

## Perseus and Medusa

Acrisius' eyes widened in horror as the ancient Pythia (priestess) hissed, "King of Argos, listen well. Your daughter's son will spell your doom!"

"My daughter is unmarried. She has no son," he spluttered. The Pythia smiled knowingly through the swirling vapours that rose from the chasm below her, but spoke no more.

Acrisius, shocked, stumbled from the Oracle in Apollo's temple at Delphi. "This will not happen," he vowed.

On his arrival at his palace, his beautiful daughter, Danae, ran to greet him. Her joy turned to dismay as he roughly grabbed her arm. He dragged her to a bronze room at the top of the palace, thrusting her inside and locking the heavy door. Each day the door opened only to admit a young slave girl with food.

The room was open to the sky, but Danae had no means of escape. She could only wonder in sorrow why her father had turned against her so.

However, her pleas and sighs were heard in the heavens by Zeus. He looked down at the beautiful maiden, and immediately fell in love with her. So, one night, he visited her as a shower of golden light, and from this heavenly union, nine months later, a baby boy was born. He was called Perseus.

On discovering this, Acrisius raged and roared. Fearful of Zeus' wrath if he murdered them, however, he ordered his daughter and baby grandson to be put into a wooden chest and tipped into the raging sea. Danae's prayers were so desperate as they were pitched and tossed by the waves that Poseidon, god of the seas, was stirred by their plight and calmed the waters.

Even so, mother and baby bobbed around the sea for days and days, without food or water. Finally they were washed up on the strange, mysterious island of Serifos. Here they were taken in by a kind fisherman called Dyctus, brother to the king, Polydectes. He gave them shelter for many years. During that time, Perseus grew into a strong, handsome youth who was very protective of his lovely mother. Unhappily, she eventually came to the notice of the King.

King Polydectes was a cruel and evil tyrant. He summoned Danae and her son to court. Perseus did all he could to guard his mother against the King's unwanted attentions. Polydectes, angered, planned how he could get the young man out of the way. He ordered a feast and invited all the young men and women of the court. Unsuspecting, Perseus eagerly turned up, only to find that all the other guests were carrying an expensive present for the monarch.

“Are you not aware of our customs?” one guest sneered. And then, in front of the whole court, Polydectes called out, “Perseus, where is your gift?” Shamefaced, Perseus blustered, “I can bring you a fine gift, anything in the world, what is your wish?”

The clever king, playing on the young man’s embarrassment, replied, after a thoughtful pause.

“Anything? You would deliver to me anything in the world?” he asked. Perseus nodded.

“Well then, bring me the head of the Gorgon Medusa.”

There was a collective gasp from all in the room, except from Perseus.

“Consider it done!” he shouted, anxious to prove himself in any way he could.

The courtiers looked at each other in stunned surprise and then started to titter. The three female Gorgons were monstrous and deadly creatures that guarded the entrance to the underworld. Of the three, only Medusa was mortal and could be killed. Surely this ignorant young man had no idea what he was taking on, they thought.

Next morning, with a heavy heart, Perseus set off on his journey. Danae was distraught and begged him not to go. “I have made a promise,” he said resolutely. “Please don’t worry mother. I will return and free you from the attentions of this man!”

As he stood at the crossroads outside the town, his resolution wavered. In truth, he had no idea which path to take. Suddenly there appeared before him a young man with winged sandals and a tall woman in a white robe, holding a shield and spear.

Perseus knew immediately that he was in the company of the gods.

“Don’t be afraid,” said the young man, “the gods look kindly upon you. You are a son of Zeus. We wish to help you in your quest to slay Medusa. I am Hermes, messenger of the Gods and this is our sister Athena, goddess of wisdom and war.” Hermes then handed Perseus a very sharp sword, which he said belonged to Zeus. He next gave him his own winged sandals.

Athena handed him a highly polished shield. “Look only at Medusa’s reflection through this,” she warned, “for anyone casting their eyes upon her hideous face will be instantly turned to stone.”

