



## Perseus and Medusa

King Acrisius [uh-KRIS-ee-uhs] of Argos had one child, his daughter Danaë [dan-AY-ee], who was good and beautiful. But Acrisius wanted a son, so he made a journey to the Delphic oracle to ask if he would ever be the father of a boy. The priestess said no, but his daughter Danaë would have a son, and that son would kill him. To prevent this, Acrisius shut Danaë up in a bronze underground apartment with an open roof to let in light and air. The poor prisoner was cut off from men, but Zeus [ZOOS], drawn by her beauty, came to her through the open roof in the form of a shower of gold and made her his bride. Then he left her. Time passed, and one day a messenger came running to Acrisius and panted out, "Majesty, a son is borne to your daughter!" The king, aghast and scared, had a big chest made. Danaë and the baby boy, Perseus [PER-see-uhs], were placed in the chest and set adrift on the sea.

*Zeus = Jupiter, Jove*

By wind and wave they drifted to the tiny island of Seriphus. A fisherman, Dictys [DIK-tis], who was tending his nets, found the chest on the beach and released the prisoners. Dictys was a good man. He took the woman and the baby home to his wife. As they had no children of their own, they were delighted to have Danaë and Perseus stay with them. Perseus grew up tall, strong, and athletic—in all ways a princely young man.

**Zeus, king of the gods, was Perseus's father.**



Dictys had a brother, Polydectes [paw-lee-DEK-teez], King of Seriphus, who was a cruel and wicked man. The lovely Danaë and her handsome son drew his attention. He offered to marry the lady, but she, already the bride of

Zeus, refused. Polydectes bullied her, but he feared Perseus. He developed a plan that he was sure would lead to the young man's death. He flattered the lad for his prowess at the games, his skill at boxing and with the discus. He told Perseus he was wasting his talents on Seriphus. There was a big world out there; he should go see it and do great deeds and become a hero.

"How could I become a hero?" asked Perseus.

Polydectes replied, coolly, "Go kill the Gorgon, Medusa [meh-DOO-suh] of the snaky locks, and bring me her head."

The king explained to Perseus that there were three sisters, called Gorgons, living somewhere far away in the west in the land of darkness. Two were very ugly, but Medusa was most beautiful. However, her hair of coiling serpents was so terrible the sight of it turned men to stone. No one knew exactly where these horrible sisters lived.

*Athena = Minerva*

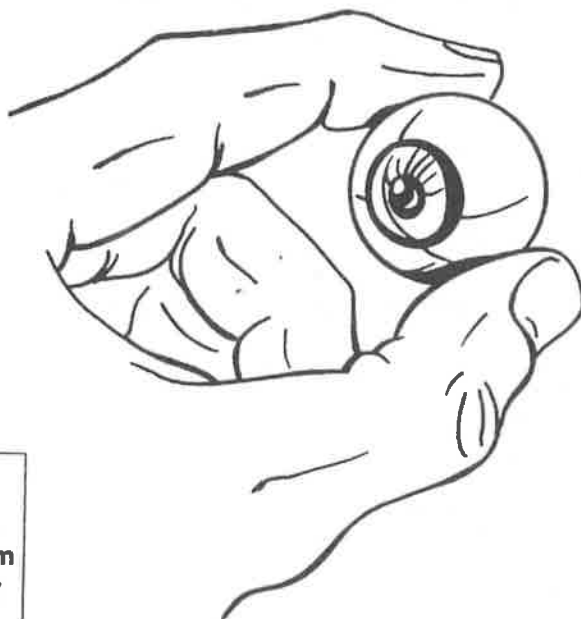
*Hades = Pluto*

*Hermes = Mercury*

The hero needed all the help of the gods, and he got it. Athena [uh-THEEN-uh] gave him her strong shield, so highly polished it was like a mirror. Hades [HAY-deez] gave his helmet that made the wearer invisible. Hermes [HER-meez] brought a pair of silver sandals with bright wings. They also gave him a special weapon, a sword with a curved blade, like a

sickle. But there were no guidelines for him to get there. Athena told him he must find the Gray Sisters, who would tell him where to go.

Hermes was his guide for the first stretch of the journey. They flew over the seas to the black-earth country of the Cimmerians (now called the Ukraine, located in southern Russia). In that wild twilight zone of the northern borderlands they found the Gray Sisters. They were like three old gray birds, who had only one eye and one tooth between them, which they passed around. Perseus had to trick them into telling him what he wanted to know by stealing the eye; then he



**The Gray Sisters shared one eye, so Perseus tricked them into helping him by stealing their eye.**

returned it to them with thanks. He and Hermes flew on, east of the sun and west of the moon, to the very limits of the earth: the back of the North Wind. This was the blessed land of the Hyperboreans, who lived happy in a climate of never-ending spring, feasting and dancing to the tunes of lyre and pipes. They gave Perseus a big leather wallet, which would always stretch to the right size for anything in it. So, with Athena's shield, Pluto's invisible helmet, Hermes' sandals, and his sickle sword, Perseus was ready for Medusa.

