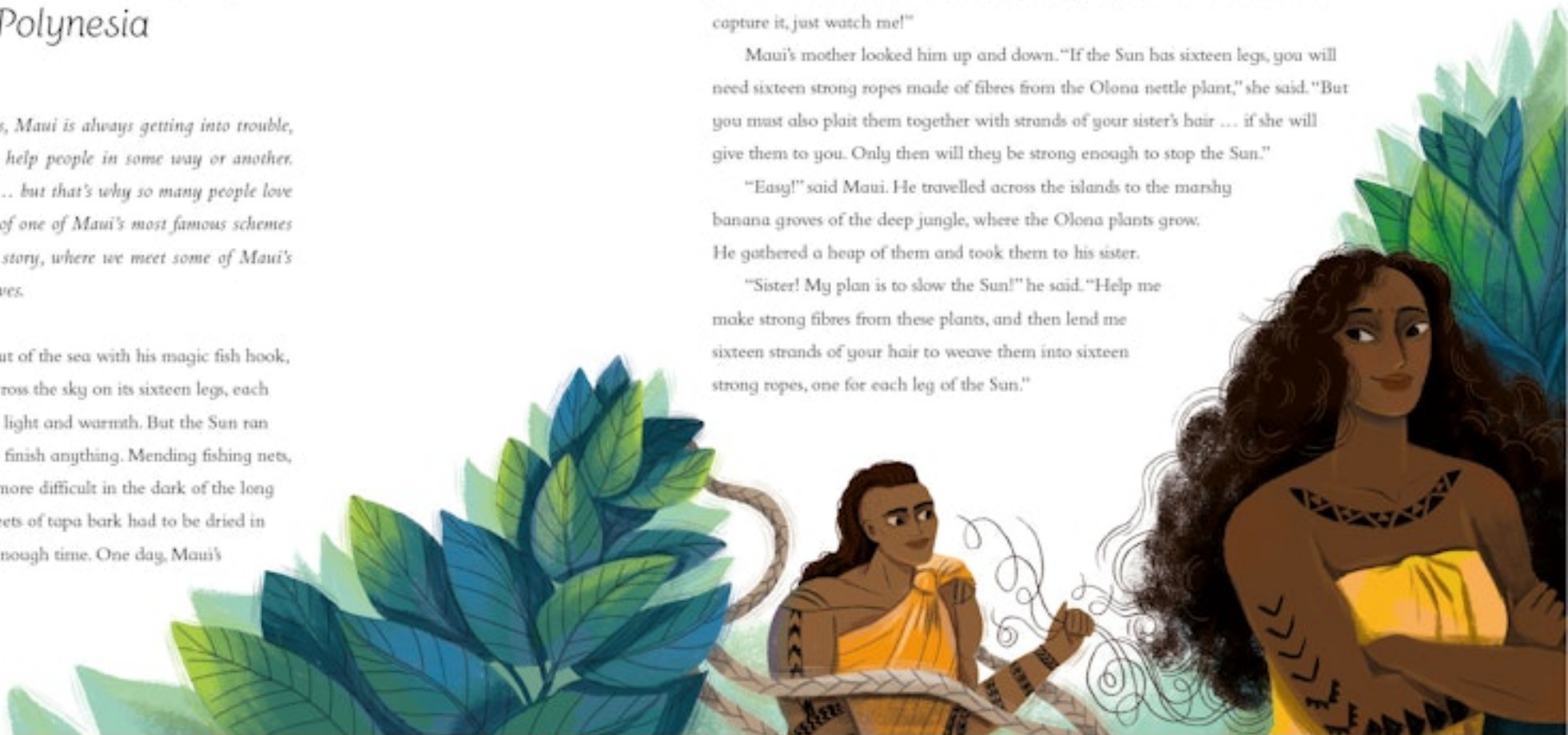
"Everyone says the same," Maui replied. "But don't worry, I have an idea! I will go and capture the Sun. I'll cut off its legs, or tie them up, and force it to move more slowly."

Maui was always having big ideas, but this was his biggest yet. Everyone always doubted Maui and his ideas – but Maui knew different. "Didn't I fish islands up from under the sea, and separate the sky from the ground, so people would have space to walk about, and steal fire, which people use every day? If anyone can slow the Sun, it is me! I will make a strong rope. I'll go to where the Sun rises, and I'll capture it, just watch me!"

Maui's mother looked him up and down. "If the Sun has sixteen legs, you will need sixteen strong ropes made of fibres from the Olona nettle plant," she said. "But you must also plait them together with strands of your sister's hair ... if she will give them to you. Only then will they be strong enough to stop the Sun."

"Easy!" said Maui. He travelled across the islands to the marshy banana groves of the deep jungle, where the Olona plants grow. He gathered a heap of them and took them to his sister.

"Sister! My plan is to slow the Sun!" he said. "Help me make strong fibres from these plants, and then lend me sixteen strands of your hair to weave them into sixteen strong ropes, one for each leg of the Sun."



MĀUI SLOWS THE SUN

Maui's sister looked Maui up and down and tossed her long black hair. "It sounds like a stupid idea to me. But since nobody has had a better one – I suppose I will help," she said.

Together they took the Olona fibres and wove the ropes, and to each one Maui's sister added a long, strong strand of hair. When they had finished, Maui took the ropes and set off for the great crater at the top Mt Haleakala, where the Sun rose every morning. He travelled by night so the Sun would not see him. When he arrived at the crater he made each rope into a lasso, laid them out on the dry cracked ground along the Sun's path, gathered all the ends together and tied them to a rock. Then he hid in the shade of a dry, cracked tree, and waited. The dark night sky began to lighten; the Sun was on its way! One by one, each of the Sun's sixteen legs peeped out over the edge of the huge crater, staining the sky red and gold. One by one, each leg stepped into the rope lasso. Gently, so the Sun would not feel a thing, Maui pulled on each rope to tighten the lassos. Then the Sun started to run, rising fast as usual. But the ropes pulled taut, and soon the Sun found it could not run any further. Fireballs flew through the air as the Sun strained against the ropes, and the ropes began to fray. The Olona fibres fizzed and burned, but the Sun kept straining. Soon, there was nothing left holding it but sixteen strands of long unbreakable black hair. When the Sun saw them, it roared,

"Who tried to trap me? The world needs my light! Let me run!"

Maui jumped out from his hiding place and stood by the rock where the hairs were anchored. "Sun! I am Maui! I pulled these islands up from under the sea; I pushed the sky and ground apart; and I stole fire so people could live. But you are ruining everything! You run too fast across the sky, and the people are suffering because of it. I vowed to come and slow you down. I've done even better than that. You can't move at all!"



MAUI SLOWS THE SUN

The Sun glared down at Maui, and Maui glared up at the Sun. Then the Sun spoke. "If you let me go, I will travel more slowly through the sky. I will take my time, so people can take theirs!"

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

"Very well – I will untie you and you can be on your way. But I will leave the ends hanging loose. If you break our agreement, I will capture you again!"

So, Maui untied the Sun, which hurtled into the sky ... but the Sun kept its promise. True to its word, it travelled far more slowly than usual. The sharp edges of its rays can sometimes be seen in the early morning sunrise and the evening sunset reveals the strands of hair that were gifts from Maui's sister.

At the foot of the mountain, and all over the islands, people found they had time to finish their work. Maui's mother finally finished drying the bark she needed to make the clothes, and she smiled, knowing Maui had succeeded in his task ... again.



SCATHACH'S SCHOOL FOR HEROES

A tale from Scotland

One of the most famous characters from Irish myth is the hero Cuchulainn. His father was Lugh, the Celtic god of light, and he became a great warrior at the age of only seven years old. He is famous for his fearlessness, his mighty 'warrior's salmon leap', his wild battle-rages and his brilliant fighting abilities. This story – from the Scottish Isle of Skye – tells how Cuchulainn learned his fighting skills, from a warrior-goddess (and some roasted hazelnuts).

At the top of the mountains on the Isle of Skye stood a castle called Dun Scaith. It was so big it had seven doors, each separated by seven windows, each spaced 150 paces apart. Dun Scaith was a school for heroes, and Scathach was its mistress.

Some people said Scathach had magic powers, some said she was a goddess – but everyone knew she was the best fighter in the world. Her strong arms could throw any opponent into the dust, and she could wield weapons so fast they became a blur. Long ago, after she defeated all the best fighters in her country, she travelled

north to find someone who could match her skills – but nobody could. So, Scathach decided to become their teacher.

She travelled until she found an island full of mist and shadows, and there she built Dun Scaith with her bare hands. Quickly, Scathach's school became famous. Young heroes flocked there hoping to train with her – but only those who could pass her tests would be allowed to stay. Their first test was to find the castle, which was hidden behind enchanted mists. The second test was to cross the Bridge of Leaps, a bridge which could turn itself upside down and throw the heroes off if they were too slow. The final test was to fight – and defeat – Scathach's fearsome daughter, Uathach. Not many people got that far. One day, however, from the castle's highest window, Scathach and Uathach spied someone coming: a young hero from the land of Ulster across the sea. He was already famous so they knew his name was Cuchulainn.

"I heard he can defeat a whole army alone, and his battle-robe can turn baths full of ice straight into steam," said Uathach. "Apparently he can jump over any obstacle with his great hero's Salmon Leap! I also heard that he can see the endings of battles before they have even begun!"

"Oh, have you now?" said Scathach. As they watched more closely, they saw Cuchulainn fight and defeat all the hopeful heroes gathered around the Bridge of Leaps. Most of them had spent a year trying to cross the bridge – but it only took Cuchulainn three tries. He leapt higher and farther than any hero had ever leapt, and when he landed by the thick oak doors of Dun Scaith, he drove his long spear straight through them.

"Ah, daughter, perhaps you have heard right. This one might be interesting!" laughed Scathach. "Go and meet him and see if you can fight him."

"Yes mother," replied Uathach, gathering weapons in her strong arms, and tying her long dark hair back into a tight bun. When she arrived at the door, Cuchulainn was waiting. His long red hair flowed onto his shoulders, and his smooth cheeks smiled as he greeted her.

"Greetings, Scathach! I am Cuchulainn, hero of Ulster! To get here, I rode a lion, followed the path of a thrown apple across a plain of deadly grass, fought a valley full of monsters and a mountain full of ghosts. With my great Salmon Leap I jumped over the sea, and then over your bridge."

"I am not Scathach – I am her daughter, Uathach. If you want to train here, you'll fight me first," Uathach replied.

"I defeated all I found on the way. And I will defeat you too!" Cuchulainn boasted. The two readied their weapons and stood facing each other, both ready. *CLANG!* Swords sliced and slashed. *CRASH!* Spears smashed against wooden shields. They fought all day, all night and all the next day. The air filled with the sounds of metal blades and battle cries. Uathach was strong. But Cuchulainn was stronger.

"You have defeated me, but you will never defeat Scathach!" Uathach cried. Just then, a shadow fell over the ground they fought on. Scathach jumped down from the top of the castle. Her battle cloak swished around her huge shoulders and her voice rang out.

"Greetings, Cuchulainn of Ulster. We will fight. I will win."





Scathach and Cuchulainn faced each other. Neither moved for a long time. When they did, their bodies moved so fast they blurred. All day long they fought there by the door, all night on the moor, and all the next day on the seashore. By the end of the second day, everyone was watching them trading blow for blow, both fighters evenly matched. It was the best fight anyone had ever seen. But by the end of the third day, neither fighter had eaten or slept. Uathach began to worry. She made white cheese from the milk of a deer, her mother's favorite, and called to the fighters, now up on the mountain. But neither came down, or even answered. So, she roasted a deer and the delicious smell wafted up the mountain. But still, neither fighter stopped to eat. A third time, Uathach called, "I will roast another deer and fill it with hazelnuts gathered from the tree by the river!"

