

# The minotaur and the labyrinth

When Queen Pasiphae of Crete gave birth, the midwife's scream of horror echoed all around the palace. Even days later, she couldn't bring herself to describe what she'd seen. "It wasn't human," was the only thing she would say.

The queen herself stayed in her rooms and would speak to nobody. King Minos took charge. The only person he allowed into the nursery was a strong male servant. Not even Ariadne, his own daughter, was permitted to visit.

Ariadne didn't dare disobey her father, but she burned with curiosity. Over the weeks following the birth, she heard all kinds of strange noises coming from the nursery — snorts, snarls and thundering footsteps — and they didn't sound as if they came from a baby.

As the months went by, the thumps and growls grew louder, and on more than one occasion the servant staggered from the room bleeding as though he'd been gored by a bull. "Please tell me what's in there,"

Ariadne begged him.

"Your father said he'd kill me if I said a word," the man replied.

"He probably meant it too," thought Ariadne. Her father was a ruthless man. She didn't press the servant any further. At any rate, his face had told her all she needed to know. It was no child in that room; it was a monster.

Then one day, she heard a terrible commotion, ending in a blood-curdling scream, and the servant didn't come out of the nursery at all. The monster had eaten him alive.

That afternoon, the king went to see Daedalus, his chief inventor. "I need you to create a place where I can hide a minotaur," he said.

"A mino-what?" asked Daedalus.

"Never you mind," snapped the king. "A creature that must never escape. Build me a prison to contain it!"

Daedalus set to work immediately, and came up with a brilliant design for a maze of tunnels beneath the palace. Under his close supervision, a team of builders began work on it right away.

The maze was so complicated that nobody who entered it would ever be able to find their way out. In fact, when one of the workmen ventured back into the tunnels

Daedalus was famous for inventing all kinds of wonderful things, from the very first sails on ships to a musical floor for Ariadne to dance on when she was a little girl.



to pick up a chisel he'd left behind, he was never seen again.

Daedalus called his maze the labyrinth. With the help of the king's army, the minotaur was driven into it, and the huge iron door at the entrance was bolted shut. For the first few days, the creature could be heard snorting angrily and ramming the door. But it soon wandered off into the labyrinth. The noise grew less and less distinct until nothing could be heard but the occasional faint bellow.

"I suppose at least we're safe now," Ariadne said to her father.

"Yes, we are," said the king. He flashed her a dark look. "But I've been thinking – maybe my monstrous prisoner could be more useful than I thought..." He told her he had written a letter to his enemies in Athens demanding that they send seven young men and seven young women to be fed to the minotaur. If they refused to sacrifice these few, he had threatened to slaughter everyone in the city. "That should keep them in check," he gloated.

Ariadne felt sick. "How can you be my father?" she said in disgust. "You're more of a monster than the one you've locked up." But the king just laughed and waved her away.

A few days later, the fourteen terrified victims arrived. They were pushed into the labyrinth with the king looking on. "There's a way out on the other side," he lied cruelly. "If you find your way through, you may go home."

The poor prisoners ran as fast as they could into the gloom. During the next few weeks, their cries were heard echoing over the island as the minotaur found and devoured every last one of them.

The following year, King Minos demanded another fourteen victims, and again the third year running. Ariadne watched as they were led in to the palace, wishing there was something she could do to save them.

As the prisoners trudged past, one of them caught her father's eye. "Stop!" he ordered, staring closely at the man. "Aren't you Theseus, Prince of Athens?"

"That's right," Theseus replied coolly. "I've come to slay the minotaur."

"Oh really?" the king mocked. "Then we will allow the beast a decent last meal before you slay it. You can face him alone tomorrow." He had Theseus flung into jail overnight, while the other prisoners were pushed into the labyrinth there and then.

In desperation, Ariadne went to see Daedalus. "You invented the labyrinth," she said, "which makes you partly responsible. You have to help me put a stop to this."

Old Daedalus had known Ariadne all her life, and her words filled him with shame. "What do you need me to do?" he asked.

"Tell me how the last prisoner can find his way out of the labyrinth," said Ariadne. "He means to slay the monster, and I think he may well live to tell the tale."

Daedalus thought for a moment. Then he went into his workshop and brought out a large ball of thin, golden thread. "Tell him to unwind this as he goes along," he said. "Then he can follow the thread to find his way out of the labyrinth."

Ariadne thanked him and hurried away.

She found Theseus sitting calmly in his prison cell. He looked up as she slipped in through the door, and the determination in his eyes made her heart leap with hope. "I've brought this to help you," she said. She handed him the ball of thread and told him what to do. "I'll pray to the gods that you succeed."

"Thank you," said Theseus. "It seems not everyone in this kingdom is a monster."

Ariadne turned to go, but then she paused. "I can't stay here after what my father has done," she said. "When you come out of the labyrinth tomorrow, I'll be waiting. Can I escape with you?"

"Certainly," said Theseus.

The next day, Theseus entered the labyrinth. He strode into the gloom, unwinding the ball of thread as he went. The tunnels seemed to go on forever, twisting and turning this way and that. Before long he had completely lost his sense of direction.

Impatient to confront the minotaur, Theseus stopped every few hundred paces and shouted, "Monster, are you there?" He listened carefully for a reply, but all he heard was his own voice echoing eerily around the tunnels.

The tenth time he shouted, a fearful voice called back, "Theseus, is that you?" Out of the darkness crept the thirteen prisoners who had been sent into the labyrinth the night before.

