

Perseus and Medusa

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King Akrisios was a happy man. He ruled the abundant land of Argos¹ and the people of his kingdom lived in peace. His wife had died some years ago, but he had a daughter named Danaë. Her beauty and laughter filled his life with joy. She was growing up quickly and Akrisios looked forward to finding her a fine husband. He longed for the carefree embrace of grandchildren. A simple message from the gods shattered the king's hopes. On one of his visits to the temple of Apollo, the holy priestess whispered to him his terrible future: he would meet his death at the hands of his daughter's child, his own grandson.

Akrisios was desperate to avoid the death the priestess had foretold. He could not bring himself to kill Danaë, so he decided to hide her away, out of the sight of men. In spite of her tears and her pleading, he locked Danaë in a room deep underground, cut into the rock, lined with bronze, where the light of the sun never penetrated. Just one old woman was allowed to take the princess her meals. But nobody can build a barrier against Zeus. The great god had seen Danaë's loveliness. He changed himself into a shower of liquid gold and seeped into her prison to be with her. When Danaë's baby boy was born, she named him Perseus.

It is hard to hide the cries of a baby and Akrisios soon discovered Perseus. Although he realized that his life was beginning to unravel, he still could not bring himself to destroy his only family. So he ordered one of his carpenters to build a wooden box. He put Danaë and Perseus inside and nailed on the lid. Then Akrisios took the box to the shore and

¹ Argos: a town as well as a region in north central Greece



set it adrift, handing over his daughter and her child to the sea. He stood and watched as the box floated to the horizon, where it was engulfed by the swell. Then he turned in sadness back to his palace.

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The sun's chariot had crossed the skies many times when, on the coast of the far distant island of Seriphos,² a fisherman hauled up a battered and salt-crust-ed box in his net. His heart leaped at the thought of gold and silver, but when he forced open the lid and discovered a young woman and her baby, he realized he had found an even greater treasure. He had no family, no prospect of children to care for him in his old age. The fisherman recognized from her clothes and from the glow of her loveliness that Danaë was of royal blood and could never be his wife, but he took her and Perseus into his home. The little family lived together contentedly. The fisherman cared for and respected Danaë; she learned to spin and weave and tended a small field nearby. Perseus looked after the goats and fished and mended nets. He grew into an energetic young man, strong and good looking, but he knew little of the intricate web of life.

Polydektēs was the king of Seriphos. He learned of the presence of a strange woman on his island. Enticed by stories of her loveliness, he decided he had to see her for himself. As his birthday approached, Polydektēs ordered all those who lived on Seriphos to come to his palace and bring him a gift. As soon as he saw Danaë, he knew he had to possess her. But her son was a problem; he would be sure to try to protect his mother. The king had to get rid of him. When it was the fisherman's turn to present his family's gift, he opened his sack and unrolled a small rush mat at the feet of the king. Then on the mat he laid out two mullet,³ caught that very morning, their scales still gleaming silver. Next to them he placed a crumbly white cheese.

Polydektēs howled with laughter. "Is that the very best that you can scrape together from your wretched little life? Is that what you think is suitable for your king? You insult me with your smelly fish and stinking cheese."

Perseus's anger flared up at once and before his mother could stop him, he cried, "If these are not good enough for you, name the gift you want. Go ahead. I will bring you anything you want."

² Seriphos: island in the Aegean Sea southeast of Greece

³ mullet: fish valued primarily as food for other fish

Polydektēs smiled. He sat back in his throne. "Far from here, in the west, where the sun god dips his chariot into the encircling river of Okeanos and brings darkness to the earth, there is a desert. The three gorgons live there. Their hair writhes with snakes, their tusks are sharper than a boar's, their wings are quicker than an eagle's. A single glimpse of a gorgon's face drains the warmth, softness and moisture of life from humans and turns them to stone. Medusa is the only gorgon of the three who can be killed. You told me to name my gift . . ." The king leaned forward, stared into the eyes of Perseus, and spoke low and calm, "Bring me the head of Medusa."