Soon the smell of roasted deer and hazelnuts followed her voice up the mountain. Both fighters knew that hazelnuts carried wisdom and the same thought came to them both: hazelnuts will help me beat my opponent. Mid-blow they stopped fighting, came down the mountain, and grabbed a handful of hazelnuts. But as their teeth crunched down, another thought entered both of their minds: I have found a worthy opponent at last. Cuchulainn looked at Scathach, and she looked back. Their faces broke into smiles, and they began to laugh.

"Why are we fighting each other?" said Scathach. "From now on, we will fight together, and I will teach you all I know."

They ate and talked and were soon great friends. When the time came for Cuchulainn to leave, Scathach gave him a magic spear that would save his life in many battles. And after he left, Scathach renamed the fire-mountains of Skye after her best student. Which is why, even now, they are called Cuchulainn.





DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES

A tale from Ancient Greece

Greek myth is bursting with colourful gods and goddesses and their dramatic dealings with each other – contests, trickery, family feuds and lots more. But some of the most strange and fascinating stories are about what happens between gods and people. Dionysus – son of the mighty god Zeus but also half-human himself – is known as the god of wine, pleasure and inspiration.

This story is about one of his extremely creative ways of punishing the humans who annoy him...

DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES

Long ago, a fast ship sped East, hot sunlight casting its shadow on the sparkling sea. The wind filled its sails and rows of wooden oars cut through the water, worked by strong sailors. On the ship's deck, twenty pirates smiled. The ship's hold was full of gold, jewels, fine delicacies, and something even better: a rich passenger who was going to make their fortunes!

That morning, a young man with diamond-bright eyes, rich purple robes and long dark hair, had waved and called from a clifftop:

"Sailors! Take me to the island of Naxos. I'll pay you well!"

The pirates agreed, and the young man had boarded the ship. But the pirates didn't just take goods, they were kidnappers too. The ship sailed straight past Naxos, and the captain cried, "You're our captive now! Your family will pay a ransom, or we'll sail east and sell you as a slave!"

The young man did not answer. He did not look worried either. He just stood there, eyes glittering, mouth curled up in a secret smile.

"Take him! Tie him up!" the captain ordered.

The crew obeyed. They grabbed the young man by the arms and legs, and uncurled a strong rope woven from strands of



flax. The young man sat smiling as they tied his wrists together behind his back. Then, still smiling, he looked into their eyes, raised his hand and ran it through his hair. The ropes fell away as if they had never been there.

"Idiot!" said one of the pirates. "You've tied the wrong knot!" He re-tied the rope but that knot fell away too. In the gathering dark, the young man smiled. Sailors know all kinds of knots, and they tried them all, but each one came undone as soon as it was tied.

On deck, the captain, along with the helmsman – whose job it was to steer the ship – heard the pirates' cries and came running. Both saw the young man, surrounded by broken ropes, still smiling, skin glowing with an inner light.

But only the helmsman's eyes widened in terror as he whispered, "Captain, this is no man – I'm sure it is one of the mighty gods in disguise! We must not anger the gods. If it is Zeus, great god of the sky, he could crush us with his thunderbolt. If it is Poseidon, great god of the sea, he could send waves and rocks to smash our ship to bits. Apollo could send bright sun to scorch us, and music to send us mad. Sail to shore now and release him!"

"Don't be ridiculous," sneered the captain. "If ropes won't tie him, then lock him up. We proceed as planned."

The pirates obeyed. Soon all hands were back on deck, or seated at their oars, racing through the sea with the setting sun behind them, the only sounds their voices and the sloshing of the water.

Then, strange things started to happen...

First, the night air filled with the sound of flutes and drums, a tune so lively that each and every pirate stopped what they were doing and began to smile and tap their feet. Where was it coming from? They looked around:



dark red liquid oozed up between the polished wooden planks of the ship's deck. It smelled so sweet it made their mouths water. Wine! Then they looked up and saw something even stranger.

"The mast! Something is growing out of it!" the pirates cried as one. It was. As the sweet smell stole across the ship, grape vines sprang out of the dead wood of the main mast, tangling with the white sail. Ripe bunches of grapes, black, green and red, fell onto the deck. At the same time, green tendrils of ivy curled around the ships' oars, locking them in place.

"Helmsman, you were right! Take the ship to the nearest land and release the prisoner." But the ship would not move. Oars locked, mast overrun with garlands of grapevines and flowers, the ship stood as still as if it had run aground.

ROAR!

Everyone gasped as the door they had locked behind the young man burst open and a huge lion leapt out onto the deck, dark flowing mane and glittering eyes fixed on the ship's crew.

The lion roared again as a huge shaggy bear appeared at the other end of the deck, jaws snapping and paws swiping. Another roar: ghostly lynxes and tigers poured out of the lion's mouth and settled at its feet, teeth bared. Reptiles helter-skeltered down the ivy-choked mast.

The crew screamed with fear, but there was nowhere to run. So, one by one they jumped overboard, into the darkening sea – and as they did so, each of them began to change shape. Arms, feet and





DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES

legs melted away, brown skin turned shiny and grey, faces elongated into bottle-nosed shapes – they were becoming dolphins!

Soon, the moonlight reflected off their shining grey backs as they leapt in and out of the water in confusion, their human voices changing forever to a sea-language of whistles and clicks.

On the top deck, a lion's roar changed into the sly laughter of a young man with long flowing hair and purple robes, his glittering eyes watching the pirates – now diving dolphins – who would never be able to kidnap anyone ever again.

The helmsman was the only one left on the ship. Shaking with fear, he looked up at the young man, who he knew was not a young man at all.

"Wh-who are you? Please don't turn me into anything!" he begged.

The young man smiled and beckoned.

"Do not be afraid. You have pleased me: you knew me when nobody else did. I am not Zeus, or Poseidon, or Apollo – I am Dionysus, god of the dance, god of vines and festivities. When I speak, all the beautiful things that grow, listen. Take me back to Naxos. Now!"

The helmsman turned the ship and did as he was told, leaving the dolphins far behind.





SOSRUKO AND THE GIANT

A Nart tale from the Caucasus

Some of the best stories are about superheroes: not gods, or ordinary people, but somewhere in between. The mythical mountain landscapes of the Caucasus mountains, which stretch across Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and northern Iran, are full of brave heroes. Amiran is one of the region's most famous, but another is Sosruko, the fearless adventurer in this tale from the Nart Sagas.

Deep in the mountains lived one hundred brothers, all bigger and braver than all the other Narts, and all sons of the great Lady Setanaya. The youngest was Sosruko. Everyone knew he was special: he was born from a magic rock and his skin was as tough as steel. He was curious about everything, and he loved adventures. Where his brothers shot birds from the sky, Sosruko shot stars. Where they rode by day and rested by night, Sosruko could ride for many days. His horse, Bzow, never tired.

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One day, Sosruko's brothers rode off without him to hunt, so Sosruko and Bzow galloped across mountain peaks and canyons by themselves, looking for bigger, better adventures. At sunset they came to a high flat plain, which was silent except the wind whistling around rocky hills nearby, all of which had cave-like holes on their slopes.

"What strange-looking hills!" Sosruko marvelled. "I wonder how they were made?"

The moon rose, and the wind picked up. Climbing the largest hill, Sosruko found a cave just big enough to shelter inside, and another for Bzow. He lit a fire and slept soundly until dawn, then jumped on Bzow's back to ride off. But the strange hollow sound of Bzow's hooves on the hill made him stop and turn back. In the morning light he saw that what he had thought were hills were actually giant skulls, some laying on their sides, others half buried in the ground. The caves they had slept in the night before were really a pair of giant eye sockets!



My brothers would flee – but not me! thought curious Sosruko. *We Narts are big, but these skulls are so much bigger!* He looked up, above the highest mountain peak and spoke into the air, “I wish one of them would come back to life so we could talk!”

Just as he turned to go, the ground began to tremble, and the air filled with the sound of bone, earth and rock grinding together. The skull moved, and from under the ground rose the rest of the upper body, transforming from a skeleton into the fully clothed top half of a giant.

“Who has woken me from my rest?” the Giant boomed.

Sosruko rode closer, and shouted, “I would speak with you, if you mean me no harm!”

“What harm can I do to one I cannot see?” asked the Giant.

Sosruko saw that although the Giant was now very much alive, their eyes were still dark, as if left behind in another world. “What are you?” he asked. “How long have you lain here, a skeleton in the ground?”

“We are the First People, who once lived long lives in harmony with both ocean-bed and mountain peak,” answered the Giant. “Five hundred years we have lain here – only half of the lifespan of our kind.”

“But the ocean is far away, and no food grows up here! How did you eat?”

The Giant’s giant arm moved, and the hand grabbed a huge handful of nearby rocks. “All we needed was right here,” the Giant replied, squeezing the rocks which dripped milky liquid.



Sosruko opened one of his saddlebags and rode beneath the drips, filling the bag with the stone milk, planning to take it back to his people as a great treasure. He began to ride away but the Giant’s booming voice made him turn back.

“What do *you* eat, tiny one? My hand hurts as the stones are harder now. More effort for less harvest,” explained the Giant.

“We eat what we hunt or grow,” Sosruko replied, showing the Giant the bread, meat and cheese he had brought with him.

“Poor little things! Your food is as inferior as your size. Back in the time when we roamed the earth, one taste of stone milk was enough for many days,” declared the Giant. “But this land no longer chooses to give freely: perhaps it is displeased with you. As I am: I dislike what you say, and I do not wish to stay. Send me back to my rest, tiny toy hero!”

Sosruko had so many more questions: how did they fight? How did they die? Who were their gods? But he bowed before the Giant. “You could have crushed me like those rocks, but you did not. I will respect your wishes.”

Once again, Sosruko looked up past the mountain peak and wished for the Giant to return to rest on the high plain, beside his long-dead people. The ground trembled, and the Giant sank into the ground with a smile, which became the grin of a giant skull, covered in mountain grass.

When all was quiet again on the plain, Sosruko sat thinking of those ancient giants once so strong they could squeeze milk from mountain rocks. For the first time, he wondered what other marvels lay back in the past – marvels he would never know. Then he turned away from that place and whispered in Bzow’s ear, “The past may hold great wonders, but we will make new ones for the future!”

And together, just as brave but slightly wiser, they galloped on, away from one adventure and into the next.





THE GOLDEN CHAIN

A Yoruba tale from Nigeria

Mythical stories often come from religions which were established thousands of years ago, and which people still practise today. The West African Yoruba religion is one of these still-living religions: its many Orisha gods and customs travelled from West Africa across the Atlantic ocean with transatlantic slavery, and influenced many other beliefs in South America and the Caribbean. This story tells a version of the Yoruba myth of creation – of how the earth, and people, came to exist.

In the beginning, the Orisha were the only beings in the universe. Their ruler was Olorun, god of the sky-realm. Down below, the Orisha Olokun ruled over a world where there was nothing but water. Life was bright and busy in the sky-realm so nobody bothered to look down – nobody except Obatala, who loved to explore. One day, he had an idea.

“Olokun’s watery world looks so boring. Someone should make it more interesting... and that person should be me! I will go to the sky-palace and ask Olorun for permission to go down and see what I can see.”

From his throne of clouds and precious stones, Olorun heard Obatala’s request, and gave his answer. “Very well, you may go down to Olokun’s realm, but getting there will not be easy. You must seek the assistance of my son Orunmilla, who has the power to see the future. Go to his residence and ask him for help.”

When Obatala arrived at Orunmilla’s hut, he was sitting outside the door, before a sacred tray carved with faces, figures and strange shapes. On a mat by his side lay sixteen cowrie shells in four small piles.

“Obatala: I have been expecting you. Come, sit, and I will reveal the answer to your question.”