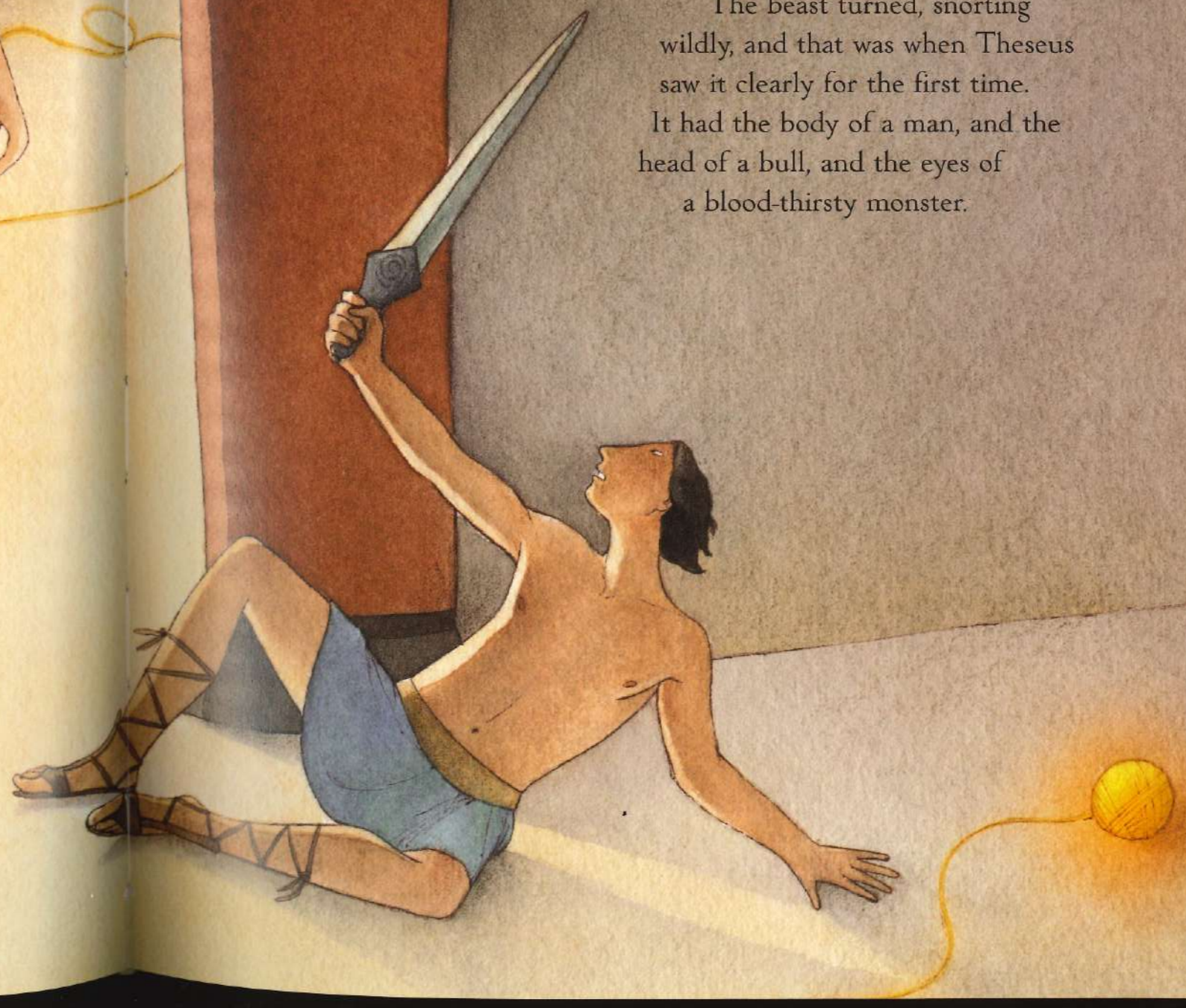
Before Theseus had time to reply, a ferocious bellow filled the air. Something was approaching from behind. The prisoners fled, and Theseus turned to face the minotaur.



All he saw was a pair of eyes  
burning red in the darkness, and then  
suddenly the minotaur was upon him.  
It seemed to fill the entire tunnel as it  
charged – a hulking mass with two massive,  
sharp horns heading right for him..

He dived clear just in time, landing  
in a tumbled heap on the ground.

The beast turned, snorting  
wildly, and that was when Theseus  
saw it clearly for the first time.  
It had the body of a man, and the  
head of a bull, and the eyes of  
a blood-thirsty monster.



No sooner had he scrambled to his feet than the minotaur was upon him again. Theseus swung his sword but it glanced off one of the beast's horns. The horn drove into his arm, slashing it open.

Gasping with pain, Theseus thrust his blade again as the minotaur thundered past. His sword caught the beast's shoulder as it spun around to face him, and drew blood. The enraged creature roared and barged into Theseus, knocking him to the ground.

Theseus rolled out of the way of its horns just before they ran him through. He leaped to his feet as the minotaur tried once more to gore him, and its horns skewered the wall of the tunnel instead. Stone crumbled from the wall under the force of the blow. Grunting with frustration, the beast wrenched its horns free, as Theseus lunged at it. This time, he succeeded in driving his blade into the minotaur's shoulder. The beast arched its back and bellowed in pain. Theseus retreated down the tunnel and awaited his chance.

The minotaur eyed him, snorting heavily. Then it lowered its head and charged. Theseus steeled himself until the very last second, then he slammed his back to the side of the tunnel, gripped his sword in both hands and thrust it out in front of him. The charging beast ran straight into the outstretched blade, stumbled and fell to the ground.

Theseus stood over it and plunged his blade deep into its chest. The minotaur gave one last, hoarse bellow. The light in its eyes faded, and it was dead.

Theseus sheathed his sword, and a ragged cheer met his ears. He turned to find the thirteen other Athenians gazing at him in awe.

"That was amazing," said one.

"Incredible," another joined in.

A young woman burst into tears. "But we're doomed to die anyway," she wailed miserably. "How will we ever find our way out of this place?"

Theseus looked around by his feet until he saw the end of the golden thread glinting in the gloom. "Like this," he said. He picked up the thread and followed it, winding it up as he went. It led them all the way back along the twisting, turning tunnels to freedom.

Ariadne was waiting at the entrance of the labyrinth, silhouetted against the early morning sun. She had bribed the gatekeeper to abandon his post for the morning, and had everything prepared for a speedy escape. "There's a ship waiting for us in the port," she whispered. "Hurry before my father notices I'm gone."

They ran from the palace and down through the barely-awake city to the port.

Out on the sparkling, turquoise sea, Ariadne stood on the bow of the ship and watched her homeland fade into the distance. She smiled and turned to watch as the Athenians lifted Theseus onto their shoulders and cheered. They hailed him as a hero and promised that the story of how he had slain the minotaur and saved their lives would be told forever more.

On the way back from Crete, Theseus left Ariadne sleeping on the island of Naxos, where Dionysus, the god of wine, fell in love with her and made her his wife.



# Icarus, the boy who flew too high



Icarus paced around the tiny room for the thousandth time. "I'm bored," he complained. "King Minos can't possibly keep us locked up here forever, can he?"

"He could do far worse than that," answered his father, Daedalus. "I helped his enemy, Theseus, escape. It's a crime punishable by death. The only reason he hasn't had us killed already is that I'm far too useful to him alive."

Sighing, he bent over his clay tablet and continued to work on his new design for a bridge. As long as he continued to produce ground-breaking inventions, the king would spare them. But it was a terrible burden knowing that both of their lives depended on the success of his latest idea.