High on Olympus, Athena heard the king's words. Deep inside the goddess there still glowed an ember of resentment at Medusa for an old insult. She called to Hermes to accompany her and the two children of Zeus set off for Seriphos. They found Perseus that evening sitting at the foot of an oak tree wrapped in his cloak. He had started immediately on his search for the gorgons and was tired from a long day's walking in the heat of the sun. Athena spoke to him softly.

"Perseus, the law of my father Zeus prevents me from doing your task for you, but I can help you on your way. The Nymphs can give you three gifts which you need to win Medusa's head, but you have to find them first. Only the three ancient Graiai, the Grey Sisters, know where the Nymphs live and they will not tell you unless you force them to. Hermes will guide you to their home. Watch the sisters, watch them carefully before you do anything."

Perseus set off again with Hermes as his guide. Soon he was walking in a land of grey. The earth was a fine ash in which his feet left perfect tracks. A thick layer of smoky clouds filled the sky. Rocks lay scattered around. Their surfaces were veined with cracks and crumbled to powder at a touch. As they reached the mouth of a narrow gorge, Hermes stopped. "You will find the Grey Sisters here," he said. "Go silently and watch them." There was a sudden flutter of wings. Hermes disappeared and a sparrow darted away into the clouds.

Perseus crept forward slowly. He crouched low behind a large rock and very gradually peered around it. A little way ahead of him sat three old women. They were bundled up in thickly woven cloaks the color of cracked pepper. Their waxy skin was deeply lined and their dank hair was plastered in thick hanks over their shoulders. They were muttering and mumbling, and from time to time one would stretch out a bony arm and take something from one of the others. Perseus waited and watched.

Finally, he saw what they were doing. Instead of two eyes each, the three Graiai had just one eye between them. Instead of each sister having her own teeth, they had just one tooth between them. When one of the sisters wanted to gnaw a few crumbs from the crusts of stale bread that lay around them, she asked for the tooth and pushed it into her gums. When one of the sisters had to keep watch for trespassers, she took the eye and slipped it into one of her gaping sockets. Perseus waited and watched again. At last he saw where their weakness lay. When one of the Graiai eased the eye out of her socket and reached out to pass it to one of her sisters, for that moment, none of them could see and the eye was there for the taking. Perseus waited. Soon it was time for a change of watcher. The sister with the eye eased it from her face and held it out. Perseus darted from his hiding place and snatched the eye from the tips of her fingers.

At first each sister thought that one of the others had dropped the eye and scrambled blindly around in the dust complaining about their carelessness. Then their frustration rose and they screamed in anger and fear. Perseus sat and watched them for a little while, enjoying his victory. Then he spoke.

"Listen to me, you hags. I am Perseus and I have what you are looking for. Tell me where I can find the Nymphs and you will have your eye back. If you refuse," he let the eyeball nestle in the palm of his hand, "I will squash the jelly out of it!" The three old women let out a howl of rage and scuttled towards the sound of Perseus' voice, but he skipped away from them with ease. "This is your last chance. Where are the Nymphs?" The sisters knew they could do nothing and told him what he wanted to know. "Thank you, ladies. Now here is your sight back," and he tossed the eye towards the women. It rolled along the ground gathering dust and grit on its sticky surface. Then he turned away and left them to their search. After he had gone some way, a cry of triumph—or was it pain?—told him they had found it.

Perseus passed out of the land of the Graiai and entered a thickly wooded valley. Here he found the Nymphs, who welcomed him graciously and gave him the three gifts Athena had mentioned. First, he pulled on a pair of winged boots, which gave him the power of flight. Second, he set on his head the helmet of death, which made him invisible and brought him under the protection of Hades. Third, he put across his shoulder a magic bag to contain Medusa's head. Finally, Hermes came to him again and gave him a hooked sword. Its keen edge was

jagged like the blade of a saw. Then Hermes pointed out the way and Perseus sped off towards the land of the gorgons.

Soon he came to a desolate place. No plant grew there. Bare rock stretched away to the horizon. No river, no stream, no trickle of water slaked the thirst of the arid earth. The gods avoided this barren waste. Only the all-seeing eye of the sun gazed down on its emptiness. High above this desert, Perseus soared in the vast vault of the sky, searching for the gorgons. He found them dozing, nestled together in a sandy hollow. Athena had sent the sleep god to drip drowsiness into their eyes. Perseus hovered overhead. He was unsure which of them was the mortal Medusa, but Athena, unseen, guided his hand. Turning his face away, he stretched out his left hand and grasped Medusa's hair.