Obatala sat on the opposite side of the sacred tray, and Orunmilla picked up each pile of cowrie shells and cast them onto the tray. He peered at each pile, and through the pattern they made on the tray, he calculated meanings in ways only he could understand. Then, he looked straight at Obatala. “Here is what you must do. Go and gather gold – all the gold in the sky-realm should be enough – and fashion it into a chain with a hook at one end, long enough to reach from our land here, down to the water below. But beware! There might not be enough.”

“I will do so,” Obatala agreed and turned to leave.

“Wait! You will also need these four items to accomplish your task once you arrive.”

Orunmilla filled a snail shell full of sand, and placed it into Obatala’s hands, along with a white hen, a palm nut and a black cat. Obatala placed them carefully into a bag, and then left Orunmilla’s hut in search of all the gold in the sky.

THE GOLDEN CHAIN

Obatala asked so nicely that everyone gave him all the gold they had. Soon he had a heavy pile of coins, jewellery and golden nuggets. The goldsmith, in her forge, hammered out the gold into hundreds of shining links, with a hook at one end.

At the edge of the sky, Obatala hung the chain, and let it fall until the end was invisible. Then, with the bag safely by his side, he began to climb down from the sky to the rolling water far below.

Down, until the sky was a tiny speck above him.

Down, until he could feel the wet air all around him.

Down he climbed until there was no more chain left to climb down. But his feet touched air, not water!

"Orunmilla! You were right, the chain is too short! If I let go, I will fall!" he shouted upward, as loud as he could. At first there was silence - but then, in the distance, he heard Orunmilla's voice.

"Take the snail shell and pour the sand down onto the water. Then drop the hen after it."

Holding tightly to the chain with one hand, Obatala did as he was told with the other. The sand poured and poured, until there was a huge pile floating on the face of the water. The hen had not far to flap down to land on top of the pile, and it immediately started pecking and spreading it this way and that. Obatala's eyes widened in wonder - wherever the sand landed, earth spread out over the water and solidified. Where small piles drifted, mountains appeared, with valleys in between. Single grains of sand became boulders and rocky outcrops and cliffs.

"Now that's something to look at!" Obatala said and let go of the chain. Where he landed, brand new dust rose and settled. And with the black cat for company, he walked on the new land for the first time.

Eventually Obatala felt tired so he sat down. The palm nut fell out of the bag. It burrowed into the ground and a palm tree sprang up, dropping seeds which



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grew into other trees, and then grasses and eventually all the vegetation in the world. Obatala was pleased with what he saw. Olorun was pleased too: as a gift, he created the sun and hung it in the sky, to give light and warmth to the new land.

"Now that's even better!" Obatala marvelled, looking around. "I will call this beautiful land Ile-Ife, and it will be my home."

For a long time, Obatala and the black cat explored the new lands. Standing in the clay mud at the edge of a lake, Obatala caught a glimpse of his reflection in the still water. It gave him yet another idea.

"Ile-Ife would be even better if I had more company. I'll make some people!" he exclaimed. He took handfuls of the clay and began to mould them into figures who looked just like him, setting them to dry in the hot sun by a palm tree. The tree dripped sweet, strong sap. Whenever he got hungry and thirsty, Obatala drank the liquid. He had made many, many figures before he noticed the palm sap had made his hands behave differently. Not all the figures looked like him anymore – they were all shapes and sizes! But still, he was happy with his creations, and called up to Olorun. "I have made these figures from the clay of Ile-Ife. Please, bring them to life, so that they can enjoy this land as I have. I will be their protector!"

Olorun agreed. He blew life-giving breath down into the figures. One by one, the first people of Ife opened their eyes, marvelled at the land they lived on, and worshipped Obatala, whose hands had created them.



PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE

A tale from Croatia

Have you ever wondered why so many things in the world exist in cycles – like the seasons, or day and night? You're not alone. People have wondered the same thing for thousands of years and have imagined battles between mighty gods who represent opposing natural forces to try and understand. One of the best is the story of Perun and Veles: their ongoing god-feud is so famous across the Slavic world that in Croatia (and Bulgaria, and Bosnia) mountains are named after them!

The great Oak Tree of Life connected everything in the universe. Its broad leaves and wide branches supported Parv, the heavens and home to the gods. Its trunk grew up straight and true from Yav, the earth, where lush green hills and rushing rivers fed all the living creatures. And its roots – they pushed down beneath the earth to Nav, the underworld. At the very top of the tree perched the god Perun, in the shape of a golden eagle. From there he ruled over the sky, and the other gods, with the power of thunder and fire. And by the deepest root, in the dark world of Nav,



PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE

lived Veles, god of the earth, the flowing waters and the cows, sheep, goats and other livestock.

Every day Veles looked up to the light, far away at the top of the tree and at Perun watching over everything. And every day, as the red sun rose over the Tree of Life, casting dancing shadows, Veles' face twisted into a frown of jealousy.

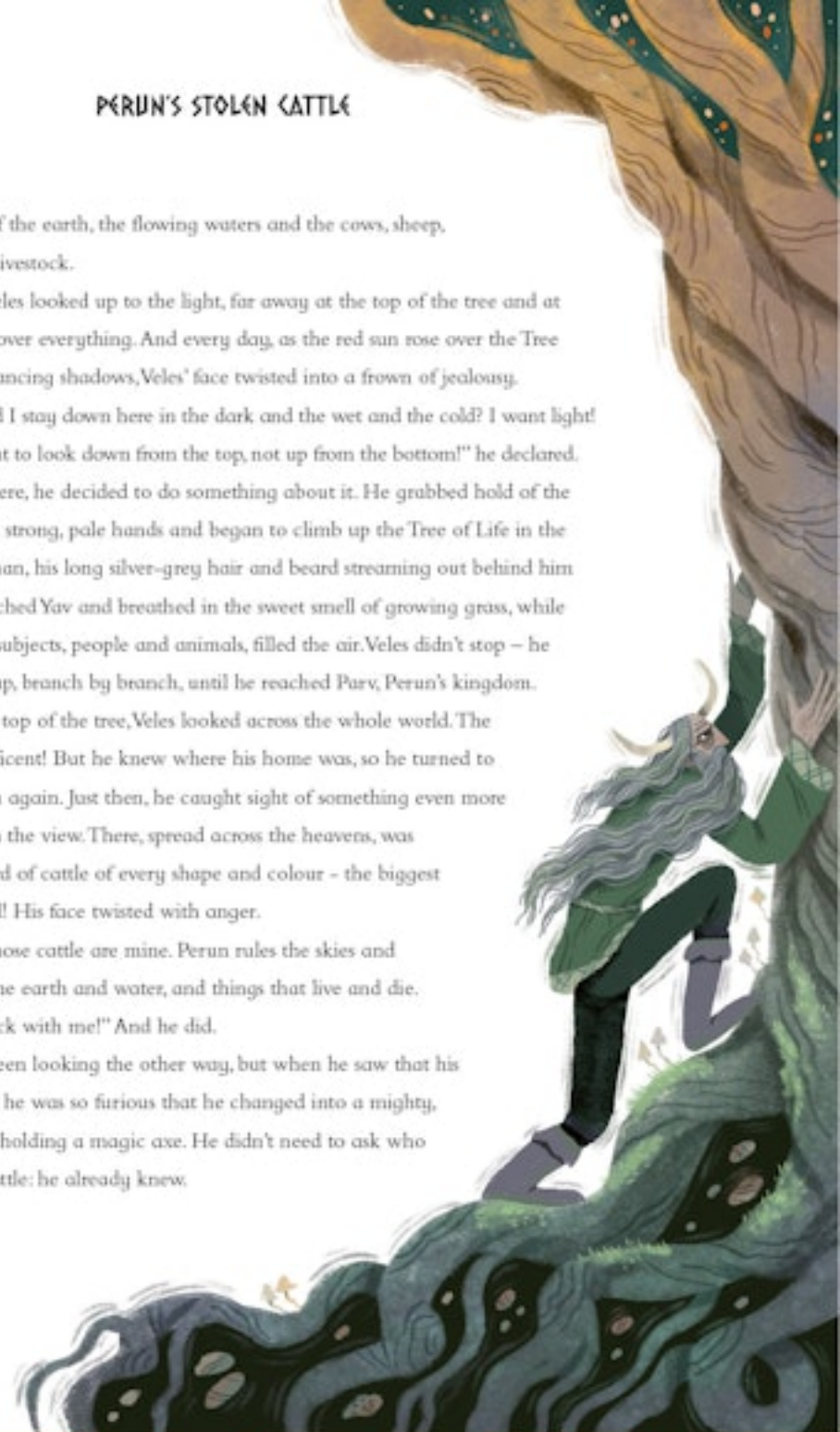
"Why should I stay down here in the dark and the wet and the cold? I want light! I want sun! I want to look down from the top, not up from the bottom!" he declared.

Then and there, he decided to do something about it. He grabbed hold of the longest root with strong, pale hands and began to climb up the Tree of Life in the form of an old man, his long silver-grey hair and beard streaming out behind him.

He soon reached Yav and breathed in the sweet smell of growing grass, while the voices of his subjects, people and animals, filled the air. Veles didn't stop – he climbed further up, branch by branch, until he reached Parv, Perun's kingdom. Now at the very top of the tree, Veles looked across the whole world. The view was magnificent! But he knew where his home was, so he turned to climb back down again. Just then, he caught sight of something even more magnificent than the view. There, spread across the heavens, was an enormous herd of cattle of every shape and colour – the biggest herd in the world! His face twisted with anger.

"By rights those cattle are mine. Perun rules the skies and mountains, not the earth and water, and things that live and die. I'll take them back with me!" And he did.

Perun had been looking the other way, but when he saw that his cattle were gone, he was so furious that he changed into a mighty, muscled warrior holding a magic axe. He didn't need to ask who had stolen the cattle: he already knew.





"Veles, you thief and underground mischief-maker!

You have taken my property!" he roared, and sent a thunderbolt crashing down to the earth, where it started a forest fire.

Veles heard Perun's roar and saw the fire. He stopped watching the herd grazing on a quiet green hillside, and changed into his most fearsome shape: a snake, broad as a tree trunk and long as a river. With huge fangs dripping poison, Veles slithered lightning-quick back up into the tree, coiling around it like a spring, to wait for Perun.

CRASH! Another thunderbolt echoed across the sky as lightning seared a crack in the ground.

"Show yourself, Veles!" thundered Perun. CRASH! Another thunderbolt.

Meanwhile, Veles, coiled around the Tree of Life, climbed higher and higher. Perun was so busy throwing thunderbolts he didn't notice Veles coiled around the clouds, beneath his foot. Veles opened his poisonous fangs and bit...



"AARRRGHH! I'll get you, Veles!"

Perun shouted in pain and fury, wielding his axe. Its magic blade reflected the sun, which scorched too bright over the land. Crops withered and died. Rivers dried up. But Perun could not catch Veles.

From his hiding place in the branches of the tree, between Perun's realm and his own, Veles looked down, and saw the mess the chase had made. He sighed a great sigh. "Perun, it's over – you win," he said, emerging into view. "I will go back to Nav, and you can keep your stupid cattle. For now, anyway."

"Good. Get back down there where you belong," cried Perun. He transformed back into his golden eagle form and settled back at the top of the Tree.

Veles meanwhile climbed back down the Tree of Life. As he did, rain fell. Green shoots pushed up through scorched earth, and rivers flowed. As Veles' foot touched the earth, night fell again – it had been day too long. And, as he continued his journey down to Nav, his home in the underworld, leaves fell, the ground grew cold and frosty, and winter settled over the forests and fields of Yav.

But winter never lasts. Each year, Veles looks up to Perun at the top of the great Oak Tree of Life and decides to climb. So, each year the cycle begins again...





