

The Birth and Young Life of Zeus

written by Leanne Guenther based on the Greek Mythology texts by Berens and Baldwin

Zeus's father, one of the Titans, was afraid of him before Zeus was even born.

His father's name was Cronus, and he ruled the whole world in those days. Someone had told him that one of his own children would take his throne, and he made up his mind that none of them would get the chance. Each time a baby was born, he swallowed it whole. There were five of them, one after another, and their mother, Rhea, could only watch.

When the sixth child was about to be born, she had a plan.

She wrapped a large gray stone in baby blankets and held it out to her husband. Cronus was in a hurry and never looked closely. He swallowed the stone and went away satisfied. Rhea carried the real baby, Zeus, across the sea to the island of Crete and hid him in a cave in the heart of a mountain.

The cave was cool and dim, with walls the color of wet slate and a little gold light that crept in at the entrance each morning. A spring trickled out of the rock at the back and collected in a clear green pool. A goat named Amalthea gave the baby her milk. Eagles flew in with ambrosia, the food of the gods. And the nymphs brought honey, thick and amber, still dripping from the comb.

The youngest of the nymphs looked after him the most. She was cheerful and she talked to the baby as if he could answer back. She called him "your majesty" when he was being good and "your enormous majesty" when he wasn't.

The hardest part was keeping hidden from Cronus. Babies cry and a baby's cry can travel a long way. So Rhea's priests stood outside the cave and clashed their shields together, over and over, so loudly that no other sound could be heard. Cronus never once heard his youngest son.

One afternoon the honey jar was empty. Zeus screamed, red in the face, his fists clenched tight. The air in the cave began to prickle. Then a thin white bolt of lightning leapt from his hand, crackling and bright as a splinter of the sun streaking toward a crack in the roof where the sky showed through.

The young nymph didn't think. She flung out her arms and the spring leapt out of the rock. It rose in a shining ribbon and wrapped around the bolt, and she hauled it down with everything she had. The water hissed. Steam filled the cave. For a moment she couldn't feel her fingers.

When the steam cleared, the bolt was gone and Zeus was hiccuping in his blankets, perfectly cheerful. The young nymph slid down the wall and sat on the floor... pale and dripping.

"Lightning from a clear sky," she told him shakily. "Your father would have found us by supper. Your majesty, you owe me a spring."

Zeus grew quickly. He became strong enough to lift boulders that three grown men could not move. But as he grew, he realized he couldn't stop thinking about his father and about the brothers and sisters he had swallowed. In the worlds of Greek gods and Titans being swallowed isn't the end. Zeus knew his siblings waited in the darkness to be saved.

One morning the young nymph found him standing at the cave entrance, looking out at the sea. He had been standing there a long time.

"You're thinking of leaving," she said. She tried to make it sound light, and almost managed it.

"I'm thinking of my brothers and sisters," said Zeus. "They've been waiting a long time."

"And if your father swallows you, too?"

"Then he'll find out what I'm like when I'm angry."

She laughed in spite of herself. "I certainly know exactly what you're like, your enormous majesty. You still owe me a spring."

Zeus grinned despite himself and the nymph stepped aside. He was finished with hiding, and he walked out of the cave to make his father give back his siblings.





