GREEK MYTHS FOR KIDS

Perseus and Medusa

A FREE STORY FROM *HEROES*



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STORY 1

Perseus and Medusa



King Acrisius of Argos had one big worry: he wanted a son. So he climbed the mountain to ask the oracle, a priestess who could see the future.

The oracle looked at him for a long time. Then she said, “You will have no son. But your daughter, Danaë, will. And one day, that boy will be the cause of your death.”

The king hurried home with his heart pounding. He did not wait. He built a tower with walls of solid bronze, locked Danaë inside, and kept the only key.

“No one gets in,” he said. “No one.”

Kings can lock out people, but they cannot lock out gods.

One afternoon, a ray of sunlight slipped through a crack in the roof of the tower. It was warm and golden, and it filled the room with light. It was Zeus, king of the gods. Not long after, Danaë had a baby boy. She named him Perseus.

When Acrisius heard a baby crying in the tower, he went pale. He was afraid to harm his own family, because the gods punish anyone who does. So he did the next worst thing. He put Danaë and baby Perseus in a wooden chest, nailed the lid shut, and pushed it out to sea.

For days, the chest bobbed on the waves. Danaë held her baby close and sang to him so he wouldn't be afraid. At last, a fisherman named Dictys spotted the chest tangled in his net. He pried it open, and out climbed a tired mother and a hungry baby.

"Well," said Dictys, "you two had better come home with me."

A Very Bad Promise

Perseus grew up on the island of Seriphos, tall and strong and maybe a little too sure of himself. The island's king, Polydectes, wanted to marry Danaë. She did not want to marry him. And Perseus made sure the king knew it.

So Polydectes made a plan. He threw a feast and told every guest to bring him a horse as a gift.

Perseus didn't own a horse. He didn't own much of anything. Everyone turned to look at him, and his face burned.

"I can't bring you a horse," he blurted out. "But name anything else, and I'll get it. I'd even bring you the head of Medusa!"

The room went silent. Somebody dropped a cup.

The king leaned back in his chair and smiled. "The head of Medusa," he said. "What a generous gift. I accept."

Medusa was a Gorgon. She had snakes instead of hair, and anyone who looked into her eyes turned to stone on the spot. Plenty of heroes had gone looking for her. Not one had ever come back.

Two Gods and a Lot of Gifts

That night, Perseus sat on the beach, kicking at the sand. *What was I thinking?*

"You weren't," said a voice behind him.

Perseus spun around. Two figures stood there, glowing faintly in the moonlight. One was a tall woman in a gleaming helmet, with sharp gray eyes. The other was a grinning young man with wings on his sandals.

It was Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Hermes, the messenger god.

"We'll help you," said Athena. She handed him a bronze shield, polished so bright that Perseus could see his own surprised face in it. "Remember this: never look at Medusa. Look only at her reflection."

Hermes tossed him a curved sword. "Sharp enough to cut through anything," he said. "But you'll need more than a sword. Go find the Gray Sisters."

The Gray Sisters

The Gray Sisters were three very old, very cranky women who lived in a cave. Between the three of them, they had one eye and one tooth, and they took turns using them.

Perseus crept close and listened.

"Give me the eye. It's my turn!"

"You had it all morning!"

"I need it more than you do!"

Just as one sister held out the eye and another reached for it, Perseus snatched it out of the air.

"Who took it?" they shrieked, grabbing at nothing. "Thief! Thief!"

“I’ll give it back,” said Perseus. “But first, tell me how to find the nymphs who guard the magic gifts.”

The sisters grumbled and muttered, but they told him. And Perseus, who always kept his promises, put the eye back in a wrinkled hand.

The nymphs were much friendlier. They gave Perseus three gifts: a pair of winged sandals so he could fly, a magic bag that could hold anything, and a cap that made whoever wore it invisible.

Now he was ready.

The Cave of Statues

Perseus flew to the edge of the world. The land below was gray and silent, and it was full of statues: a man frozen mid-run, a soldier with his sword half drawn, a wolf with its mouth open in a snarl.

They weren’t statues. They were everyone who had looked at Medusa.

Perseus pulled on his invisibility cap. He turned around and walked into the Gorgons’ cave **backward**, holding the shield up in front of him like a mirror.

In the bright bronze, he saw them. Three Gorgons, fast asleep. Two were Medusa’s sisters, who could never be defeated. The third was Medusa. Even while she slept, the snakes on her head twisted and hissed and flicked their tongues.

Perseus’s hands were shaking. He took one slow breath. Keeping his eyes on the reflection, he raised the sword and struck once.

Without ever turning around, he slipped Medusa’s head into the magic bag and pulled the string tight.

The other two Gorgons woke up screaming. But they couldn’t see an invisible boy, and they couldn’t catch a boy with wings on his feet. Perseus shot out of the cave and into the sky.

The Girl on the Rock

On the way home, Perseus flew over the coast of Ethiopia and saw something strange: a young woman chained to a rock at the edge of the sea. At first he thought she was a marble statue, like the ones outside the Gorgons’ cave. Then the wind lifted her hair, and he saw tears on her cheeks.

He landed on the rock beside her. “Why are you chained here?” he asked.

For a moment she didn’t answer. Then, little by little, the story came out. Her name was Andromeda, and she was a princess. Her mother, Queen Cassiopeia, had bragged that Andromeda was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. The nymphs complained to Poseidon, god of the sea, and Poseidon sent a monster to wreck the coast. It smashed fishing boats. It flooded villages. The king asked an oracle what to do, and the answer was terrible: give the monster your daughter, or lose your whole kingdom.