FENRIR WOLF AND THE MAGIC RIBBON

An old Norse tale

Did you know that some of the big, colourful characters of Norse myth have days of the week named after them? Thursday is for Thor and his hammer, Wednesday is for one-eyed Odin, and Friday is named after the shining goddess Freya. This story, bursting with scheming, mystery and magic, features a less famous god, but one who, nevertheless had Tuesday named after him: Tyr, the god of courage

In Asgard, the home of the gods, Loki the Trickster was famous for causing trouble and mischief. So, when Loki returned from a long trip to Jotunheim, the land of giants, and told the gods he now had three children, they were only slightly surprised. But when he began to describe these children, the gods' surprise turned to worry – Loki's children were monsters! The first was Jormungandr, a giant snake; the second was Hel, a powerful sorceress; and the third was Fenrir – a fearsome wolf with extremely sharp teeth. Even though all three lived far away from Asgard, the gods complained to Odin, king of the gods.



"Loki has fearsome monsters for children!" they chorused,

"Their mother is a giant, one of our sworn enemies."

"They might come here to fight us, and bring death and disaster!"

"What should we do?"

From his golden throne in the glittering palace of Valhalla, Odin spoke:

"Do not fear, we will trick them! Here is the plan: first, invite all three here to Asgard, but as guests, not enemies: do not let them see your fear. Then, we will capture them and send them far away, where they cannot harm us."

The gods did as Odin requested. When Jormungandr arrived in Asgard, the gods seized him and threw him into the deepest part of the deepest ocean. There, in the dark under the waves, his body grew so long that it encircled the world in a giant ring. He was happy there and posed no danger to the gods.

When Hel arrived in Asgard, Odin offered her gifts – a magic knife called 'famine', a magic plate called 'hunger', and the chance to become High Queen of the Underworld. Hel accepted and ruled over a world where everyone was her servant. But nobody can leave the Underworld, not even Hel, so the gods were safe from her too.

But the gods were so afraid of Fenrir's great strength and sharp teeth, that they decided he should stay where they could keep a close eye on him.

"We think you will be very comfortable here in Asgard," Odin lied. "Won't you stay as our special guest?"

"Fine," said Fenrir, "as long as you give me a nice place to live, and as much food as I want."

"Agreed!" declared Odin.

So, Fenrir stayed. His home was a vast cave on the edges of Asgard. Only one god, famous for his courage, dared approach the cave to bring Fenrir his food each day. His name was Tyr.

Fenrir grew fast. Soon, he was bigger and stronger than any of the gods. His open jaws could touch the sky and the earth at the same time. The worried gods returned to Odin's palace.

"Fenrir could eat us all in a single bite! We must tie him up, but none of us are strong enough."

"Then we must trick him into binding himself," said Odin. "A test of strength should do it. A game. See if he'd like to play, 'Escape the Chain!'"



"Brilliant idea!" chorused the gods. They made a long, iron linked chain, which they called Leyding, and jangled it at the mouth of Fenrir's cave.

"Fenrir! We know you're big and strong, but we bet you can't escape this chain!" they cried.

"That's what you think!" Fenrir replied.

When the gods tied him up, his sharp teeth bit straight through the heavy metal chains and he escaped easily. Everyone clapped and cheered, but really, they were shaking with fear. They made a heavier, bigger chain, which they named Dromi. When Fenrir heard its giant iron links clanking outside, he emerged once again from his cave.

"What now?" he asked.

"If you escape this chain, you'll be famous!" they said.

"Ha! It is a big chain but breaking it will be a small task for me."

It took hundreds of strong arms to tie the chain. But Fenrir shook, strained and kicked, and in moments the whole thing fell to pieces. The gods gasped and quaked. Terrified, they went back to Odin's throne.

Odin's one eye lit up with an idea. "We need magic, not iron!" he declared. He called Skyrnir, the gods' messenger and ordered him to go deep underground to the land of the dark elves. "Persuade them to make a binding that cannot be broken," Odin demanded.

The dark elves agreed, and deep underground they began their work. They weaved words, hammered metal, and mixed magic while they sang:

*Cat's footfall, child's beard,
Roots of mountain, fishes' breath,
Bear's sinew, birds' spit,
Swirling in, twist and spin,
A spell-bound rope, unbreakable!*



FENRIR WOLF AND THE MAGIC RIBBON

When it was finished, the new chain looked like a thin, shining ribbon. Its name was Gleipnir.

When Fenrir saw Gleipnir, he laughed and shook his head.

"I'm not stupid. I smell magic on that ribbon of yours. You're trying to trick me!"

"If you can't get out, we promise to free you. It's just a game!" lied the gods.

"Oh, is it now?" replied Fenrir. "I'll test Gleipnir's strength on one condition: as you tie me with this ribbon, one of you gods must put your hand in my mouth as a pledge of your promise. If you're telling the truth, you need not fear. But if you are lying, someone will lose a hand."

There was silence all around because they were lying. A hand was a high price to pay for safety. Finally, Tyr stepped forward, reached out his hand and did as Fenrir asked. The gods tied one end of Gleipnir around Fenrir and the other to a huge stone slab set deep in the ground. And it worked! Fenrir's teeth bit down. He swallowed Tyr's hand from wrist to fingertips, and snarled and strained against the chain, but he was trapped.

The gods could not kill Fenrir – he was Loki's son, and gods can't kill gods. Instead, when Fenrir opened his jaws wide, they put a sword into his mouth so he couldn't close it. Fenrir howled and the spit from his mouth formed a great river, but he could not bite them. The gods cheered with relief, and gave thanks to brave Tyr, who had sacrificed his hand to keep the gods safe from harm.



SRI AND THE OCEAN OF MILK

A tale from India

In India's vast world of myths, there are many different types of supreme beings. The most powerful are Shiva the Destroyer, Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Protector. Vishnu can take any form, and in this story, he takes many forms at the same time! Below these beings are the Devas whose powers help the world and its people, and the Asuras, their sworn enemies. Meet all of them in this epic story of shape-shifting deities, a magic ocean and lots of hard work!

One day, all good things disappeared from the land of the Devas. Cows stopped giving milk, and green trees withered, but nothing new grew to replace them. Sparkling jewels shrivelled up like old flowers, and no one could think of any reason to dance, smile or do anything at all. Sri, Goddess of Wealth and Fortune, had left the world, and Indra, King of the Devas, knew it was all his fault. He called to Vishnu the Protector for help.

SRI AND THE OCEAN OF MILK

"The devas are cursed, because of me! Down by the river Ganga, a holy man threw me a magical garland of flowers. I knew Sri lived in that garland, but I was distracted – it fell to the ground and got trampled underfoot. Now, because of my disrespect, Sri is gone. If she does not return, our world will die!"

The sky rippled as Vishnu revealed himself in human form, skin shining dark as a storm cloud, golden robes matching his golden jewellery, and each of his four hands holding a different treasure.

"Devas!" he called as they all stared in awe. "Sri has dissolved herself into the Ocean of Milk but follow my directions and she will return bringing gifts, including Amrita, the elixir of immortality. First you must fill the shallow waters with healing plants. Then, you must spin and churn the whole sea to froth and foam. The great mountain Mandara will be the churning rod, and Vasuki, the Snake King, will be the churning rope. To work this giant churn, the snake-rope must be pulled back and forth, one side by you, devas, and the other by the asuras. You are enemies, but to do this you must put aside your differences and work together! Offer them a share of the Amrita, and they will agree to help."

King Indra obeyed. As Vishnu had promised, Rahu, King of the Asuras, agreed to help in return. Soon, thousands of devas and asuras lined up on opposite shores of the Ocean of Milk. Vishnu, in the form of Sankarsana the King of Strength, uprooted Mount Mandara from the earth. Garuda, the Eagle King, picked the mountain up in his claws and flew it to the centre of the Ocean. Vasuki, the Snake King, slithered from his home and coiled himself around the mountain as the churning rope. Then, the asuras gripped the head end, the devas gripped the tail, and with a great HEAVE, they began to pull the snake-rope back and forth. Slowly at first, then faster, Mount Mandara spun, rising black and gold like a giant bee in the sun.



*Heave, ho! Heave, ho! The sea churned into foam and froth
Heave, ho! Heave, ho! Asuras and Devas, back and forth
They churned for a day, a week, a month, a year, a decade, a century!*

But Sri did not emerge, so they carried on churning. More centuries passed. Mount Mandara started to sink down under its massive weight, drilling a hole in the ocean floor. But Vishnu knew what to do: he turned into the giant sea turtle Kurma and dived down to the ocean floor. The base of the mountain now rested steady on Kurma's huge shell, and the churning continued. Faster and faster, until the mountain burned with friction: trees fell in flames and rocks melted, raining down on the coiled body of Vasuki who roared with pain.

But still nothing. Everyone got tired, but just as they were all about to drop, Vishnu turned into Aniruddha, a being with a thousand strong arms, and helped spin the churn. Then, at last, something erupted high up out of the foaming milk – but it wasn't Sri, or the elixir.

"Halalala! Deadly venom!" the devas and the asuras screamed. As one, they shielded themselves, knowing only one God could swallow it and save them all from being burned alive.

"SHIVA!" they cried.

A hot wind came down from above, and on a cloud, Shiva the Destroyer appeared. He opened his mouth wide and caught the halalala as it fell, which was so poisonous it turned his throat blue as he swallowed. The few drops he missed fell to the earth onto scorpions, snakes and some mushrooms and plants – many are still poisonous to this day.

With one last *WHOOSH!* the asuras and the devas stopped churning. Vasuki span, uncoiling from the mountain to take his place once again around Shiva's

neck and shoulders. The Ocean of Milk bubbled, glowed and bulged, and everyone looked on in amazement as a giant lotus flower rose up from its surface carrying Sri. She smiled down, and everyone felt their worries slip away, like stepping from icy winter into warm sunlight.

As Sri's bright eyes gleamed, more gifts rose up from the ocean: Chandra, the crescent moon, settled above the head of Shiva, and when Surabhi, the giant shining cow of plenty, walked onto the land, all that had withered and died began to grow back again. Following them, Parijata the sacred tree rose up covered in fragrant white jasmine flowers.

Having provided many gifts, the Ocean of Milk swirled and glowed once again. Then, up came the universe-healer Dhanvantari, holding a golden pot in one of his two pairs of hands. Everyone knew that pot contained Amrita, the elixir of life. Everybody wanted it – and later the devas and the asuras would become enemies again because of it – but in that moment, all eyes were fixed on Sri. Everybody cheered for the return of the goddess of plenty, and for the gifts that came with her out of the Ocean of Milk.





ILMATAR AND THE GOLDEN EGGS

A tale from Finland

Many ancient philosophers from Europe, India and Africa believed that everything in the world was made up of four elements – earth, fire, water and air. These elements appear in many myths, which are stories created by people to make sense of the world. Ilmatar, the main character in this story from the Finnish epic Kalevala, begins as a creature of the air, but it is only when she meets the other elements, that the world is created.

To Ilmatar, daughter of the air, the heavens were a great prairie, and the shifting, moving, everlasting clouds were her companions. Every day they billowed under her soft feet as she stepped across the sky-fields, and every night she lay down and slept on their pillowy white softness. Each day was the same. Ilmatar's life in the clouds was beautiful, but with only clouds for company, it was lonely. Even worse – it was boring.



"There must be something else to do!" she thought, searching for gaps in the clouds, listening for any other voices. Until one day, from below...

Crash! Splash!

Ilmatar dived down, following the sound, until pop! Her head emerged from the bottom of the clouds.

"Ha!" she gasped. Below, whirling and dancing, bubbling and foaming, was the sea – darker, faster and more exciting than the clouds. The wind was stronger too, whipping up spray that wet her cheeks and her hair. It felt good!