"Why did he have to lock me up as well?" Icarus muttered sulkily. "I could be plotting your escape by now."

Daedalus didn't look up from his work. "I imagine that's exactly why he locked you up, Son."

Icarus slumped onto his elbows on the window ledge, startling a couple of doves into flight. He stared at them enviously. Picking up a stray feather and stroking it idly against his cheek, he murmured, "If only we could fly, we could escape from this tower and go wherever we wanted."

"That's it!" Daedalus exclaimed, flinging down his tablet. "You've hit the nail right on the head!"

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Icarus.

"It's simple. I'll make us wings and we'll fly away," said Daedalus, already scratching busily at a fresh tablet. Within an hour, he'd come up with a rough design for human-sized wings. "That's the easy part," he said. "Now we have to collect enough feathers to actually make the things."

From that moment on, they gave half their tiny daily ration of bread to the birds. More and more birds flocked to the little tower, eager to be fed, and each day Icarus collected the stray feathers they left behind and hid them under his straw mattress.

After a few months, they had so many feathers the mattress would barely stay on the floor. Icarus and his father had grown quite thin from their reduced rations.



"The lighter we are the better," joked Daedalus. "Still, before we waste away entirely, I'd better get on with making those wings."

He reached out of the window of the tower and pulled some vines from the wall. After stripping them of leaves, he wove the supple stems into four large frames. Next, he collected all the wax that he used for making design models and laid it in the sunshine to soften it. He dotted the softened, sticky wax along the frames and pushed feather after feather into it.

Daedalus had studied the birds carefully over the last few months, and modified his design according to what he learned. He made sure that each feather overlapped the last, and lined them up in order of size to look just like a real bird's wings.

Icarus watched in fascination as the wings took shape. When they were finally ready, he ran his fingers over the soft feathers and glanced at the sky. "Do you really think they'll work?" he asked.

"Have any of my inventions ever failed?" Daedalus replied. He lifted one pair of wings onto his son's shoulders and tied them on.




Icarus raised his arms and flapped them cautiously. To his delight, his feet left the floor and he hovered in the air for a moment before dropping gently down again.

Icarus scrambled eagerly onto the window ledge. Looking down, he could see all the way to the foot of the tower. It was a dizzying sight. But then he turned his gaze to the sparkling sea and the vast, empty sky above, and felt excitement rising again in his chest.



Icarus took a deep breath, spread his wings and leaped into the air. The wind caught him straight away, and he glided smoothly out above the sea. The air rushed past, ruffling his hair, and a broad grin spread across his face. Flying was incredible.

A shadow fell over him as his father flew overhead. "Careful now," he said. "Don't fly too low in case the sea spray dampens your feathers; and don't fly too high in case the sun melts the wax. Just follow right behind me."



Flapping his wings steadily, Daedalus took the lead and Icarus followed him obediently. Far, far below, farmers were working in a patchwork of fields. Icarus was fascinated by how small everything looked: tiny sheep grazed in tiny meadows, tended by toy shepherds. Before he knew it, they were gliding past craggy cliffs and out over the open sea.


A lone fisherman looked up as they passed, and dropped his net when he saw the winged figures soaring across the sky. "They must be gods," he whispered in awe, and counted himself lucky to have caught a glimpse.

Icarus certainly felt superhuman. He was so used to flying now that it was as if he'd been doing it all his life, and he was growing mighty bored of looking at the soles of his father's dusty old sandals. It was high time for a bit of fun. He swooped down to the sea and skimmed low over the glittering waves, so low that he could see jade-green turtles and schools of silvery fish swimming beneath the surface.

Then he flapped his wings and climbed higher and higher into the sky, until even the birds were beneath him and the sky was his alone.

His father's voice came floating up from beneath him. "Icarus, come down at once!"

Frowning, Icarus flapped his wings and flew even higher. "Why shouldn't I enjoy myself?" he grumbled, squinting down at his father, who by now was so far below him he looked no bigger than a sparrow.



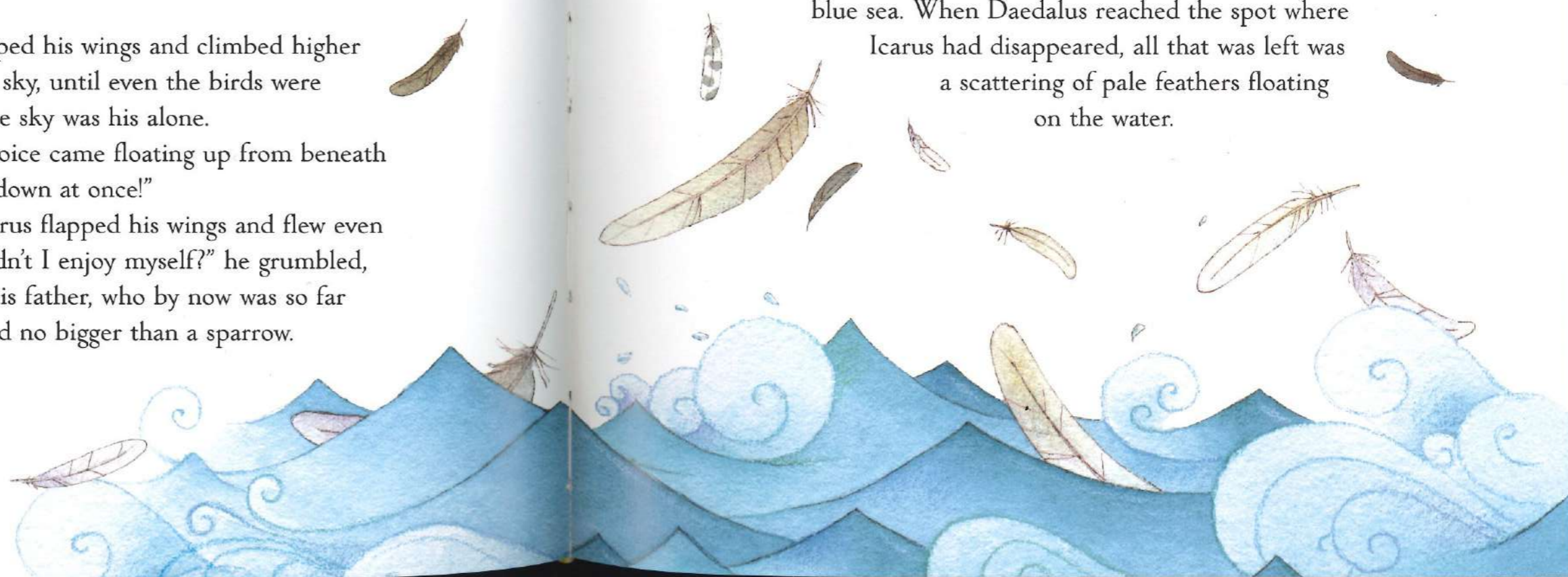
The light on the sea was so dazzling, Icarus shut his eyes. "Free at last," he thought, as he soared closer and closer to the sun.

