



Perseus and the Gorgon

Long ago, a huge wooden chest washed up on the shores of Seriphos, a little island not too far from mainland Greece. Inside the chest were two people, a young woman named Danae and her baby son. Now, the story of just how two people wound up locked in a chest floating in the Aegean Sea is a different story altogether: for now, our story is about how the baby – whose name was Perseus – would grow up to take on an epic quest to retrieve the head of Medusa.

Growing up on Seriphos, Perseus was very happy. King Polydectes had taken him and his mother in and allowed them to live in the castle, and Perseus had many friends on the island who he could run around and explore with. For Danae, however, life was far from perfect: the king was unmarried and kept asking her to marry him, although Danae did not like the King one bit, and she was worried that one day he would begin to resent her son. In fact, her fears soon came true, as over the years Polydectes became increasingly afraid of Perseus and called him lazy and a drain on the household to anyone who would listen.

One day, the king came up with an evil plan to get Perseus out of the way, and he set an ultimatum before him. 'It's time you earned your keep,' he said, 'either your mother agrees to marry me, or you must perform a task' When Perseus agreed to the job, Polydectes smiled cruelly as his plan fell into place. 'You, boy, will bring me the head of the gorgon Medusa.' Everyone gasped – they had all heard stories of the monster with snakes for hair who could turn people to stone with just a look. Danae turned to Polydectes, about to ask him to reconsider, when Perseus replied: 'I'll do it. I'll get you the head – and you'll leave me and my mother alone, forever.' Polydectes agreed, but added that Perseus had to return within a month. 'So you'd better get packing, boy,' he added, laughing to himself.

Later, Danae helped Perseus prepare for his quest, giving him armour and food for the journey. When the time came for Perseus to leave, she pulled him aside and spoke to her son: 'Be safe, my child. Polydectes does not intend for you to return from this quest – he wants you to be killed by Medusa, that is clear enough. What he does not know, though, is that you are Zeus' son – a hero just like Hercules or Achilles – you were born for this. I'll pray to the gods every day for you to succeed. Keep an eye out for their signs!'

Perseus, stunned into silence, could only return his mother's hug and step numbly into the ship as it prepared to take off, and he kept thinking of his



mother's words all through the voyage. Soon the ship docked, and Perseus set out alone on his quest.

For days he walked around towns and villages asking everyone the way to the Gorgon's cave, but no one would tell him. Some turned away in fright simply at the mention of Medusa's name; others told him to give up on his quest: 'it's madness! No one gets out of there alive,' they said, shaking their heads at this young "hero" determined to throw himself in danger's way.

After nearly two weeks of this, Perseus stopped at Zeus' temple to make offerings, still unable to believe that he was really the son of a god. After he had prayed and rested a while in the cool of the temple, he set out once again. Suddenly a man and a woman appeared before him in the road and Perseus was almost blinded by their brilliance – they were gods! Straightaway he flung himself on the floor, hoping that these gods were happy with him and not after some kind of punishment – he'd heard enough stories of the gods' tempers.

'Perseus,' the goddess said, and he looked up again. 'I am Athena.'

'And I,' said the other grandly, 'am Hermes, god of tricksters and thieves, leader of souls to the underworld, inventor of the l...' Here, at a withering look from Athena, the god broke off suddenly. 'Ahem...'

Athena rolled her eyes and turned back to Perseus. 'We know what brings you here, mortal. You seek the Gorgon's head.'

Perseus tried to gather his thoughts. 'Yes,' he replied, 'I must defeat the monster and return to Seriphos in two weeks, or my mother will be married against her will to the evil king who rules the island. I just... need to find out where Medusa lives...'

'You need quite a bit more than that!' Hermes scoffed. 'She has a thousand snakes for hair and a gaze that turns any living being to stone – even the gods hate her and avoid her lair.'