"At last, a new place to explore, and play, and have fun!" she cried. Without looking back, she dropped herself down straight into the foaming, tossing ocean. The ocean was delighted to meet her because it had been lonely too. For a long time, they played together: Ilmatar diving, rolling, splashing and whirling. The wind joined in too. Ilmatar learned that soon she would give birth to a son, and she laughed with excitement.

The wind and the sea were wonderful companions – at first. But time stretched on and soon 700 years had passed. However long Ilmatar waited, it became clear that her son would not be born in this place. The wind and the sea were no fun anymore. Lonely again, Ilmatar bobbed along on the surface of the sea, sinking and floating north, south, east and west, with nothing to do but think and dream, and sing little songs to herself. Eventually, she called out to Ukko, the great Maker, who was everywhere all at once.

ILMATAR AND THE GOLDEN EGGS

"Air above, the water below, I've explored them all, but I need more! Here I float, waiting to become a mother, but I am still only a daughter! Help me, Ukko! Make something happen, bring me something new!"

Ilmatar's voice carried on the wind, up into the air and down into the sea. Then, out of the emptiness, a dark speck appeared, moving closer until she could see it had wings, and a beak. Look! It was a wild duck, looking for a place to land and lay its eggs. Ilmatar knew the only land was her own body, so she raised her shoulders and knees out of the water, as if she were a small island, calling, "Come, wild duck, land on me!"

The duck swooped down and landed lightly on Ilmatar's knee, where it built a nest from its own feathers, and Ilmatar's hair. Then, it laid seven eggs – six of gold and one of black iron – and settled down on the eggs in the nest. Ilmatar stayed perfectly still, bobbing in the ocean, with the duck for company. Safe in the nest, the eggs grew warmer and warmer until they were hot, so hot they warmed up the sea, and Ilmatar's whole body. Hotter and hotter until...

"OUCH!" The eggs burned Ilmatar's skin. Without thinking she jerked her knee up, tossing the nest, and the duck and the eggs, high into the air. The duck flew up and away, but the eggs fell – *SMASH!* – into pieces on Ilmatar's body. Some pieces fell to the bottom of the ocean and came together there, creating a huge dish of solid earth. Others were carried up by the wind and came together there, where they formed the sky, beneath the cloudy heavens. The whites of the eggs became the silver light of the moon and stars. The yolks, flecked with golden shell fragments, became the rays of the sun.

"How beautiful," Ilmatar whispered. She floated on the sea for a while admiring the new sun and moon and stars. But there were still some broken pieces of shell on her body. She picked one up and looked at it in the light. A brilliant idea popped into her mind like a flower blooming.



ILMATAR AND THE GOLDEN EGGS

Smiling, Ilmatar placed one piece of shell carefully on the surface of the ocean – a coastline appeared! The earth from under the sea came up to meet it, and that was how the first land appeared, quickly covering itself in a carpet of green grasses.

“What next?” Ilmatar asked, picking up another piece. This time, she pushed it against the land, which crinkled up to form mountains and valleys. Then, she curved another piece along the edge of the land and bays and beaches appeared. With a shower of dark splinters from the iron egg, she made rocks and pebbles and boulders.

“This is fun!” Ilmatar exclaimed. She continued to create using the pieces of eggshell: forests and fields, big and small islands, flat green fields and brown deserts, freshwater pools and lakes. She was so busy creating that she almost forgot she was about to become a mother, too. By the time she gave birth to her son, he was a fully grown adult. His name was Vainamoinen and he had magical powers that would change the newly-created world. But that is another story...



ROLAND'S BREACH

A tale from France

Many epic stories are about kings, knights and violent battles: they often have sad endings, but lots of action and excitement. This story is part of a famous medieval French epic called The Song of Roland. Set in the legendary court of King Charlemagne, it tells the story of the valiant knight Roland, his mighty sword Durendal and his battle horn Oliphant.

In the days when brave knights fought for their kings and gods, and honour and glory were more important than life itself, Old King Charlemagne was making his way home after seven years of war. His beard was long, and his hair was white, but his sword Jogeuse was still sharp. The only sword sharper was Durendal, which belonged to Roland – a gift for his many valiant deeds. Together, Charlemagne and Roland had conquered every kingdom in Spain, and King Marsile of Saragossa had finally surrendered and sent peace offerings: 400 donkeys heaped with silver and

gold, 50 wagons bursting with jewels, packs of fine falcons and hunting dogs, bears, lions, horses and camels.

When Ganelon, Roland's proud but jealous stepfather, returned with the news and rich gifts, Charlemagne addressed his troops, camped at the Roncevaux mountain pass.

"Glad tidings! Peace at last! Now we head home to France, to listen to storytellers sing of our great victories. I will lead the way. Roland, dear to me as my right hand, you will form a rearguard, to protect us as we travel north. If harm should befall you, blow your battle horn Oliphaunt, and we will ride back to fight with you."

Ganelon smiled a cruel, secret smile as Roland turned to the king and bowed.

"Sire, it is my honour. But Oliphaunt will remain silent: only a coward blows a battle horn to call a king he has sworn to protect!"

The army mounted their horses and began the long journey home. The mountain passes of the Pyrenees were narrow and steep, but each fighter felt lighter as they left the fields of so many battles behind. Many wept for joy when their feet stepped on French soil again. That night, for the first time in seven years, they slept soundly. But King Charlemagne dreamed disturbing dreams – of a raging lightning-storm smashing weapons and denting armour, and being attacked by leopards, bears, dragons, griffins and a huge lion-monster. Then at dawn, the sky suddenly went dark as storms anyone raged dagger-like across the sky. Joy forgotten, everyone panicked, crying, "The end of the world is here!"

But when Charlemagne heard the faint, clear sound of a battle horn from the direction he had just come, he understood the dream and the storm. "Roland is in trouble! We must take our weapons and return to Roncevaux!"

Ganelon sneered. "Sire, I fear we will be too late."



Roland's army was in trouble. On the night Charlemagne had gone ahead to France, the enemy had crept up and hid, filling the mountain forests above Roncevaux pass like dark trees while Roland's army slept, dreaming of peace. In the dark before dawn, Oliver, Roland's wise friend and battle companion, came running.

"We have been betrayed! The enemy are here, and they outnumber us twenty to one. Blow your battle horn now, and we might live!"

As Roland looked up the mountain, the rising sun sparkled golden on thousands of coats of shining Spanish armour. The flags of Saragossa rippled in the morning breeze, and the ground shook with the pounding of horses' hooves as the enemy army charged down the mountain.

"My stepfather Ganelon is to blame for this. I sent him to the enemy to accept the peace offering. It was a dangerous mission so he must have assumed I wanted him dead. I remember him whispering, 'May ill fortune be a forest fire that burns through your life!' He's always exaggerating so I just laughed. But now I see he has taken revenge and convinced King Marsile of Saragossa to swap peace for one last war. Now all we can do is fight bravely and hope. No evil songs will be sung about our deeds – only Ganelon's."

"Yes we must fight. But please, blow your horn, and call for help," pleaded Oliver. The noise of the enemy's charge came closer.

"Not until we've crushed the enemy! Gather our army, and let the hills ring with our battle cry: *Mojoi!*"

With Oliver beside him, Roland mounted his war horse Veillantif, and raised his mighty sword Durendal. Then, *clang!* – the tangling of silver spears. The enemies clashed – both believing themselves to be right, and their enemy, wrong.

Once more, Oliver pleaded, "Roland, blow your horn!"
But Roland would not.



The battle was a great storm. Lances clashed like explosions, and deadly weapons dented shining armour. But Durendal, the sharpest sword in the world, worked hardest: with each blow, it split hundreds of enemy shields in two, never losing its edge.

Both armies fought like leopards and bears, dragons and griffins – but they were just men. Exhausted fighters fell on both sides until only a few were left standing.

Roland looked across the battlefield. "We will not survive today. But our army, which serves great king Charlemagne, can still defeat the enemy if they come now!"

At that, Roland picked up his horn Oliphaunt. He blew so hard that his cheeks bulged, and his head almost burst with effort. The sound rang out across the Pyrenees as if carried by birds. Roland kept fighting until he was the last man left on Charlemagne's side. He wept for the army, and especially his friend Oliver, who had fought so hard that his sword had smashed right down to its crystal hilt.

"My friends! You are gone but will never be forgotten: minstrels will sing songs of our victory here today and for years to come!"

But were reinforcements coming? A mountain was in the way so Roland could not see. He took Durendal and wielded

that mighty sword one last time, against the mountain itself. The sword stayed sharp as stone and boulders smashed and fell. Soon there was a gap – a breach. Roland knelt before it and looked north towards his homeland. There! Tiny specks on the horizon: Charlemagne's army, hurrying south towards a new gap in the mountains which could only have been made by one sword.

The Song of Roland's deeds, and Ganelon's betrayal, is still sung today. The square gap in the mountains, which some say was hewn by Durendal, is still called 'Roland's Breach'.





THE KING OF WILD GRAIL CASTLE

An Arthurian tale from Germany

Stories of King Arthur, the Round Table, and the Holy Grail, have always been popular in Europe – but Parzival, composed over 700 years ago by Wolfram von Eschenbach, is one of the best. It follows a young knight with a magical destiny, on a long quest of miracles and mystery. This small section of his story begins with an 'ending' – a happy celebration – but quickly fills with enchantments, puzzling prophecies and chance meetings in wild places.

In the grand feasting hall of Wild Grail Castle, a richly dressed crowd fizzed with excitement. It was a day of celebration: Parzival was the new Grail King! He sat beside his queen at a table carved of a single garnet, golden crown glittering by the light of four crystal lamps. Awed silence fell as a bright-eyed page carried in the kingdom's greatest treasure, the Grail – a glowing stone of magic and

THE KING OF WILD GRAIL CASTLE

miracles – and set it before the new king. By the Grail's power, cups and plates were immediately filled with delicious food and drink. Everybody cheered: "Long live the Grail King!"

Nobody noticed a brown-haired woman in plain brown clothes enter the hall ... until her strong voice called "Parzival!"

Everyone watched the king's face burst into a smile. "Sigune! Cousin!" he cried.

"So, it is true. The prophecy is fulfilled: the Grail really has chosen you," said Sigune.

Parzival turned to address the crowd. "I am indeed the new Grail King – but I have endured many trials to become worthy of the title. Sigune knows all too well of my long journey."

Everyone looked up at Sigune and cried, "Tell us!"

The King nodded so Sigune spoke.



THE KING OF WILD GRAIL CASTLE

It began many years ago, in the deep forest of Soltane. I was sitting beneath a tree, grieving my husband's death, when a young lad greeted me. He looked ridiculous as he was dressed in rags, with too-big shoes laced up to his knees, but he showed compassion: he tried to comfort me. His face reminded me of someone. When he told me to call him 'dear boy' – his mother's nickname for him – I knew then that he was my own cousin, who I had heard of, but never met. He knew nothing of his history or even his true name, so I told him he was Parzival, son of my Aunt Herzeloide, a queen robbed of her kingdom and her husband by an evil knight. She had taken Parzival to the forest as a baby to protect him, and he grew into a young man there, innocent of the dangers he must eventually face. Parzival told me that one day, by chance, he had met his destiny: four knights of Camelot, King Arthur's court, riding fine horses through the forest. Their noble looks and shining armour had captivated him, and now he was on his way to Camelot to become a knight himself.

How it must have pained his mother to let her son follow his heart into danger! But she had not shown it – instead she sent him off with good advice: 'Always be kind to those you meet, and when you want something, ask for it.' But looking at Parzival before me then, I knew she had dressed him in rags secretly hoping the

THE KING OF WILD GRAIL CASTLE

knights would reject him as a 'fool', so that he would return to her. He begged me to direct him to Camelot – but he seemed so young – too innocent for knighthood, so I sent him in the opposite direction.