He didn't realize that the sun's hot rays were melting the wax in his wings; he didn't see the feathers dropping out one by one.

But Daedalus did. When feathers from his son's wings began to flutter down, he shouted himself hoarse trying to warn him. When he realized he was out of earshot, he flew as quickly as he could to reach him, but Icarus was too far away.

By the time Icarus opened his eyes, it was too late. His wings were almost bare skeletons. He flapped and flapped but the air just whistled through their empty frames and he began to fall.

Daedalus could only watch, his eyes filling up with helpless tears, as his son plummeted through the air, flapping his useless, broken wings, and plunged into the deep, blue sea. When Daedalus reached the spot where Icarus had disappeared, all that was left was a scattering of pale feathers floating on the water.





# Atalanta and the golden apples

Deep in the forest, in the dead of night, a man put down a little bundle and walked away muttering to himself, "What use is a daughter anyway? Girls can't fight or look after themselves. They just eat you out of house and home until you eventually marry them off. Getting rid of her now will save me a lot of trouble." A pitiful wail pierced the night air behind him, but he pulled up the hood of his cloak and hurried away.

In the shadows, a mother bear pricked up its ears at the cry. It followed the noise until it came to a baby wrapped blankets, lying in the leaves. When the bear sniffed the baby, she stopped crying, and patted its nose with her tiny hands.

Gently, the bear took the blankets in its mouth, and carried the child home. It laid her between its two warm, furry cubs, and settled down to suckle them all.



After Atalanta was nursed by the bear, she was raised by hunters. It may be that they were all sent by Artemis, the goddess of hunting and wild animals, and protector of young children.



One morning twenty years later, the same forest rang out with hunting cries as a group of young men on horseback charged after a boar. "Whoever kills the beast can take it home," shouted Prince Meleager, letting an arrow fly and narrowly missing the boar's bristly back.

His companions jostled for the lead, their horses gleaming with sweat. Suddenly, another hunter appeared out of nowhere and overtook them on foot. For a moment, all they saw was a tumble of long, black hair as the skin-clad figure sprinted ahead of their horses. The hunter took aim and let an arrow fly.

There was a squeal from the boar as the arrow met its mark, and the men galloped up to find the newcomer standing over the dead animal, smiling broadly. To their astonishment, the hunter was in fact a huntress, and an extremely beautiful one at that.

"Who are you?" asked Meleager when he'd managed to find his tongue.

"My name's Atalanta," replied the young woman.

"Well Atalanta, you've won. The beast is yours to keep," Meleager said.

Atalanta slung the boar's body over her shoulder.

"Wait a minute," one of the other men protested. "You may have lost your head over her, Meleager, but you're not giving her our kill. She's a girl."

Atalanta narrowed her eyes. "This girl killed the boar before any of you," she said coldly. "And if you try to steal it from her, you'll be sorry." She turned on her heels and disappeared back into the forest.

Atalanta's reputation spread, and soon everyone was talking about her bravery and beauty. Countless men asked her to marry them, but Atalanta scorned them all. Eventually, she tired so much of being asked that she sent her latest suitor home with an announcement. "She says she'll only marry a man who can outrun her in a race," he laughed to his friends. "I'm racing her next week."

"What happens if you lose?" asked one of the friends.

He snorted. "I die by her hand, apparently. But I'll hardly lose against a woman."

The race attracted a large number of spectators, and Atalanta turned up at the allotted time, with her bow and arrows slung over her shoulder. She joined her suitor on the starting line. "You'll never keep up with me carrying those," he smirked. "You'd better put your weapons down."

Atalanta shook her head. "I don't need to," she said.

They crouched at the start, and somebody shouted, "Ready? Set? Go!"

Atalanta's suitor sprinted away, entirely confident of his success, but Atalanta streaked ahead, leaving him for dust. She reached the finish in no time at all, to incredulous cheers from the crowd.

But then she turned, drew an arrow and fired. The arrow shot her suitor right through the heart. The crowd fell silent with shock, and Atalanta turned to them and asked, "Does anyone else want to try?"

All was quiet and then, to everyone's astonishment, a man pushed forward through the crowd. "I'll race you," he said. "No woman can beat me."

Atalanta sighed. She gestured to the starting line, and they both took their places. Once more, the starter shouted, "Go!" and both figures set off at a sprint. But even though the second suitor put all his effort into the race, he fared no better. Atalanta ran like a deer, and by the time she crossed the finish, her competitor was only halfway down the course.

Coolly, she drew another arrow, aimed and fired. The suitor dropped dead not far from the man before him.

Atalanta glared fiercely at the spectators. "Anyone else?" she demanded. But nobody dared even meet her eye, and so she stalked away, leaving them to bury their dead.

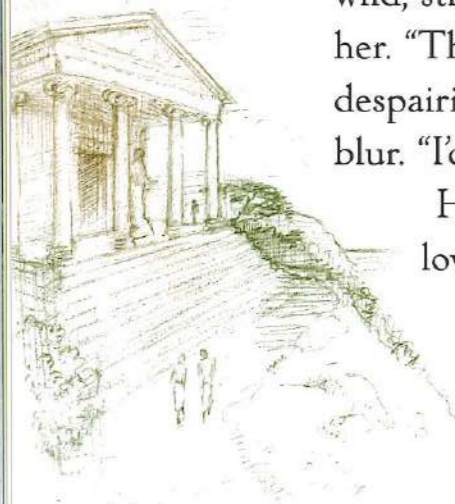
Word of the challenge she had set spread across Greece, and more men journeyed from miles around to win her hand in marriage. By this time, they all knew the dangers. But, lured by Atalanta's beauty, they raced her nonetheless. One after another, each of them lost and she killed them without a second thought.

A handsome young man named Melanion came to watch every single race. He thought Atalanta was the most wonderful person he'd ever seen. She was heartless and wild, strong and independent, and he absolutely adored her. "There's no way I could beat her in a race," he thought despairingly, as he watched her long legs flashing past in a blur. "I'd be a lucky man to win her hand, but I need help."

He went to the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and knelt in front of her statue. "Noble goddess,"

he prayed. "Please help me. I've lost my heart to a woman I could never win on my own."