Perseus went pale. 'But you're in luck,' Hermes continued. 'We've come on Zeus' orders to bring you exactly what you need. You will be invisible to all while wearing this helmet, and these winged sandals will speed you on your journey home.'

'And,' Athena broke in, producing a brilliantly gleaming shield out of nowhere, 'you must use this shield to avoid the monster's gaze: her reflection will not harm



you – but if you meet her eyes, you are doomed and not even a god will be able to help you. Take this too,’ she added, giving Perseus a very ordinary-looking bag. ‘Medusa’s gaze will be deadly even after she is dead – keep her head in here where it will be safe.’

Athena and Hermes pointed the hero in the right direction, reminding him of the creature’s danger, and with that, disappeared as quickly as they had come. Perseus couldn’t believe his luck – literal gifts from the gods! Still marvelling, he knew better than to waste time, and set off again, this time in the direction of Medusa’s lair.

It was nearing sunset as Perseus approached the cave, and in the distance he could see crowds of people waiting outside the entrance. Relief flooded through him: he wasn’t alone! Surely it couldn’t be such a difficult task if so many people were there to try. In fact, he started to worry what might happen if someone else defeated the monster and took away the head... but he quickly pushed those thoughts from his mind, and dashed on toward the cave.

When he was close by, Perseus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and goose-bumps appeared down his arms, as he realised that the people around the cave’s entrance were standing just a bit *too* still. By now it was almost fully dark... he reached out to tap the closest person on the shoulder and jumped back in horror as he felt cold stone under his fingers. ‘It can’t be!’ he thought desperately, as he rushed to check the others, hoping against hope that one – just one! – would be alive. ‘No no no no no...’ he cried, as he found that every person had been turned to stone, and, worse, each had an expression frozen in terror.

Dread overtook our hero; Perseus crept back to the undergrowth and slumped against a tree, hiding from the sight of the cave and Medusa’s terrified victims. He was afraid – there was no other word for it. He sat and despaired for what seemed like hours: how would he, a boy on his first trip away from his little island home, manage to defeat the monster when all the others had ended up turned to stone? And what would happen to his mother if he didn’t manage it? Could he just go home? His mind went around and around in circles like this, until a glinting of light caught his eye. The moon had risen and its light had caught the shield’s reflection – surely a sign from the gods, reminding Perseus of their favour and his quest, he thought to himself.

With a deep breath, Perseus grabbed the shield, put on his helmet, and stood up – ‘better to get it over with,’ he thought, steeling himself for the dangerous task



ahead of him. Once more, he walked up to the cave's entrance and this time, holding the mirror up in front of his face, walked in to face the monster.

The cave quickly led to a large hall full of wide columns, a kind of maze. Dotted around the room were more of Medusa's victims but Perseus tried to keep his mind off the danger, looking around each corner with his shield before progressing. After a few turns, he started to hear a hissing noise which got louder with every step – it echoed nastily around the walls as if there were snakes hiding all over the room.

Perseus made himself carry on walking and tried to listen for something – anything – other than the hissing. Finally he heard a faint swishing sound far off to his left, and again closer. With his back to a column, he reached out with the shield and glanced up to see the reflection of Medusa's terrifying face, contorted in rage and surrounded by countless snakes, their fangs dripping with venom, much closer than he had expected! As he flinched back the monster rushed forward, but Perseus was prepared – he held the shield up again and suddenly Medusa caught sight of her own reflection. There was a deafening silence as her own petrifying gaze worked its terrible magic, and she began to turn to stone just as her many victims had.

Quickly Perseus leapt out from behind the column, keeping his face turned away from the gaze which he knew was still just as deadly, and lopped off the monster's horrible head! Into the magic bag it went, and Perseus whooped with the excitement! He had done it – he had proved himself a true hero! As his cheers echoed eerily around the hall he was reminded that his quest was not yet over, and he made his way back to the outside world, ready to test out his winged sandals and return to Seriphos to deal with Polydectes – but that is a story for another time...