Alone with my grief again, I travelled until I reached a forest close to my mother's birthplace, the enchanted kingdom of Wild Grail Mountain. A place full of wonders and home to the miraculous Grail, it was invisible to all but a chosen few. It was also a place heavy with sorrow because its king, Anfortas, lay gravely wounded by a poisoned lance. Even the Grail's great power could not fully heal the king's pain. Over time, the king's spirit had withered, and so had his kingdom. The only hope for a cure was a Prophecy: that a knight on a true quest, destined to be Wild Grail Mountain's next king, would find the hidden castle and ask a question of true compassion. This would break the curse and heal both king and the kingdom. Nobody knew who the knight might be, but they hoped one day he would come.

One winter's day months later, a knight in fine red armour rode by on a chestnut-red horse and greeted me, grinning. It was Parzival! He told me everything: he had reached Camelot and won the red armour in his first knightly joust. Despite his ragged clothes, King Arthur's court had welcomed him, and a grey-haired knight there had given him a second piece of advice: not to ask too many questions, so that



nobody could call him foolish. Later, he had rescued a queen named Condwiramurs and they had fallen in love. And then – wonder of wonders – he told me he had happened upon the castle on Wild Grail Mountain! It had chosen to reveal itself to him. He had seen the king's enchanted wound and the Grail's power. Could that mean Parzival – my cousin – was the Chosen One the kingdom so longed for? But as he spoke, my hopes were dashed. He had heeded the grey-haired knight's advice, not that of his mother, or his own heart and had failed to ask the question and therefore break the curse. I was angry: Wild Grail Mountain was my home now and Parzival's failure meant the curse was still destroying it! I told him to leave my sight and never return.

For four long years I wandered, living alone in a cave on Wild Grail Mountain, where Cundrie, a powerful sorceress, took pity on me and brought me food. Spring flowers were blooming when a familiar voice called out to me once again. Parzival! My face was lined with sorrow, but he recognised me. Since we last met, he had become a famous knight, but his failure to ask the right question still pained him. In vain he had searched once again for Wild Grail Castle, which had now hidden itself from him. My anger faded as I told him he was almost there! Cundrie the sorceress always came to me from the castle. By following her footprints, he might still find the king again, ask the question, and correct his mistake.



In the bright hall, Sigune turned to face Parzival.

"And now, here you are, cousin! Word reached me that the Old King's wound is healed, and the Grail had chosen you as king! How?" she asked. A deep silence settled over the crowd as Parzival spoke.

"I followed the sorceress' footprints, but still no castle appeared. Winter fell over the land but I walked on and on until a hermit took me in and revealed miraculous

news. He was brother to the wounded king – but also to my mother, and yours! With new hope I set out again and fought a black-and-white armoured knight – the first I could not defeat. We called a truce and talked. His name was Feirefiz and his mother was an African queen. We wept for joy to learn that we had the same father, so we were half-brothers! We found King Arthur's camp just as the sorceress found me and brought us here. King Anfortas – my uncle – still suffered from his enchanted wound, the result of a mistake he made long ago. But cousin, this time I finally knew the right question. It seemed too simple, but I listened to my heart and asked: 'what is wrong?' A question of True Compassion. It fulfilled the prophecy, broke the curse and healed the old king. Joy returned to Wild Grail Mountain, and I happily accepted the crown. Seeing you, I am happier still!"

The hall erupted into cheers, and the cousins embraced and talked all night, while the Grail shone with magic light, ready for its power to be called upon again one day.





QUEEN LIBUŠE

A tale from the Czech Republic

This well-loved legend, written down in medieval times, tells how a queen with magical powers is able to predict the future – she sees a vision of a ‘city whose future glory will touch the stars’. That city became Prague, the capital of Bohemia, and today the Czech capital. Unlike ancient stories of gods, this legend is what some call a ‘national myth’ – a story designed to inspire people to feel proud of their country.

When Krok, king of the Czech lands, moved his court from the forests of Budec to the high castle of Vysehrad above the Vltava river, he brought his three daughters with him. Kazi, the eldest, was a healer and Teta, the next eldest was a high priestess. But it was Libuše, the youngest, who inherited the gifts of wisdom and prophecy from her father. So, when Krok died, it was Libuše who all the people chose to crown as their rightful queen. Her brilliant mind knew every detail of



the law, and each day she passed judgements that were fair and kind, from her stone throne under the branches of a spreading lime tree that grew inside the castle.

But, one morning, everything changed. Two farmers burst into the throne room, glaring at each other with hatred.

“His family think they own the hedgerow between our fields, but I look after it – it’s mine!” cried the younger.

At that, the older farmer snarled back, “Your sort have no business near my hedgerow – everyone knows it’s mine!”

The two farmers demanded that Queen Libuše solve their dispute at once. So, after hearing both of their stories, Libuše talked with her advisors on one side of her throne, and a jury of local people on the other. But when she found in favour of the younger farmer, the older turned bright red, spat on the floor and cursed her.

“I would expect no better judgement from a woman! All of you have long hair but short wits! It is a disgrace that good strong men like me should suffer your stupidity. You need a husband to keep you in line!”

The throne room fell silent. Queen Libuše stood up from her throne, tossed her long dark hair, and looked around the room.

“You are right that I am a woman,” she said, with an icy stare. “The person who you and all the people of this land chose as your rightful queen, for I judge fairly and can see the future, as my father could. But because I am not harsh you think I have no wits! As your queen, I am your servant, and must do as you wish. If you would rather be ruled by your vision of ‘a man’ then I challenge you: choose me a husband! He will be your king.”



But make sure you choose wisely – or your life will be harder than you know, and I will not be able to save you. You have one day to decide. I will spend tonight with my sisters."

Libuše swept out of the room, white robes flowing behind her, leaving the men staring after her, mouths open in surprise, eyes wide with fear of choosing wrongly. None slept that night. Meanwhile, far away, Libuše and her sisters talked deep into the night ... and came up with a plan.

At dawn, when Queen Libuše returned, the men stood before her in silence.

"Well? You want a king, but you are afraid to choose. But I am wise: I have seen a vision of a king who is just, not cruel. Ask and I will tell you how to find him."

The gathered people bowed their heads in shame. "Please! Tell us!" they implored.

"Very well." Eyes glittering, Libuše spoke. "Ride across the forest to a place called Stadice by the Belina river. There, you will find a ploughman, driving a pair of oxen, one with a white head and black body, the other with a black head and white body. When he sits to eat at an iron table, you will know that man is Premysl. He will be my husband, and your future king."

The room erupted in whispers. A common ploughman, as king? But none argued.

"My horse, who shares my visions, will lead you there."

The men obeyed. Libuše's horse galloped before them, as if it already knew the way. When they reached the spot, they found Premysl – a tall man with firm hands and kind eyes. They placed a crown on his head, a jewelled robe on his shoulders and new shoes on his feet, but he insisted on keeping his peasant's sandals.

"May we all remember that fortune strikes for both better and worse. To marry the queen of wisdom is my good fortune – but these sandals will remind me where I came from."

Back in Vysehrad, when Queen Libuše smiled at Premysl, took his hand and said 'Husband!', everyone knew that she had tricked them. She had chosen him and had fallen in love with him long before she became Queen ... but nobody minded. From that day on, they ruled together.



QUEEN LIBUŠE

That year, the harvest was rich and plentiful. From the highest point of the castle, the King and Queen and their most trusted advisors looked out across the fields, while flocks of birds swooped towards the forest beyond. Suddenly Queen Libuše stepped forward, reached into the air, and stood still as a stone statue. Her eyes glowed royal purple, and later people said she was surrounded by light. In a clear high voice, she spoke a prophecy.

"I see a great city whose future glory will touch the stars." She pointed. "There! In the forest encircled by the Vltava river, between the valley and the rocky hills. Go to that exact spot and build a castle: that place will be called Praha. As people bow their heads before a low doorway, the people who enter Praha will bow their heads in awe, and it shall be renowned across the world."

The men obeyed and that is how the beautiful city of Prague – still encircled by the Vltava River – was built.




NUT, RA AND THE DAYS OF THE YEAR

A tale from Egypt

A wonderful thing about mythical stories is that characters can exist who are not just gods of natural phenomena – like the sea, or the sky – but actually ARE those things at the same time. Nut is an Ancient Egyptian goddess of the sky. She is clever and powerful; the mother of the (much more familiar) gods Osiris, Horus and Set; but she is also the beautiful, star-studded sky itself.

Long ago, the sky was a goddess called Nut, and the earth was a god called Geb. Nut and Geb loved each other so much that they lay with their great arms entwined all the time. This meant everything between the sky and the earth was stuck – there was no day and no night, rivers could not flow, and nothing could grow. The only being who could move was Shu, the father god of wind, whose body was the air itself.



"Nut! Geb! Let go of each other and make space for the day, the night, and the world!" Shu ordered. When they ignored him, he whispered airy words into their ears instead to persuade them to separate. But Nut and Geb just held on to each other more tightly.

"I have no choice then," said Shu. "I will have to push them apart."

Between Nut and Geb there was the space the width of one hair.

As air, Shu blew himself into that tiny space and began to push. Geb and Nut clung tightly to each other, but Shu's arms were strong. He lifted Nut up above his head so that her body encircled the heavens. Everything that had been stuck between Geb and Nut was released. By day, the sun god Ra paddled his sun-boat across Nut's sky-body, and every night, the stars sparkled across her, front and back. The great long river Nile flowed across the earth, and its water evaporated through the air into the sky, linking Nut and Geb, sky and earth, forever.

Many ages passed, and the world grew bright and beautiful between the sky and the earth. Geb rested, but Nut could not. She was going to have a baby – in fact, she was going to have five! Everyone was happy about it – except Ra.



"Nut is a powerful goddess: she is sure to have children who are even more powerful. I am the Sun god which means I am the best god, the highest and most important. No baby but mine should be born here!" he declared.

Ra seethed and sulked in his sky boat high above his pyramids, temples and worshippers, until one night, he hatched a plan. He decided to cast a spell on Nut, so she would not be able to give birth to her babies, however long she carried them in her womb. That night, while the moon god Khonsu was full and high, Ra spoke:

Powers above, powers below, hear my curse!

The Goddess Nut may not give birth

On any night or any day

Across the year, inside they'll stay!

In these ancient times, each month had 30 days, so each year had 360. As the days passed, Nut's belly got bigger and bigger. The time came for her babies to be born, but she could not give birth, however hard she tried. Ra's curse had worked. Finally, Nut shouted down from the sky.

"Enough! I must find a way to stop Ra's curse, so my babies can be born!"

Her shout echoed loud and far, until it reached Thoth, the god of wisdom, who secretly loved Nut. He came to her straight away.

"Thoth! Help me!" cried Nut. "Ra says I cannot give birth on any day of the year, but I am cleverer than him and know a way to trick him. For my plan to work, I need someone who is good at board games. And who better than you Thoth, god of wisdom?"



NUT, RA AND THE DAYS OF THE YEAR

Thoth bowed, "I accept any task set by you, dear Nut."

"Good! Go and challenge Khonsu, the Moon god, to a game of draughts. You will win. Each time he loses three games, he must give you one night of moonlight. When he has lost fifteen games, come back to me."

Thoth bowed, gathered up his golden gaming board, and flew to meet Khonsu just as he was setting for the night, over the horizon. When Thoth suggested they play, the moon god was delighted and agreed to the terms.

"Ha, what fun! I love games, and I have light enough to lose a round or two," he scoffed.

The two of them sat down at the golden board and counted out the pieces. Thoth let Khonsu win the first few games, but when he started to win, he did not stop. He won fifteen games, and the Moon lost five days of light.

"You have done well, friend," Nut smiled. She used the moonlight Thoth had won to make five extra days, one for each birth.

"You said I could not give birth on any day or night of the year, but you never said anything about extra days," laughed Nut. Ra was angry Nut had tricked him and he shouted and raged.