Alone now, he flew off to the far west and found the Gorgons' cave as the Gray Sisters had told him. Outside near the entrance were statues of men, their stone faces set in expressions of terror. With his back to the cave, Perseus kept his eyes on Athena's shield which, shining like a mirror, reflected the shapes of the Gorgons who were sleeping inside. Two of them were ugly things, though decorated in gold and bronze, with curved, cruel claws and huge teeth. They were immortals, and Perseus could have done nothing to them. But the third sister, Medusa, was mortal and beautiful, though a bit pale, and it would have been hard to find her in the darkness—



**Hermes**

except for the whispering sounds of the serpents that were her hair. Silently thanking the gods for the invisible helmet, Perseus backed into the cave, watching the images in the mirrored surface of his shield. Focusing on the reflection of Medusa's head, he rose a bit on the winged sandals, raised the sword above him, and Athena, who was always there at the right time, guided his hand. With one sweeping blow, the curved blade cut off the snaky head, and Perseus dropped it into the leather bag, drawing the latches tight—but not before he had spilled some blood. From those drops sprang the winged horse, Pegasus [PEG-uh-suhs]. But Perseus was already in the air. The other two sisters woke up and ran raving and screaming after him, their golden wings clattering, bronze claws slashing. But Perseus, victorious, was gone.

**With the help of the gods, Perseus was able to kill the Gorgon, Medusa.**





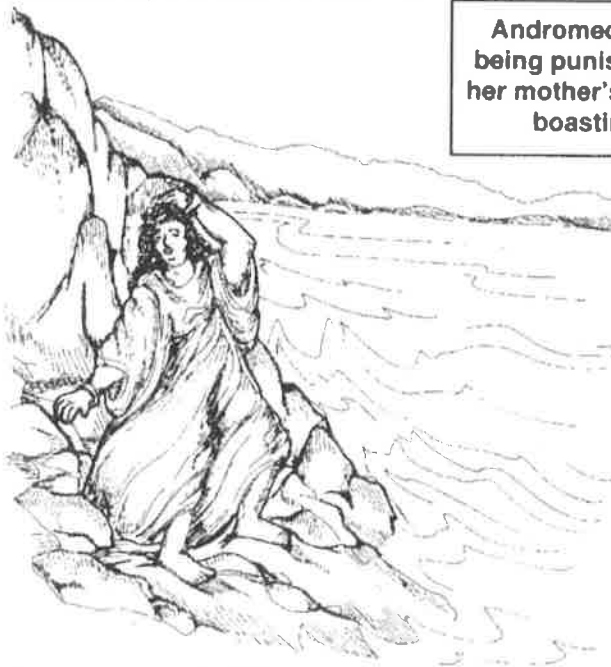
## Perseus and Andromeda

Perseus [PER-see-uhs], having severed the snaky-haired head of Medusa [meh-DOO-suh] from her body, began his journey home. He came first to the mountains of northwest Africa where he

found the old Titan, Atlas [AT-luhs], holding up the heavens and growing weary with that never-ending chore. Atlas greeted Perseus with pleasure; he had already learned from an oracle what the hero had been up to and that Perseus was fated to relieve his burden and set him free. "You know," he said, "I've never had any time off, except when Hercules paid me a visit and relieved me to go fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides." He sighed. "I'm tired of this job, it's too much even for a Titan. Please show me the Gorgon's head." Perseus understood and sympathized. With his own head turned away, he drew the dreadful head of Medusa out of the leather bag and showed it to Atlas, then returned it to the bag. He watched as the Titan changed. Atlas, already large, grew larger; his hips thrust out into the foothills of mighty mountains, and his shoulders became their lofty summits. His beard and hair turned into thick forests. His head, turning to stone, reared up among the clouds and stars; his gigantic hands and arms steadied the skies. The Titan had become part of the range that is still called the Atlas Mountains.

Perseus was fated to have one more grand adventure. As he flew east he came to a stretch of African seacoast that lies along Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Here he found a lovely maiden in a white tunic, chained to a rock. Perseus flew down close. "Maiden," he said, hovering, "who does not deserve these chains, who are you? What is your country? Why are you being punished in this cruel way?"

