

CHILDREN OF THE GODS

Book 1 of The Children of Myth trilogy

Revised edition

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The sound of footsteps outside his room roused him from an uneasy dream of rats and mice, menacing phantoms with blood red eyes, nibbling at his mind with sharp little rodent teeth. As he blinked away the vestiges of sleep, their grey images faded to the corners of the room, spiralling into the darkness like puffs of smoke.

Sliding out of bed, he tiptoed to the door, avoiding the piles of clothes, books and toys, the miscellany of a young boy's life strewn across the floor. Holding his breath, he crept to the edge of the stairs, avoiding the creaking floorboards in the centre of the hallway, his heart hammering in his chest so loudly it shook his whole body.

Why is Dad going outside at this hour? I wish Mum was here.

He tiptoed down the stairs to the landing, grasping the handrail with damp palms, listening intently. A woman's voice floated along the hallway and rose up to meet him.

'What do you want, Ray? I've finished in the kitchen and I was just about to go back to the cottage. Can't whatever it is wait till morning?'

Rousette. She was still here.

Reassured, he looked at the watch his grandmother had given him for his birthday. He felt very grown-up with this large timepiece on his wrist and checked it again, just to savour the feeling. It was almost midnight.

Apprehension returned. What did his father want with her at this hour?

His father replied, his normally deep voice barely audible. Crouched on the landing, the boy made out the words "Pegasus" and "colic". Was the big stallion sick? He hoped not. He loved his grandfather's horse and spent hours grooming him, living for the moments when the old man allowed him to exercise the powerful beast in the home paddock.

The kitchen door slammed, and he stood up and pattered down the last flight of stairs to the hallway, confident now that he was alone in the house. He retrieved his boots from the mudroom and let himself out the back door, sidling along the wall and keeping to the shadows in case his father lurked nearby.

The moon was full, riding high through a field of stars; it silvered the leaves of the poplars edging the driveway and cast deep pools of darkness beneath the camellia hedge.

A rabbit scuttered across the path leading to the barn, white tail flashing, and he watched it as it disappeared into the bushes. A barn owl swooped by, missing the rabbit by inches, and soared soundlessly into the branches of the old eucalypt where it perched, motionless, waiting for its prey to re-emerge.

The boy watched the bird for a moment but moved away when it turned its head to regard him, the black pools of its eyes reflecting the moonlight.

The barn door was ajar, and a sliver of pale light marked its outline. If he were very careful, he could creep inside and see what they were doing.

He paused, wondering whether he should risk his father's ire; Raymond's punishments were swift and ruthless, with no allowances made for mistakes or misunderstandings. No wonder his mother had gone back to Molong for a break. Sometimes he wondered whether she would simply stay there and never come back...

He wished they were not alone. His grandparents were staying overnight in Sydney, seeing some show, and Roussette's husband, the farm manager, was overseas on business. For some reason he couldn't explain, the man's absence filled him with dread and a nameless foreboding.

He edged closer to the door, his agitation increasing. Something was wrong. Raymond always cared for Pegasus without anyone to help him; why did he insist that Roussette go with him into the stalls?

A stab of primal fear surged through his stomach at the same

moment the moon slipped behind a cloud, plunging the path into darkness. He stopped, momentarily disoriented, and waited for his eyes to adjust, afraid he might stumble and fall.

His vision cleared and he lurched forward, his limbs feeling stiff and uncoordinated as though they'd rusted while he stood motionless in the darkness.

The vulnerability of his situation began to dawn on him, and he wished he'd stayed in the house. What if his father came out and found him? He had no torch, no way of escape. It would mean another beating, and he was still sore from the last one.

Screwing up his courage, he flattened himself against the wall of the barn and inched his way inside the door. Somewhere, someone was crying, whimpering in the darkness. Nausea rose in his chest and he choked it back, frantically searching in the night for the source of the weeping. There was something disturbingly familiar about the whimpering sounds.

He stumbled forward and tripped over something on the ground. Not daring to reach out and touch whatever it was, for fear of what he might find, he moved cautiously onward. The weeping was softer now but punctuated by groans. Confused, he slowed to listen. They didn't sound like groans of pain, yet the voice moaned and muttered incoherently.

He reached the stalls and crushed his body against the adjoining wall. A pungent odour assailed his nostrils, a mixture of animal manure and damp straw, and he almost sneezed, grasping the bridge of his nose in time to suppress the violent urge.

The boy began to tremble, sweat pouring down his spine and pooling in the small of his back. He felt himself pulled into the building, moving ever closer to the source of the sobbing voice. And now it was mingled with another sound – a deep, rhythmic grunting. His trembling grew more violent until he thought his legs would fail

him. Yet onward he moved, one foot jerking in front of the other, curiosity overcoming his fear, until he reached the end of the stall where Pegasus, his grandfather's stallion, munched contentedly on a biscuit of hay, unperturbed by the noises in the night – and quite clearly not suffering from colic.

The sight that met his eyes would haunt him for years to come...

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