Nut gave birth to three sons, named Osiris, Horus and Set; and two daughters named Isis and Nephtys. As soon as they were born, she gathered them in her arms, which were also wings, and made them a promise: "You will be great and famous, known and remembered for thousands of years."

The promise came true: Nut's children went on to have many, many adventures of their own.





STORY JUMP OUT

An Afro-Caribbean tale

Stories help us understand the world: their colourful characters and settings can show us how to solve problems, make choices, and think in new ways. In many Afro-Caribbean cultures, the king of stories – and mischief – is the trickster Anansi, a mythical spider-person. This tale is a combination of two famous Anansi tales about how stories, and wisdom, came into the world.

Long ago, all the stories, wishes, dreams and wise sayings in the world belonged to King Tiger, who kept them shut up in a huge chest, high up on the mountain. Down in the forest below, Anansi heard talk of the story chest, and decided to visit the mountain.

"Life is dull down here – if the stories were mine, just think how much better it would be. I would be the king of stories. People would love me!"

Anansi threw a silken spider-thread. The wind caught it and carried it up past the treetops, fastening onto the mountaintop. Anansi used the thread to pull himself up the mountain and scuttled over to where King Tiger lay asleep in the sun.

"Tiger, Tiger," called Anansi. "I have heard that you possess a chest full of all the stories in the world! I wish to have it, to share with all the people. Life would be more interesting for everybody."

King Tiger opened one eye.

"This chest is very valuable. Why should I give it to you? You spend all day lying around making mischief, and you probably want to keep the stories for yourself. If you want it, you will have to pay!"

"What is your price?" asked Anansi.

"Too high for you! To get the chest you must capture Python and bring her to me. She is big and strong while you are small and lazy. You are bound to fail," answered Tiger and closed his eyes again.

Anansi threw his web back down to the forest and climbed down, thinking hard. By the time his feet touched the forest floor, he had had an idea. He cut a long stick and went to the deep green glade where he knew Python lived in a hollow tree. When he arrived, he spoke loudly, as if he were arguing with someone.

"Do not disrespect Python in that way! She is far longer than this stick. I'll prove it!"

Python heard the noise and slithered out. "Say what, Anansi?"

"Oh, great Python!" cried Anansi, "I spoke in your honour! My wife says you are so scrawny, you are shorter than this stick. I know she's wrong, but to prove it, would you agree to measure yourself against it?"



STORY JUMP OUT

"Anything for some peace and quiet," replied Python.

Anansi laid the stick on the forest floor, and Python straightened her long body out against it. Quick-quick, Anansi spun a strong thread and tied Python tightly against the stick so she could not escape.

"Easy!" Laughing, Anansi threw his thread back up to the mountain, where King Tiger was waiting. "I have Python! Now, give me the chest of stories!"

Tiger took Python in his paw. "Your success surprises me, Anansi. But Python is only part of the price. If you really want the chest, bring me ... the fire-stinging Hornets' nest!"

Anansi scuttled back down to the forest on his thread. As before, an idea popped into his head as he landed on the ground. He filled a calabash with water and strapped a round-bellied gourd to his back that was the same shape as a hornet's nest. He climbed up the tree where the nest hung, calling out, "Monsoon! The rains have come. I must save the hornets!" He splashed the water over himself and the nest.

Hornets swarmed out of the wet nest, buzzing in panic.

"We hate the rain! Where should we go?" they cried.

Anansi was ready. He opened the lid of the gourd, and said "Try this new nest, it is dry and waterproof. You will be safe here!"

One by one, the hornets buzzed into the gourd. When the last one was safely in, Anansi shut the lid and once again threw his silken thread up to the mountain. This time, King Tiger was waiting.

"A mighty python, AND a swarm of hornets. Impressive. But the price is still too low. Now, bring me a forest spirit, which no eye can see. Impossible for you." Tiger closed his eyes again, smiling to himself.

Anansi slid back down his silken thread, thinking hard. He passed the branches of a tall silk cotton tree. "Aha! Silk cotton trees are spirit trees!"



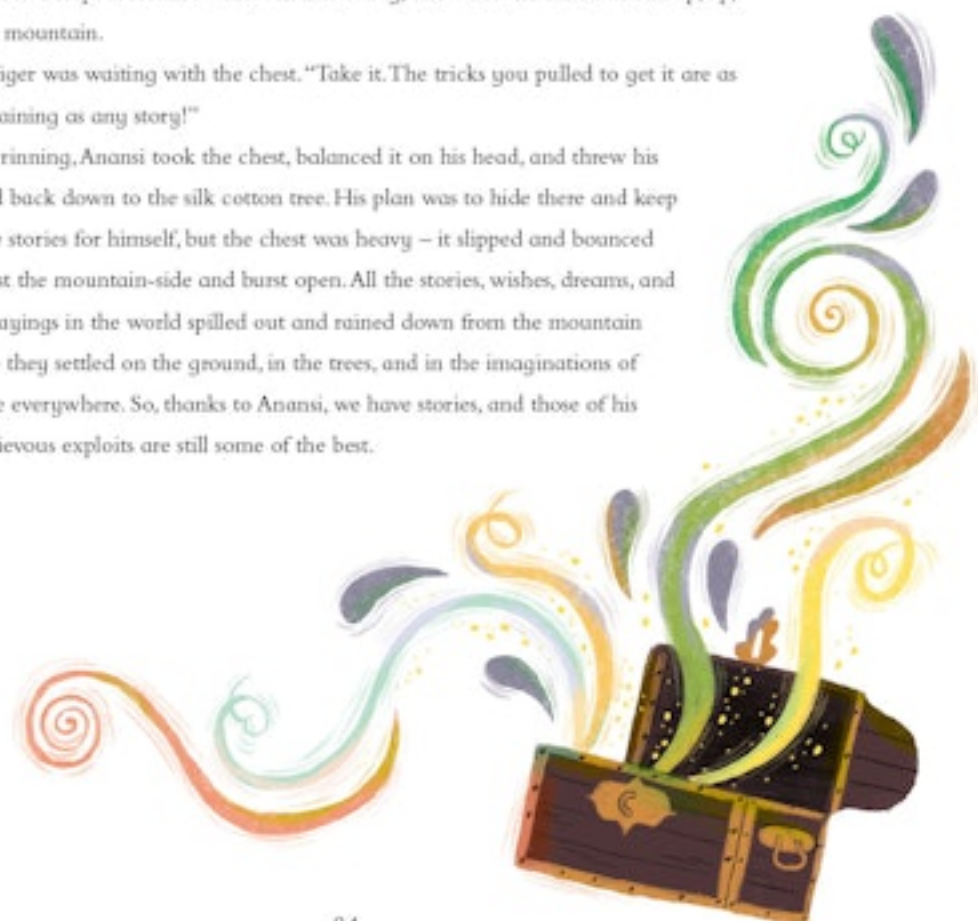
Anansi got busy. He cut leaves, bark and fluffy silk cotton, and fashioned them into a long-haired doll. Then he covered the doll with sticky sap from the tree's green buds and waited until twilight. Just before the moon rose, he heard a tinkling sound – voices! Spirits! Surrounding the doll, the spirits greeted it happily.

"Sister spirit! Our faces are invisible to the creatures here – but we see you! You look like us. Come join us! We embrace you!"

But as soon as they did, the sticky sap glued their arms to the doll, just as Anansi had hoped. He threw the doll into a bag, and threw his silken thread up, up, to the mountain.

Tiger was waiting with the chest. "Take it. The tricks you pulled to get it are as entertaining as any story!"

Grinning, Anansi took the chest, balanced it on his head, and threw his thread back down to the silk cotton tree. His plan was to hide there and keep all the stories for himself, but the chest was heavy – it slipped and bounced against the mountain-side and burst open. All the stories, wishes, dreams, and wise sayings in the world spilled out and rained down from the mountain where they settled on the ground, in the trees, and in the imaginations of people everywhere. So, thanks to Anansi, we have stories, and those of his mischievous exploits are still some of the best.



THE MOON PRINCESS

A tale from China

What do you see when you look up at the surface of the moon? In some countries, people describe the shape of a person – a man-in-the-moon. But in others, including China, the same shape is seen as a rabbit. In some stories, that rabbit has a companion: the lady Chang-e, who rose up to the moon after making a horrible mistake, and whose presence there has inspired the imaginations of poets, artists, and astronauts all over the world.

As far as Chang-e could see, the moon was nothing but a grey and white desert. The dusty ground was hard and cold underneath her bare feet, and her footsteps were the only sound. Shivering, she wrapped her silver robes tight around her body, and walked until she came to the hilly edge of a crater, where she stopped, sat down, and began to cry. Her fat tears soaked into the dry ground.

"I'm so tired, and so alone," she said to herself. "I'll just close my eyes for a second..."



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Chang-e must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes, she wasn't alone anymore. There was sound – a rhythmic pounding – and a sliver of bright green peeked out from behind the small hill before her. As she got closer, she saw a huge mortar bowl, carved from solid Jade. The pounding was coming from a pestle, carved from the same stone, worked by the paws of a large white rabbit. As she rounded the hill, the rabbit turned to look at her.

"Ah! You must be Chang-e! What took you so long?"

Bewildered, Chang-e answered. "I thought I was alone. How do you know me?"

"I've been expecting you! By orders of the Jade Emperor of Heaven, it is my honour to pound the eternal-life potion in this pestle and mortar, and to be your companion, Moon Princess!"

"Me? I am no princess, just a person, banished to this grey place, because of a terrible mistake."

"What mistake?" asked the rabbit. Chang-e told him everything.



Once I was a handmaiden in the Jade Palace of the Emperor of Heaven – a magnificent city carved from a mountain of solid jade stone, where everyone lives forever. I worked and laughed with my friends in gardens of jewelled flowers and magic peaches. But one day, I dropped a priceless vase. It smashed and I was banished. In the blink of an eye, I found myself in another palace – not in heaven, but on Earth. Nobody knew where I had come from, but everyone was kind. I lived there, made friends, and did my best. Then one day, I noticed people cheering to a fanfare of mouth organs, trumpets and drums.

"Hou Yi is here! The great Hou Yi is here!"



Everyone knew who Hou Yi was, except me. He was a hero: the great archer, who saved the world from the ten Sun Brothers. His reward, they said, was a pearl of immortality! Whoever swallows it, will live forever in the Jade Palace.

Home! I thought. Then the crowds parted. There he was – Hou Yi – carrying a crystal box with the pearl inside, on his way to give it to the Emperor as a gift. He saw me, too. We fell in love instantly and forgot about everything, except that we wanted to be together forever. We got married that afternoon, and soon I was travelling across the plains, to his house – my new home. The pearl of immortality came back with us. It was so beautiful he put it on display.

"I don't need to live forever, you are all I need," we told each other.

For a while, I completely forgot about the pearl – I forgot that it came from the home I could never go back to. But one day, I remembered, and so I told my husband everything.

"Heaven is your home, but we must be together! I will travel the world to find a deed worthy of another pearl!" he vowed.

Then he was gone. I was lonely without him. I started to walk in my sleep – each night took me a footstep closer to where the pearl was. One morning, I woke up, and it was in my hand. And then – oh I don't even know how – I'd swallowed it! My body became lighter and I started to float – up past the house. Everyone knew that it was because I had 'stolen' the pearl. My husband came home just in time to see me float above the clouds, but he could not follow, because no other pearl was to be found. He had returned to give it to me. If only I had waited, perhaps I would be back home, in the Jade Palace, and not here in this wilderness!