Many of the Ancient Greeks worshipped Aphrodite. They built numerous temples, shrines and statues to her, where they prayed or made offerings to the goddess in the hope that she might help them in love.



The air around him grew warm and he looked up to find the goddess standing over him. Her hair was shining and golden and her lips rosy and inviting. Most men found her irresistible but Melanion barely even noticed her beauty. All he could think of were Atalanta's fierce eyes and tumble of night-black hair.

Aphrodite knew this and it made her smile. "I will help you," she said. In her arms she held three shining golden apples, which she bent down and gave to Melanion. "During the race, drop one apple at a time in Atalanta's path," the goddess told him. "She won't be able to resist stopping to pick them up, and it will slow her down. Good luck," she added.

Melanion got to his feet a little shakily, clutching the apples. He certainly hadn't expected that. "Th—thank you," he stammered. But the goddess had vanished.

The next race day, Melanion arrived at the start line with the three golden apples tucked into a pouch at his waist. Atalanta strode up to him. "Are you next?" she asked.

"Call me a fool," answered Melanion, "but yes."

Atalanta frowned. "If you yourself think you're a fool, then why compete? I don't want to have to kill you. And you certainly won't be faster than me."

"Probably not," Melanion agreed. "Besides, I don't think anyone really deserves to win your hand. But I'd be giving up the greatest chance of my life if I didn't try. I think you're amazing."

Atalanta blushed, and then scowled and looked away in confusion. "Well, let's get on with it," she said hesitantly.

As they crouched at the starting line, Melanion took hold of one of the golden apples in his pouch. "Go!" came the shout, and Melanion broke into a sprint. Atalanta started running too, but a shining golden apple crossed her path and rolled away towards the crowd. She ran after it to pick it up, allowing Melanion to gain precious ground.

"It's working," he thought excitedly, glancing back over his shoulder. Atalanta waved the apple at him and then, to his dismay, began to catch up with him rather easily. "You dropped this," she said, holding the apple out.

Hurriedly, Melanion let the second golden apple fall. "You careless thing," Atalanta scolded, and fell back again to pick it up. Melanion ran for all he was worth, but she caught up without any trouble at all.

"You keep dropping these lovely golden apples," she said, running alongside him. "Someone's going to steal them if you're not careful."

Melanion was too out of breath to answer. Staring fixedly at the finish line, he did his best to speed up. He let the third apple fall in front of Atalanta, and saw her look at him questioningly before turning back to pick it up.

Melanion stumbled on, his chest burning as though it was on fire. Atalanta jogged along behind him with the three precious apples in her arms, only speeding up when her suitor crossed the finish line. The crowd let out a cheer, and Atalanta ran up to Melanion and grinned. "You lost these," she said, bundling the golden apples into his arms.

"But I won the race," Melanion panted.



n more than that," Atalanta told him.  
looked at her searchingly. "I don't want to  
a race," he said. "But if you gave it to me  
luckiest man that ever lived."  
ughed. "Then you should count yourself  
she said.

moment on, the couple only had eyes for  
wandered away from the crowd, talking  
told Melanion all about her childhood in  
Melanion told her all about how he'd watched  
run, and had wondered how he could ever  
him. Without paying attention to where  
they arrived at Aphrodite's temple,  
and sat down, hand in hand.

ave noticed you anyway," Atalanta said,  
new love, "but who gave you the clever  
n apples?"

Melanion lied. "I thought of it by myself."  
kissed him. Then she glanced up at  
e. "Whoever needs the goddess of love,  
d love all by ourselves, as we did?"

needs her?" Melanion laughed.  
a sudden burning in the air. "You should

"As for you," she turned on Atalanta, "you never  
would have noticed him in a million years if I hadn't given  
him the golden apples. You have found love, and I won't  
deny you that, but you've both behaved like beasts.  
So that's how you'll live from now on."

Atalanta and Melanion looked at one another in  
alarm, and each watched the other change before their eyes.  
Their skin sprouted golden fur; their hands turned into paws  
and their noses became furry muzzles. Sprouting whiskers  
and tails, they fell onto all fours and roared in dismay.

Aphrodite had turned them into lions.

The two beasts looked at one another helplessly.  
Nothing remained of the beautiful, athletic girl or the  
handsome man, but their eyes shone with love for one  
another just the same. Aphrodite watched as the pair  
of lions turned and walked away together  
into the deep, wild forest.





# Bellerophon and the flying horse

Welcome Bellerophon," the king smiled at the fresh-faced young man striding up to his throne. "It's wonderful to have you to stay."

"Your son-in-law asked me to give you this," Bellerophon told him, and handed the king a letter.

That night the king held a feast to welcome his guest, and they spent many days together talking, going riding and generally getting to know one another. They had such a pleasant time that the king forgot all about the letter.

On the tenth morning of the young man's visit, he found it again, and broke the seal. As he read, his blood ran cold. "Bellerophon must die," the message said. "He offended my wife – your daughter – terribly while he was staying with us, and no good can come of him staying alive. I trust you will see to it."

The king was very troubled by this letter. He'd seen nothing in Bellerophon's manner over the last few days that would suggest he was anything other than a likeable, lively young man. Besides, he had welcomed him into his home — he couldn't very well kill a guest. On the other hand, if this young man had indeed done something so awful his son-in-law wanted him killed, he couldn't very well do nothing.

"Is something bothering you?" Bellerophon asked him at lunch. "If there's any way I can help, just ask."

The king looked at the young man thoughtfully and suddenly he had an idea. "I was wondering," he said, "whether you would be brave enough to go on a quest."

No young man likes to admit he is anything other than brave, and Bellerophon was no different. "Of course," he said boldly.

"There is a terrible monster in my kingdom known as the chimera," said the king. "Have you heard of it?"

The sudden pallor of Bellerophon's cheeks answered the question well enough.

"It needs killing," the king went on, feeling rather sorry for his guest. "Only the strongest, bravest of men could attempt such a thing. What do you say?"

"I'll certainly try," Bellerophon answered, with only the tiniest tremor in his voice.

Later on, when Bellerophon had gone to bed, the king scribbled a note to his son-in-law saying, "I have sent the boy on a quest that he can hardly hope to survive. I hope that is enough for you."

That night, Bellerophon tossed and turned in his

bed. "How am I to slay the chimera?" he muttered to himself. "It's said to have the head of a ferocious lion that tears to pieces anyone who comes from the front, the head of a mighty serpent which attacks anyone who comes from behind, and the head of a fire-breathing goat between. How can I even get near enough to attack it? May the gods help me."