Athena continued: “You must find the Old Grey Sisters that live on the northern shore. Make them tell you how to locate the daughters of Hesperus, the Nymphs who tend the garden of the Goddess Hera. They have been entrusted with items you need to defeat the Gorgon.”

"They will also tell you how to find her lair. Be bold yet cunning in your quest, we wish you well."

Perseus, thanked them for their gifts. "Others have failed, I know," he said, "so I will heed your advice gladly."

And so Perseus' quest began. He travelled first northwards, to seek out the Old Grey Sisters. Soon he approached their cave by the seas. Never had he seen a more revolting sight.

Hunched together in the mists and spray of the sea were three knotted, hideous old crones, as grey as the rocks that surrounded them. They had just one eye between them. As he cautiously approached, Perseus heard them muttering and passing the soft, slippery eye gingerly between them with their gnarled fingers. Each sister scolded the others and begged for a turn with the eye, in equal measure.

It was a awful sight, but one which Perseus knew he could use to his advantage. As one took the eye out to pass it to another, Perseus seized his chance. He flew down on his winged sandals and, snatching the eye, darted out of reach. "Where is it? Give it to me," screeched one old hag. "You've taken it. Give it back. It's my turn!" howled another, scrabbling about on the floor for the lost treasure.

"Quiet!" yelled Perseus, "listen to me!" All three fell silent, their wizened, sightless heads craning towards the voice. "I, Perseus, have your eye and I shall keep it and take it far away, unless you reveal to me the secret location of the daughters of Hesperus."

"Thief! Give us the eye, it is ours," screeched each crone. "How dare you steal it from us!"

"Tell me of what I seek or the eye will be lost to you," boomed Perseus. "You will end your days in darkness, if you fail me."

The sisters screamed, ranted and pleaded with Perseus, stumbling towards him, their skinny arms stretched out. They gasped and groaned as though in agony, until eventually one exhausted old crone muttered the information Perseus wanted. "Here's your eye," he called, throwing the gruesome object into the middle of the threesome. He took off as their screeching, scrabbling and quarrelling started once again.

Following their directions, he eventually reached a beautiful and peaceful garden.

Situated on the western edge of the world, it was the garden of Hera. The nymphs who lived there were pleased to help Perseus on his quest. From them he received

a knapsack that would safely contain Medusa's head, and a cap or 'helmet of darkness', which made the wearer invisible. Under the nymphs' directions he travelled onwards to the Gorgons' cave.

Their lair was unmistakable, surrounded, as it was, by the petrified remains of unwary visitors.

Perseus cautiously entered, crouching low to avoid the sloping roof, slimy green and dripping with water. The foul stench made his stomach heave. He crawled further in, peering ahead in the gloom. The distant snoring of the Gorgons, and the soft hissing of the snakes that crowned their heads, reached the anxious warrior. The air turned bitter, the cold stinging his body like a swarm of wasps. He crept silently on, using the shield to reflect the way ahead.

Suddenly, he tripped on a rock and a low grunt of pain escaped his lips. He froze, listening, peering. What was that? Oh, only a rat scuffling across his path. Then he saw a reflection in his shield. Medusa was lying there, twisted and grotesque. Her hands were claws and her skin was scaly. Her mouth, open in sleep, revealed tusks that served for teeth and a black protruding tongue. far too big for her mouth. Perseus gripped his gleaming sword until his knuckles turned white.

He glanced again at his shield. The live snakes twisted viciously about Medusa's head like dancing flames. He knew he would have but one chance. It was only the highly polished surface of the shield that was keeping him from turning to stone. Did he dare to step round that vile creature? Would the Gorgon sense his fear? He inched nearer and the snakes writhed to reach him, he slowly raised his weapon and, with one powerful movement, struck the Gorgon's neck, slicing off her head.