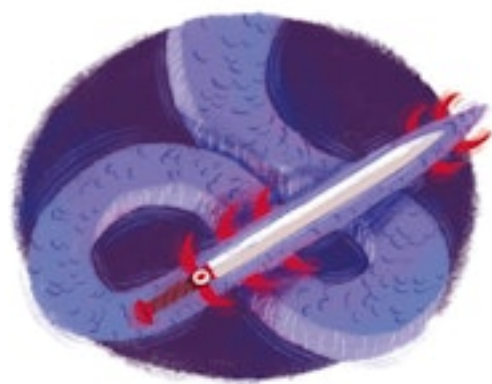
The rabbit blinked as Chang-e finished her story. "Quite a tale!" he said. "Mine is much simpler. I was with my friends in the forest, when a thin old man came to sit with us. He needed food – but there was none to be found. So, I offered him my own body – which was when the old man revealed that he was really the Jade Emperor. His reward for my kindness was a new job: to live on the moon, pounding the potion of eternal life, and to be a companion to the new Moon Princess."

"You are here as a reward?" cried Chang-e.

"It's an honour to be here. And if you continue to tell me stories like the one you just told me, the time will pass quite nicely, I think."

So, from that day on, Chang-e became princess of the moon, and the Rabbit kept her company. Some say that the first time Chang-e smiled, was the first time the people of the earth saw the moon shine in the sky, full and round. And when they looked up, what did they see? The outline of a white rabbit, pounding a pestle and mortar! The outline is still there, and so, perhaps, are they.





THE STORM GOD AND THE SERPENT

A tale from Japan

Said to have been stirred up from beneath the sea by the gods Izanami and Izangi, the islands of Japan are full of magnificent sights. But did you know there are three mythical treasures so precious that the only person allowed to see them is Japan's Emperor? One is a sacred mirror, another a world-saving jewel. But this story is about the third treasure: a great sword which was first found by Susanoo, the brave (but sometimes bad-tempered!) Storm God.

Up in the heavenly realm of Takamagahara, Susanoo, the god of storms, was known to have a short temper – he always acted before thinking, and was jealous of his elder sister, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. One day, Susanoo decided to play some pranks on his sister. But Amaterasu didn't find them funny at all: in fact, she was so furious that she threw Susanoo down to Earth, where he landed by the wide, rushing Hii river.

THE STORM GOD AND THE SERPENT

The world was newly made; there were islands full of majestic mountains, fertile forests and blossoming flowers that shone like jewels. Susanoo, however, was too angry to see the beauty.

"This place is boring! It's empty, with nothing to do, and nobody to talk to," he complained, throwing a rock into the river. But then his eyes opened wide with surprise. Bobbing down the river towards him was a single chopstick! "People eat with chopsticks so perhaps this world isn't empty after all. There must be someone upriver! I'll go and find out."

Susanoo was big and strong, so it didn't take him long to walk up the riverbank to the mountains above. At the mountain peak, by the source of the river, two scraggy trees stooped over a smaller tree covered in pale pink blossom.

"Huh, nothing here either," Susanoo muttered. But then he heard sobbing coming from the trees. He looked closer: they were not trees at all, but an old man and an old woman. They were stooped over a young girl by a house carved into the mountain rock. Fat tears dripped from all their faces and slid into the stream.

Susanoo was curious. Still holding the chopstick, he marched over and abruptly asked, "Who are you, and why are you crying?"

The Old Man looked up with sad eyes. "Sir", he said, "we are Earth guardians, and this is our daughter, Kushinada. Just as that chopstick you found was drowning in the river, we are drowning in grief. Each year, a giant serpent, the Orochi, rises from the river and carries off one of our daughters. Once we had eight, now we only have one, and soon it will take her too!"

Susanoo couldn't help himself – his face broke into a grin. A giant serpent? What fun! he thought. "Ah well, today is your lucky day! I will defeat this Orochi!"

"Impossible!" cried the Old Man. "The Orochi is no ordinary serpent. It has eight fearsome heads and eight tails. Its body is so long it covers eight mountains and eight valleys, and its skin is as hard as mountain rock. It cannot be defeated!"

THE STORM GOD AND THE SERPENT

Susanoo's laugh rang out over the mountain. "Hah! Well, it hasn't met me yet! I am Susanoo, god of storms, younger brother of the goddess of the Sun. My wits are sharp, and my sword is unbreakable.

I will lure the Orochi with a trick, then I will cut off all eight heads and all eight tails. Now, what will you give me if I defeat the Orochi?"

The Old Man, the Old Woman and Kushinada bowed down low, and replied: "If you can defeat the Orochi and save us, we will give you anything!"

"Very well," said Susanoo. He said a magic word, and transformed Kushinada into a jewelled pearl comb. He stuck the comb into his long black hair. "Your daughter will be safe with me," he said. "Now, this is what you must do. Take water from your river, rice from your fields and the skins of the fruits from your trees. Brew them together eight times into a potion strong enough to intoxicate the Orochi. Then, take wood from your forests and make eight round containers. Float them along the river in front of your house and fill each one with the potion. Then hide yourselves. I will stand on the roof above the river, so this beautiful comb and I will be reflected in each container's liquid. The Orochi will be fooled into drinking the potion, thinking it is devouring us. Now, go!"

The Old Man and Old Woman did everything Susanoo asked. Susanoo, perched on the roof, did not have to wait long. Suddenly, the sky darkened, rain began to fall, and the rushing blue river turned white with boiling, bubbling whirlpools. Then, the Orochi rose, carrying whole pine trees and boulders on its huge back, eight heads scouring the land like searchlights. Its eight tails crashed down, sending tsunamis to drown the fields along the river. Its eight mouths opened and the air filled with screams, shrieks and roars. Slowly the Orochi surged up the river towards its prey: the Earth guardians' eighth daughter. The Old Man and Old Woman gasped in fear from their hiding place, but Susanoo's eyes gleamed with excitement.



When the Orochi reached the eight floating containers, each head saw the reflection of the shining comb, and the face of Susanoo. As it dived forwards to devour them, the Orochi's eight tongues slurped up the strong liquid. Each head rolled and lolled, the eyelids closing over ruby-red eyes. The great monster fell sound asleep. Susanoo jumped down and drew his sword.

"Orochi! You have ruled this land long enough! You are no match for me!" he shouted. Slash! Down came the sword and sliced off each head. Susanoo ran round to the tails and did the same ... but as he did so, his sword hit something hard.

"My unbreakable sword is broken! How can this be?" Susanoo cried. He looked closer. One of the tails glowed. Another sword! Longer and finer and glowing with a light of its own. Susanoo was stunned into silence.

Then the sword spoke: "My name is Kusanagi. My blade can cut through iron, stone and reality itself. I may never be seen, except by the gods. Take me home."

Susanoo obeyed. He raced up to Takamagahara and knelt before his elder sister. "I have discovered a great treasure while on Earth. Now, I present it to you."

Amaterasu took the sword. Such was its brilliance, she forgave him in an instant.

"Brother, you have done well. What would you have me do for you?"

Susanoo reached into his hair, said a magic word, and transformed the pearl comb back into the princess Kushinada.

"Sister, meet the Earth guardian princess in whose name I slew the Orochi. Let me live on Earth with her and her family. I will protect the land and its people."

"Yes, Brother," Amaterasu agreed. Susanoo returned to Earth and settled with Kushinada on Japan's largest island, in a beautiful place he named Izumo.





SOURCES



The First Words

A much longer and more complicated version of this story can be found in the *Popol Vuh*, (the sacred text of the Quiché Maya people) but it has been retold many times for different audiences.

Shed Skins

Some of my favourite retellings of this story appear in Geraldine McCaughrean's *Golden Myths and Legends of the World* (1999) and Arthur Cotterell's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends* (1989), from which I developed my own live performance (HIDE, 2023).

Māui Slows the Sun

Although the Māori version of this story (in which Māui enlists the help of his brothers) is possibly better-known, I chose to work with a Hawaiian version found in Westervelt's *Legends of Mā-ūi* (1910) in which Māui's female relatives play leading roles.

Scathach's School for Heroes

This episode is based on a Scottish version of a popular fragment of Irish myth, found in Otta Swire's *Skye: The Island and its Legends* (1961) and an oral retelling by Clare Murphy. Other details came from Caldecott's *Women in Celtic Myth* (1992), Retzlaff's *Women of Mythology* (1999) and Lady Gregory's *Red Branch* (1907).

Dionysus and the Pirates

My retelling is based primarily on a praise poem to the god Dionysus, which appears as 'Hymn to Dionysos' in Penguin Classics' edition *The Homeric Hymns* (2003).

Sosruko and the Giant

Many adventures of the hero Sosruko, including a few versions of this one, appear in Colarusso's *Nart Sagas* (2016), but stories with similar plots (but sometimes different heroes) exist in Georgian myth too.

The Golden Chain

In Yoruba myth and sacred texts, this story appears in many forms, using different character names and orders of events. Inspiration for this highly visual, simplified version comes from Harold Courlander's *Treasury of African Folklore* (1996), Penelope Farmer's *Beginnings* (1978), and various live retellings.

Perun's Stolen Cattle

My interpretation is woven from various sources (including *The Slavic Myths* (Charney + Slapšak 2023) and *Forests of the Vampire* (1999)) that describe the two opposing deities Perun and Veles, whose conflict is said to be responsible for the cycles of seasons.

Fenrir Wolf and the Magic Ribbon

The oldest written accounts of this story appear in the Old Norse poem *Völuspá* and the *Prose Edda*. In both sources, *gleipnir* (which binds Fenrir) is described as a 'fetter' (*festr*) but to emphasise its unexpected strength and magic powers, I've called it a 'ribbon'.

The Storm God and the Serpent

Retelling a popular episode from Japanese mythology, this story appears in both of Japan's major myth texts, *Kōjiki* and *Nihon Shōki*.

Sri and the Ocean of Milk

This story appears in many ancient Indian texts including *Skanda Purana* (Book 2 section 9) and is the third story in *Dashavatar* – the epic story of ten incarnations of the god Vishnu. I also consulted Devdutt Pattanaik's *Indian Mythology* (2003) and was inspired by performances by Emily Hennessey and Vaishali Raithatha.

Ilmatar and the Golden Eggs

This is the first story in the Finnish myth collection *Kalevala*; a summary can be found in Penelope Farmer's *Beginnings* (1978). My retelling is also indebted to oral performances by Sarah Liisa Wilkinson, the Ilmatar statue in Finland's capital city Helsinki, and the work of visual artist Tatiana Bergelt.

Roland's Breach

A recent English translation of this French epic poem appears in *The Song of Roland and Other Poems of Charlemagne* (Oxford World's Classics:2016). An interesting radio discussion of the poem can currently be found on BBC Sounds (*In Our Time*, 4/11/21).

The King of Wild Grail Castle

Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* is available in many editions including an abridged version for children by Katherine Paterson (2000). I also consulted writings about the work by Hugh Sacker (1963) and John Wulsin (2006), plus oral retellings by mythologist Martin Shaw.

Queen Libuše

This 'national myth' appears in Alois Jirásek's *Legends of Old Bohemia* (1963), but was first written down 900 years ago in Latin: a retelling of existing local myths intended to prove the validity of Czech rule in the area then called Bohemia (*Czech Reader*: 2010).

Nut, Ra and the Days of the Year

My dramatised account contains details found in S.T. Hollis' *Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut* (1987), Barbara Lezko's *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (1999), Leon Ashworth's *Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (2003), among others. Thanks also to the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum website, and oral performances by Sarah Liisa Wilkinson.

Story Jump Out

Jamaican versions of this originally Asante story (in which the character 'Tiger' replaces the god Nyame) include those in Philip Sherlock's *Anansi the Spiderman* (1954) and Brian Gleeson's *Anansi* (1992), but I also drew from my own experience of telling both versions of the story, and works by Harold Courlander (1996) and Kwesi Yankah (1983).

The Moon Princess

My retelling of this well-known story, often considered the origin of the Chinese mid-autumn festival, is written from the perspective of Chang'e herself. It combines details from many versions, which are helpfully summarised in Lihui Yang and Deming An's *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (2005).