"You need to approach it by air, of course," said a strong, resonant voice. Bellerophon was extremely surprised to find a powerful-looking woman standing at his bedside. She looked remarkably like the statues of the goddess Athena he'd seen in temples.

He rubbed his eyes, thinking he must be asleep, but Athena was still there, looking down at him. "The air?" he asked her in bewilderment. "I can't fly."

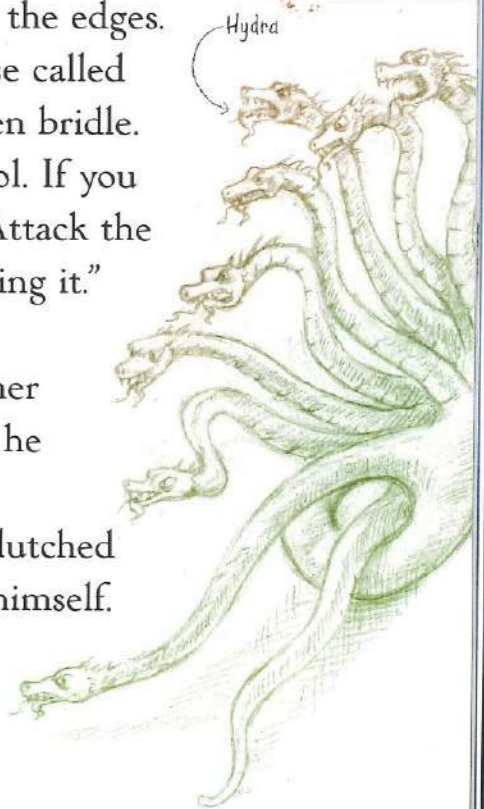
The goddess's lips curled upwards a little at the edges. "No," she agreed, "but there is a wild, winged horse called Pegasus that can." She handed Bellerophon a golden bridle. "Approach him quietly while he drinks from a pool. If you can catch him with this, he will be yours to ride. Attack the chimera from the air for the best chance of defeating it."

"But—" Bellerophon began.

The goddess reached forward and touched her fingertips to his eyelids. "Sleep now," she said, and he knew nothing more until morning.

Bellerophon awoke to find a golden bridle clutched in his hands. "It wasn't a dream," he whispered to himself. "If a goddess thinks I can do this, maybe I have a chance after all."

The chimera came from a monstrous family. Its siblings included Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog of the Underworld, and a swamp-dwelling serpent with many heads, known as the hydra.



Over breakfast, he asked the king whether he knew of a wild, winged horse called Pegasus.

The king nodded. "Many have tried to catch him — it is impossible."

"If I can tame him, it may help me in my quest to kill the chimera. Can you tell me where to find him?" Bellerophon asked, and the king told him all he knew, hoping despite himself that the young man would succeed.

Carrying nothing but a spear and the golden bridle, Bellerophon walked until he reached the forest where Pegasus lived. In the middle of the forest was a quiet, shaded lake. It was a hot day, and the breeze across the cool water was welcome relief from the beating sun.

"A wild horse might well come here to drink," he thought to himself, and he settled down to wait.

Before long he heard a soft flapping noise. He looked up to see a pearl-white horse flying gracefully through the air on feathered wings. It swooped down through the trees and landed by the lake where it looked around, sniffing the air for danger.

Bellerophon didn't move a muscle. He had chosen a hiding place downwind of the lake, so the horse wouldn't catch his scent. It seemed to work, for Pegasus lowered his head to the water and began to drink.

Bellerophon got to his feet and crept stealthily towards the winged horse. Only when he was very close did Pegasus finally see him. The horse reared and pummelled the air with his golden hooves, but Bellerophon darted beneath them and threw the bridle up over his nose.

It slid into place, and Pegasus tossed his head wildly trying to escape. Bellerophon clung to the reins and spoke to him in a low, soothing voice. Whether it was due to his voice or some magical effect of the bridle, he couldn't tell, but the horse calmed down surprisingly quickly.

Bellerophon stroked his neck gently for a few moments, and then climbed onto his back. At once, Pegasus leaped into the air and began to flap his pearl-white wings. He flew up between the branches and into the open sky. With the slightest tug of the reins, Pegasus turned and flew low over the treetops; another tug and they soared high into the clouds. It was the smoothest and most exhilarating ride of Bellerophon's life.

Very soon he felt confident enough to tackle the chimera. So he flew on Pegasus's back to the plains where the king had told him the monster lived. He scanned the barren, scrubby ground below until he saw something prowling around beneath, and swooped down lower to take a closer look. It was the chimera. The beast was every bit as strange and terrifying as the stories suggested, and even bigger than Bellerophon had expected.

He headed for the monster, urging Pegasus into a dive. Hearing the flapping wings, the chimera's giant serpent head hissed and looked up. Bellerophon thrust his spear at it but the serpent writhed aside and he missed. It wrapped itself around his spear, spitting venom. Pegasus struggled to gain height as the serpent pulled on the spear. But Bellerophon managed to wrench it free and they flew back up to safety.



Then they wheeled  
around and plunged into a second  
attack. This time, the chimera's lion head  
bared its teeth and roared ferociously as Pegasus swooped past.  
Perseus leaned right out and jabbed his spear into its neck.  
The lion head roared in pain and the beast swung its great  
paws at them. Pegasus pulled up just in time and they circled  
above the monster. It was bleeding a little from the neck  
wound, but it looked more fearsome than ever.



The goat head glared up at them with its sickening yellow eyes, as they swooped down a third time. As Bellerophon leaned forward to strike again with his spear, the goat head mouth opened and streams of flames shot into the air. Without flinching, Bellerophon thrust the spear through the flames, deep into the monstrous creature's throat.

As he pulled the weapon free, the tip broke off in the monster's throat. The chimera blew another furious blast of flame at them, but then suddenly it began to choke and gasp. The fire was so hot it had melted the metal spear tip inside its throat.

The chimera writhed as the molten metal entered its blood. The serpent, lion and goat heads all bellowed at once, and the deafening cries echoed across the plains, making animals tremble and scatter in terror. Pegasus shuddered and flew higher in an attempt to escape the unbearable noise, and Bellerophon clamped his hands over his ears in pain.

But all at once the chimera fell silent, and it slumped to the ground, dead.

Bellerophon could scarcely believe it. "We did it!" he cried, patting Pegasus's pearly neck. "I couldn't have done it without you."

The horse snorted proudly in answer. After circling the chimera's dead body one more time, they set off triumphantly for the king's palace.

When the king saw Bellerophon land in the courtyard on the winged horse, he rushed out to greet him.