At the instance of death her eyes flew open. There was a roaring of thunder and out of the severed neck arose a magnificent winged horse. As it flew into the sky, dark shadows shifted. "Who dares desecrate our lair?" The furious Gorgons scanned the gloom with their deadly eyes, but Perseus, wearing the helmet of darkness, was invisible to them. Still using the shield as a mirror, he grabbed the loathsome snakes hair, lifted the head with its terrifying staring eyes and dropped it into his bag.

He darted back out of the lair and, using his sandals, followed the winged horse into the skies, to the vengeful cries of the remaining two Gorgons.

Perseus was eager to return home to rescue his mother. As he allowed himself a deep sigh and a brief smile, little did he know that his adventure was far from over.

He was approaching the coast, when he saw a beautiful young woman chained to a jagged shelf above the sea. The rocks around her were littered with the bones of men and beasts.

Clearly some terrible monster had feasted upon them. Appalled by the situation and infatuated with the girl's beauty, Perseus flew down to her. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he asked.

"My name is Andromeda, and I'm being sacrificed because my mother was so vain and boasted that I was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. In their anger they released the sea monster over the land. Only my death will appease it," wept the girl.

"Only the sea monster's death will appease me!" exclaimed a shocked Perseus. "Look out, it's on its way," cried Andromeda, pointing frantically out to sea. Perseus turned and watched the water ripple with the approach of the creature. As the great, scaly monster emerged below the rocks, Perseus hovered in the air on his winged sandals, challenging the brute and guarding the beautiful hostage. The monster opened its huge jaws, showing teeth as sharp as daggers.

Perseus swung his sword, hacking as the creature twisted and turned, snarling and snapping to get its mouth around its adversary.

But Perseus was quick. He darted this way and that, wielding his sword with punishing blows whilst evading the monster's lashing tail and cavernous jaws. The sea turned red with the creature's blood. Its movements weakened. Perseus launched one final attack and the monster was dead.

Andromeda was free and safe, in the arms of her adored and adoring hero.

The journey back home was long, with many dangers. However, now that Perseus had his beloved Andromeda by his side, he feared nothing and no-one.

Arriving at the palace of King Polydectes once more, Perseus could hear the sounds of the courtiers eating, drinking and dancing. He could see no sign of his mother and sent Andromeda to her rooms to stay there until he came to them. As he entered the great hall, the room quickly fell silent. Everyone stopped, everyone stared.

It was Perseus, alive and back amongst them! The silence was broken only by the regular, deliberate footsteps of Perseus as he slowly approached the King's table. The King stood to his full height and stared down at the young man. Speaking not a word, Perseus stopped and stared back at the King. The silence seemed to grow louder and louder.

It was eventually broken by Perseus.

With a half-smile on his face, he addressed the king directly. "My lord, you look surprised to see me."

Polydectes forced a smile but, in a voice which trembled with anger, answered him. "Every day I have looked for your return. Each morning I have thought about your quest and each night I have asked for any news of your success...or failure." Quiet returned to the room, all eyes fixed firmly on Perseus, who just stared. Feeling how awkward this silence was becoming, Polydectes, threw his arms wide and proclaimed, "Perseus, your return has brought joy to me as it will to all my subjects."

The young warrior looked down at the bag which hung from his left hand. With his right hand he reached over and slowly loosened its cords. "Then, your majesty, you should know that I have not only brought you joy, I have brought you the gift you wanted. And ...here it is!"

He reached into the sack, closed his eyes tightly, and, in one swift movement, raised the hideous trophy above his head. The wicked King and all of his courtiers turned instantly to stone, frozen for evermore.

Perseus was quickly reunited with his mother and within a few days Andromeda and Perseus were married. Dictys became king of Serifos. As for Acrisius, he did not escape the fate foretold by the Delphic Oracle. A few years later he was visiting the annual games at Larissa. Competing in the discus was none other than the young hero Perseus. Perseus threw his discus with all his might, but it veered off course, striking his grandfather, Acrisius, killing him instantly. The prophesy was fulfilled.