"Sir," the beauty replied, "I am Andromeda [an-DROM-eh-duh], Princess of Abyssinia." She explained that she was being sacrificed to a terrible sea dragon because the gods were angry with her mother, Cassiopeia [kas-ee-oh-PEE-uh]. This foolish queen had boasted that she was more beautiful than the daughters of Poseidon [poh-SIE-don], the Sea God. The Nereids, of course, were furious, but their wrath fell not on the vain mother but on the innocent daughter. The sea dragon was devouring youths and



**Andromeda was being punished for her mother's foolish boasting.**

*Poseidon = Neptune*

maidens all along the coast. If Andromeda were given to him, he would depart, satisfied.

Even as the princess talked, they heard a roaring sound and saw the monster, green and scaly, rapidly gliding toward them across the sea. Perseus leaped into the air, and as the dragon drew near he came down hard and from behind, gashing the beast's neck and shoulder. An awful fight followed; Andromeda shut her eyes in terror. The dragon split huge rocks with his lashing tail, which cracked like a whip. Perseus came at him again and again, working under the scales with his sickle blade, until the dreadful thing at last lay lifeless on the rocks and sand, its tail floating out to sea. The hero loosened the maiden's chains and took her back to her father, King Cepheus [SEE-fee-uhs], who was quite willing to give Andromeda to Perseus as his wife.



**Perseus killed the sea dragon that was sent to devour Andromeda.**

*Hades = Pluto*  
*Athena = Minerva*  
*Hermes = Mercury*

foster father, Dictys [DIK-tis], taking refuge in a temple. King Polydectes had been harassing them. While Danaë was explaining what had happened, the king appeared at the head of a band of soldiers. When he saw Perseus had come back, his false smile grew sickly. "Did you get the Gorgon?" he demanded. For answer, Perseus loosened the leather bag and flashed Medusa's head at the wicked king; he and his soldiers became frozen statues.

Perseus gave back the helmet to Hades [HAY-deez], the shield to Athena [uh-THEEN-uh], and the winged sandals to Hermes [HER-meez], with profound thanks to all the gods. He made the good Dictys king of the island of Seriphus. He sent for his bride, Andromeda, and decided to take her, with Danaë, back to Greece to see if they could reconcile with his grandfather, King Acrisius [uh-KRIS-ee-uhs] of Argos, who had sent him and his mother adrift in a sea chest when he was an infant.

They found the king in the North where his host, the King of Larissa, was throwing a series of parties and athletic games. Perseus was a good-hearted youth and quite prepared to forgive his grandfather and treat him kindly. But the oracle had spoken. One day Perseus decided to participate

in the discus-throwing; Acrisius was standing by as a spectator. The hero took up the heavy bronze plate and pitched it far, but it was a curved throw and flew off to the side where it struck Acrisius in the head and killed him.

As for the terrible Gorgon's head, Perseus gave it to Athena, who had helped him so much. An effigy, or image, of it was carved into the aegis, Zeus's [ZOOS-ez] shield, which Athena carried for him.

Andromeda in time became a constellation, as did Perseus, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia—the whole family raised to the stars!

*Zeus = Jupiter, Jove*



**Athena**



**Zeus**

# The Hero Perseus Project

Invent a Greek hero! Give your hero a Greek-sounding name, draw a picture of him or her in the box, and describe their origin, personality and powers. Please see the beginning of this section for further instructions. You may use another sheet of paper if you need more space.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Origin:**

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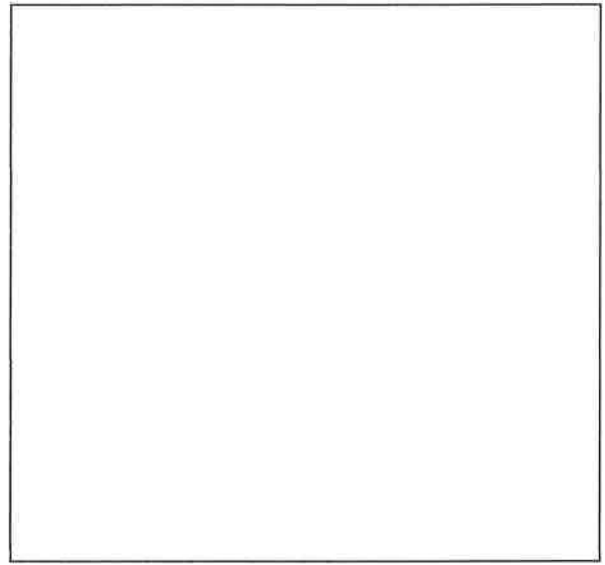
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**Personality:**

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**Powers:**

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