"You must have had the gods on your side to be able to tame this creature. My son-in-law will have to believe in your goodness now," he said. "Did you kill the chimera as I asked?"

"I did," Bellerophon replied. "But what do you mean about your son-in-law?"

The king sighed. "He sent me a note demanding that I kill you as you had deeply offended his wife, my daughter," he said. "I didn't want to kill you. So I sent you on this quest to prove yourself. But tell me, is it true what he said?"

Bellerophon flushed to the roots of his hair. "It is," he admitted. "But I didn't know what to do not to offend your daughter in the circumstances. It pains me to have to tell you, but she took a liking to me behind her husband's back. When I refused to kiss her, she said she'd have me thrown out in disgrace. So I made my excuses and left the next morning so as not to cause any more trouble. Please believe me."

"I do believe you," the king said. "Besides, not even my son-in-law will be able to deny your worth now you've killed the chimera. You have nothing more to worry about. Come inside, and let's celebrate."

While Bellerophon was welcomed happily back into the king's palace, Pegasus was led to the palace stables, where he was rubbed down and given oats and clean water to drink. The beautiful winged horse and his heroic new master became famous throughout the land, and they had many an adventure together in the years to come.

At Lycia, where this story takes place, traces of the chimera still remain, as fire-breathing vents in the rocks that belch out flames from underground.



# The Midas touch

“Good evening,” King Midas said, peering out at the shadowy figure on the doorstep. The stranger stepped into the light, revealing a pair of pointed ears poking from a mop of silvery hair. He had a shaggy beard and a donkey’s tail. Midas recognized him at once as a satyr.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the satyr said, “My name is Silenus. I’m a friend of Dionysus, the god of wine. He and I and a large party of others were passing through this area. I wandered off from the others and rather foolishly lost my way.”

Midas’s eyes had widened at the mention of Dionysus. Any friend of a god was not to be sniffed at. “Make yourself at home,” he urged, showing in his guest.

The satyr sank gratefully onto a chair by the fire. “We were going to set up camp somewhere near here,” he said, “in a grove of olive trees near the river.”





Dionysus was the source of merriment and feasts wherever he went. His followers always liked a party. They consisted of satyrs...



maenads...



and nymphs.

"It'll be tricky to find your camp in the dark," Midas said. "Besides, it's late, and you look tired. Why don't you stay here for the night? I'll help you look for Dionysus in the morning."

The next day, Midas showed Silenus the way to a nearby grove of olive trees. Sure enough, they found Dionysus and a huge party of followers camped there.

Dionysus himself came out to greet them. Midas gazed in awe at the god. He was a head taller than anyone else. His handsome face was framed with dark, lustrous curls and he had vines of jewel-like grapes dangling around his neck. "My dear friend," he cried jovially, throwing his arms around Silenus, "where have you been?"

"I got a bit lost," the satyr chuckled. "But King Midas here gave me a bed to sleep on for the night."

Dionysus clapped the king heartily on the back. "That's cause enough for celebration," he said. "Come, we'll have music and dancing and a feast to welcome an old friend and a new!"

Dionysus certainly wasn't a god to do things half-heartedly. At the click of his fingers, an entire roast ox appeared, complete with spit and fire. Servants hurried to carve the meat, and brought bowls of soft bread and sweet, musky grapes, not to mention barrel after barrel of berry-red wine. There were dancing girls and tumbling acrobats, pan-pipers and drummers; it was the best party Midas had ever been to.

After they had eaten their fill and were breathless with dancing, Dionysus came and sat next to King Midas.

"So, my friend," he said refilling the king's goblet, "how can I reward you for your kindness to Silenus? You can have anything you like!"

Midas's head spun with possibilities. "Anything at all?" he asked.

"Just name your wish," said Dionysus.

"Well in that case," Midas said. "I wish that from now on, everything I touch turns to gold!"

"So be it," said Dionysus.

Midas grinned from ear to ear. "I'll be the richest man alive!" he said.

Dionysus threw back his head and roared with laughter. Then, in the blink of an eye, the entire party vanished – Dionysus, the satyrs, the dancing girls and all the musicians were all gone. Midas found himself sitting alone on a moonlit hillside, his ears still ringing with the merry-making and music.

It was night already. How much time had passed? Had he really met a god? And had he been granted his wish? Midas got to his feet and hesitantly touched the nearest tree. Instantly the whole thing turned to gold, leaves and all.

Crowing with delight, he bent down and touched a flower. It too, turned to gold. "I'm rich, I'm rich!" Midas chortled, transforming leaves and pebbles and stuffing them into his pockets. He picked his way down the hillside and wandered home to his palace, touching a flower here and a dangling fruit there. By the time he got home, his path was littered with gold, all glittering in the light of the rising sun.

He pushed open the doors to his palace, laughing gleefully at their instant transformation. Hearing his master's voice, a servant came running.

"Bring me a feast," Midas ordered him, tossing the man a couple of gold pebbles. "Go right away. I want the finest food and wine gold can buy!" The servant hurried away, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

Midas turned and looked at the rest of his palace. "Why settle for anything less?" he muttered greedily to himself, and he began to run his fingers across everything he could find – pottery bowls and vases of flowers, giant urns, tables and chairs, even the doors and floors and walls. He didn't stop until everything in sight had been turned to gold.

His wife came in rubbing her eyes, "Where have you been?" she asked sleepily.

"Consorting with gods," Midas boasted, "I've been blessed by Dionysus. I met him last night!"

"Where did all this come from?" his wife gasped as she looked around at all the gleaming gold.

"Me," said Midas proudly.

Just then the servant came in leading a line of others, carrying the finest feast gold could buy. Dish after dish was laid on the table.

"Sit down," Midas said to his wife, waving the servants away. "Let me tell you all about it."

His wife sank doubtfully into a chair. "We can't afford all this..." she began.

"Don't worry about that," Midas reassured her.

"We're rich beyond our wildest dreams." He picked up a dusky purple fig to put on her plate. Of course, the fruit turned to gold the instant he touched it.