At once, a squirming mass of snakes entwined his arm. He felt his throat tighten at their disgusting touch. He raised his sword and struck. There was a gasp, almost a sob and then a long, sinking hiss. Perseus thrust the writhing head into his bag and sped away. Behind him, Medusa's headless body thrashed about and her sisters awoke. They could not see Perseus, but quickly they caught his scent and with a screech of grief and fury gave chase. They hunted Perseus across the desert and over the waters of Okeanos, but his winged boots and the guiding hand of Hermes swept him away from them.

At last, Perseus arrived back in lands where humans lived. Far below him, at the end of a rocky finger of land jutting out into the sea, he could see something moving. As he swooped down, he saw that a young woman had been chained to a rock and that a crowd of people was gathered on the nearby beach watching. At that very moment, the crowd roared out in fear and pointed out to sea. Perseus slowed down to see what was happening. Deep below the sparkling surface of the water a vast, dark shape appeared. It rose swiftly and burst from the sea in a sputtering surge of salt spray. Perseus reached into his bag, gripped Medusa's head and dived down from the sky.

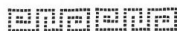
The people on the beach had barely glimpsed the sea monster's enormous scaly head and its gaping jaws bearing down on their princess Andromeda, when time seemed to pause for a moment and then jerk again into motion. Suddenly, instead of a monster there was a new, misshapen rock out at sea. A young stranger was standing before their king holding Princess Andromeda's hand. Then the whole crowd cheered and wept with joy. The king embraced his daughter and announced a royal wedding and a month of rejoicing.

It was over a year later that Perseus and his wife arrived back in Seriphos. When he reached his old home, he found his mother gone and the fisherman alone. The fisherman explained that Danaë had resisted the king's desires in the hope that Perseus might return. Now she thought that her only hope was with the gods and had taken refuge at the altar of Zeus. King Polydektes and his men had surrounded her there and were starving her into submission. Perseus left Andromeda with the fisherman and taking his bag set off to find his mother.

When Polydektes saw Perseus, he mocked him. "So you are back at last. It has taken you a long time to bring my gift, but I am always happy to have a birthday present, even a late one. I suppose you have Medusa's head in that little bag. I can't say that I think much of the wrapping!" The king and his followers roared with laughter, but when Perseus drew the gorgon's head from his bag, their limbs hardened, their blood turned to sand in their veins and the laughter stopped. Then Athena came to Perseus and gently took the head from him. She was wearing her aegis skin across her chest. In its very center she set the gorgon's face to paralyze her enemies with terror and she fringed the skin with the snakes.

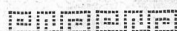
Perseus made the faithful fisherman king of Seriphos—he learned to be a wise king and his people grew to love him. Then, with Andromeda and Danaë, Perseus set off back to his birthplace, back to Argos to see his grandfather. When they reached Argos, Akrisios was gone. He had heard of his grandson's imminent return and had run away to escape the death the priestess had foretold. Perseus was hailed as the new king.

Some years later, in a distant land, Perseus was competing in an athletics competition. When it was his turn to throw the discus, he threw so far that the discus hit an old man in the crowd and killed him on the spot. Nobody knew the old man, so Perseus had the body brought back to Argos for burial. No one recognized the old man until Danaë came to mourn. She stood over the body and gazed down at the lifeless face of her father Akrisios. ∞



Look, Medusa!

SUNITI NAMJOSHI



Medusa lived on a remote shore
troubled no one: fish swam, birds flew, and the sea
did not turn to glass. All was as before.
A few broken statues lay untidily
on the lonely beach, but other than these
there was nothing wrong with that peaceful scene.
And so, when the hero, Perseus, came to seize
the Gorgon's head, he thought he might have been
mistaken. He watched for a while, but she turned
nothing to stone. The waves roared as waves will,
till at last the hidden hero burned
to be seen by her whom he had come to kill.
'Look, Medusa, I am Perseus!' he cried,
thus gaining recognition before he died.