Up on the cliff, her parents, King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia, were weeping and wringing their hands.

“You should go,” Andromeda said. “It’s coming.”

Perseus didn’t go. He flew up to the cliff. “I am Perseus, son of Zeus,” he told the king. “I just came from the Gorgons’ cave. If I save your daughter, will you let her marry me, if she wants to?”

“Yes!” cried the king and queen together. “Anything!”

The Monster from the Sea

Far out on the water, a long ripple appeared. It moved toward the shore like the front of a racing ship, pushing a wave ahead of it. Then the sea bulged, and the monster rose up: a huge gray back, a tail that slapped the water like thunder, and a mouth wide enough to swallow a rowboat.

Perseus kicked off from the cliff and shot into the sky.

The sun was behind him, so his shadow fell on the water. The monster saw the shadow, thought it was an enemy, and lunged at it, snapping and thrashing at empty waves. That was all Perseus needed. He dropped out of the sky like an eagle diving on a snake and landed on the monster's back. He struck with the curved sword Hermes had given him, then leaped up into the air before the monster could twist around.

The monster roared. It rolled and churned the water into foam. Perseus dove again and struck again, then soared out of reach. Dive, strike, rise. Dive, strike, rise.

But the spray was flying everywhere, and the little wings on his sandals were getting soaked. They grew heavy. They flapped slower and slower. Perseus could feel himself sinking toward the waves.

He spotted a rock poking out of the water, just big enough to stand on. He landed on it, gripped it tightly with one hand, and waited. When the monster came charging at him one last time, he stood his ground and struck with all his strength.

The monster shuddered. It let out one long, rumbling groan. Then it sank down, down, down beneath the waves, and the sea went still.

On the cliff, the people of Ethiopia cheered so loudly that the sound echoed off the hills. Perseus flew back to the rock and broke Andromeda's chains.

To wash the salt from his hands, he set the magic bag down on a bed of seaweed. The Greeks said the seaweed it touched turned hard as stone and red as a sunset, and that was the first coral in the sea.

An Unwelcome Wedding Guest

Andromeda was brave, and smart, and she thought Perseus was pretty wonderful too. Her parents threw a grand wedding feast.

Right in the middle of it, the doors crashed open. In marched Phineus, Andromeda's uncle, with a crowd of armed men behind him.

"She was promised to me!" he shouted.

"Then where were you," said Perseus, "when she was chained to that rock?"

Phineus didn't have an answer. He just raised his spear. His men drew their swords.

Perseus was badly outnumbered. "Everyone who is my friend," he called out, "turn your face away!"

Then he lifted Medusa's head from the bag.

The hall went silent. Phineus and his men stood frozen, spears raised, mouths open, as gray and still as the statues outside the Gorgons' cave. And the wedding went on.

The Gift Arrives

Back on Seriphos, Perseus found that the king had been bullying his mother the whole time he was gone. He marched straight into the palace, where Polydectes sat laughing with his friends.

"Well, well," sneered the king. "The great hero returns, empty-handed."

“Not quite,” said Perseus. “You asked for the head of Medusa. Here is your gift.”

He turned his face away and lifted the head out of the bag.

The laughing stopped. Polydectes and every one of his friends had turned to stone, still sitting at the table.

Perseus made kind old Dictys the new king. He gave the magic gifts back to Hermes, and he gave Medusa’s head to Athena, who placed it on her shield, the aegis, where it frightened her enemies forever after.

You Can’t Outrun Fate

Years later, Perseus entered an athletic contest in a faraway city. When it was his turn to throw the discus, he spun and let it fly. A sudden gust of wind caught the heavy disc and carried it into the crowd, where it struck an old man.

The old man was King Acrisius, Perseus’s grandfather. He had come to watch the games, never knowing his grandson was there.

The oracle had been right all along.

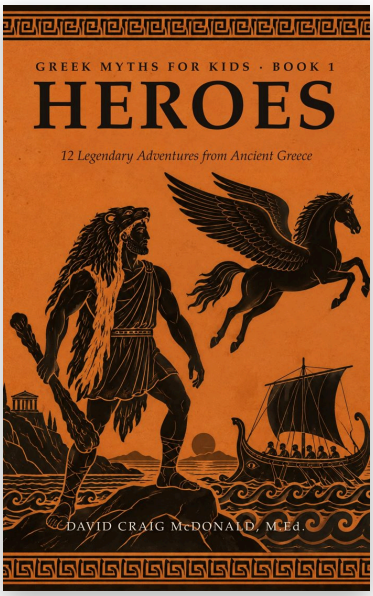
The Greeks loved this story for two reasons. It reminded them that no one can run away from fate, not even a king in a bronze tower. And it gave them a hero who won not just by being strong, but by being clever, listening to good advice and keeping his word.

Words from the Myth

- **Medusa:** scientists use this name for a jellyfish, because its long, trailing tentacles look like Medusa’s snaky hair.
- **Aegis:** Athena’s shield. Today, if something happens “under the aegis” of someone, it happens with their protection and support.
- **Perseus and Andromeda:** on a clear autumn night, you can find this whole story in the sky. Perseus, Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Cepheus and the sea monster are all constellations, and the Andromeda Galaxy is one of the most distant things you can see without a telescope.
- **Cetacean:** the Greek word for a sea monster was *ketos*. Scientists still use it: whales and dolphins are called cetaceans.

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