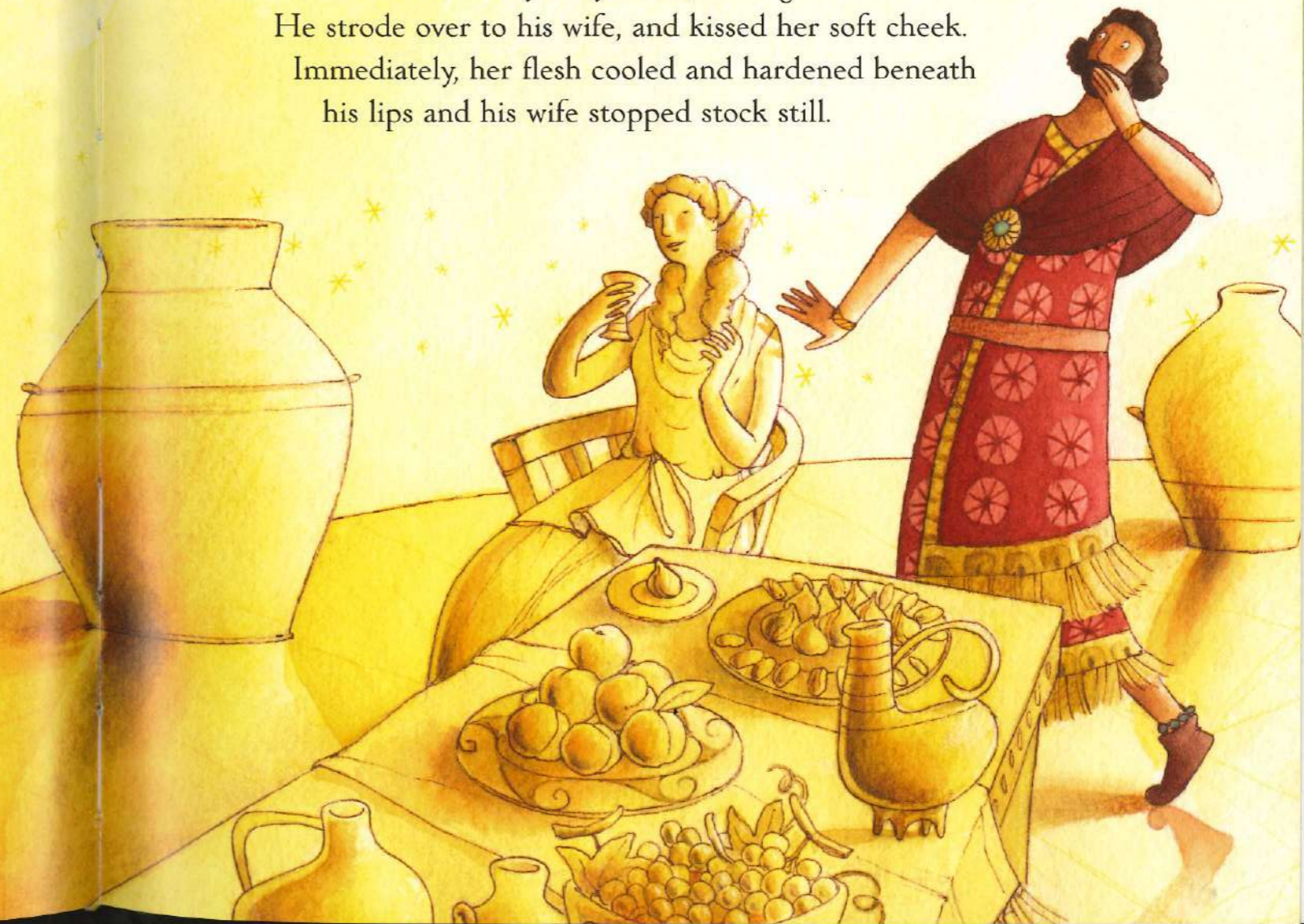
"See?" he laughed, unperturbed. "I have this amazing new power!"

His wife stared at the fig, unable to believe her eyes. "But how?" she asked.

"It's simple," Midas said, "Like this..." he got up and whirled around the table like a magician, touching all the food and turning it all to gold.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" asked his wife. "What good is gold food?"

"We can always buy more, darling," Midas answered. He strode over to his wife, and kissed her soft cheek. Immediately, her flesh cooled and hardened beneath his lips and his wife stopped stock still.



Midas stared in horror-filled fascination. Every strand of her hair, still tousled with sleep, was pure gold; her crumpled robe, her delicate throat, her slightly parted lips, her eyes, blank and gleaming. Every fingernail, every eyelash, was perfectly, terribly transformed.

He widened his gaze and took in the whole hall. Everything he'd touched was worth a fortune. He was surrounded by untold riches and yet the only thing that was truly precious to him had been lost.

"N-no," he choked miserably. He sank down into a chair, unthinkingly picked up a goblet of wine and dashed it down his throat. The wine became solid just as he swallowed. It slid lumpenly down his throat and settled heavily in his stomach. In horrified realization, he touched a piece of bread. Of course, it too instantly turned to gold. Only then did he fully understand what his wife had meant. "She's right," he murmured to himself. "Gold food is no good at all. I will die too. Oh, what have I done?"

When the servants returned to clear away the dishes, they found a feast all made of gold laid out on the table, and Midas with his head in his hands, weeping golden tears.

Suddenly he got up, ran out of the palace and back to the hillside where he had last seen Dionysus. He fell to his knees in despair. "Please undo my wish," he called to the empty air. "I beg you, noble Dionysus. Hear my plea."

"Now, now, don't upset yourself," said a jovial voice. He looked up to see Dionysus smiling down at him.

Midas threw himself at the god's feet. "Please can you take back the gift you gave me?" he begged.

Dionysus's smile grew a little cold. "I gave you exactly what you asked for."

"I was a fool to ask for it," Midas wailed. "I've landed myself with a curse."

Dionysus shrugged. "Very well," he said. "It was meant as a reward, so I'll remove it. Go and wash yourself in the River Pactolus, and your touch will return to normal."

"And my wife – I turned her to gold by accident. Could you please turn her back as well?" Midas asked.

Dionysus frowned. "Gods aren't responsible for putting right all the foolish mistakes men make," he said impatiently, and promptly disappeared.

King Midas went to the river immediately and did as the god had told him. As he washed, streams of gold ran into the water. The river carried the flecks of gold along and, where it touched the banks, left them gleaming in the sand. Midas rubbed and rubbed at his body until the water ran clear. Then he waded to the riverbank and reached out hesitantly to touch a flower. To his relief, nothing happened.

He returned home with a heavy heart. Inside his palace, his poor gold wife was sitting motionless at the table, exactly as he'd left her. He stroked her gleaming cheek with his fingertips. "I'm sorry," he whispered. Then he called to his bewildered servants. "Get ready to leave this place," he ordered them. "I'm moving house."

That very day, Midas abandoned his palace and all his riches. He went into the forest and settled down to live in a simple wooden hut, far away from all the terrible reminders of his foolish, fatal mistake.