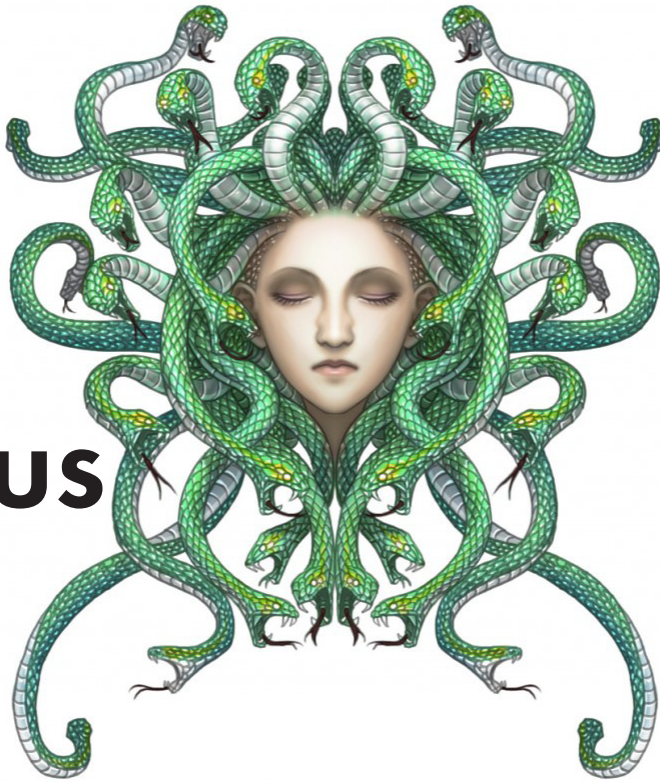


# Perseus



Once upon a time in the land of Argos, there reigned a king called Acrisius, the father of one fair daughter. Danae was her name, and she was very dear to the king until a day when he longed to know what lay hid for him in the lap of the gods and consulted an oracle. With a furrowed brow, he returned from the temple, for the oracle had told him that when his daughter Danae had borne a son, by the hand of that son death must surely come upon him. And because the fear of death in him was stronger than the love of his daughter, Acrisius resolved that by sacrificing her he would baffle the gods and frustrate Death itself. A great tower of brass was speedily built at his command, and Danae was placed in this prison to drag out her weary days.

But who can escape the designs of the gods? From Olympus, great Zeus himself looked down and saw the airy princess sighing away her youth. And, full of pity and of love, he himself entered the brazen tower as a stream of golden light, and Danae became the bride of Zeus and happily passed with him the time of her imprisonment. In time, to her a son was born, a beautiful and kingly child, and great was the wrath of her father when he heard the infant's cries within the tower. He ordered his guards to open the door to the tower and he hustled Danae

and her newly born babe, the little Perseus, to the seashore. Once at the water's edge, he put them in a great chest, and set them adrift to be a plaything for winds and waves and a prey for the cruel and hungry sea. If his daughter and grandson were to be killed at sea, it would be Poseidon's fault, not his own, he figured.

For days and nights, the mother and child were tossed on the billows, yet no harm came to them, and one morning the chest grounded on the rocky beach of Seriphos, an island in the Aegean Sea. Here, a fisherman discovered this strange flotsam and jetsam of the waves and took the mother and child to Polydectes, the king, and the years that followed were peaceful years for Danae and for Perseus. But as Perseus grew, becoming each day more goodly to look upon, more fearless, more ready to gaze with serene courage into the eyes of gods and of men, an evil thing befell his mother. She was but a girl when he was born, and as the years passed she grew ever more fair. And the crafty eyes of old Polydectes, the king, watched her eagerly, always more hotly desiring her for his wife. But Danae, the beloved of Zeus himself, had no wish to wed the old king, and she rejected his suit. Behind her, as she knew well, was the stout arm of her son Perseus, and while Perseus was there, the king could do her no harm. But Perseus, unwitting of the danger his mother faced each day, sailed the seas unfeigningly, and felt that peace and safety surrounded him on every side.

In fact, Perseus' bravery was bolstered by his dreams. It seemed the gods visited him as he slept, giving counsel and courage. On a recent night, he dreamed Athena, goddess of war, has visited him, whispering in his ear, "I am Pallas Athena and to me the souls of men are known. Those whose fat hearts are as those of the beasts that perish do I know. They live at ease. No bitter sorrow is theirs, nor any fierce joy that lifts their feet free from the cumbering clay. But dear to my heart are the souls of those whose tears are tears of blood, whose joy is as the joy of the Immortals. Pain is theirs, and sorrow. Disappointment is theirs, and grief. Yet their love is as the love of those who dwell on Olympus. Patient they are and long-suffering, and ever they hope, ever do they trust. Ever they fight, fearless and unashamed, and when the sum of their days on earth is accomplished, wings, of whose existence they have never had knowledge, bear them upwards, out of the mist and din and strife of life, to the life that has no ending."

Then she laid her hand on the hand of Perseus. "Perseus," she said, "art thou of those whose dull souls who forever dwell in pleasant ease, or wouldst thou be as one of the Immortals?"

And in his dream, Perseus answered without hesitation. "Rather let me die a youth, living my life to the full, fighting ever, suffering ever," he said, "than live

at ease like a beast that feeds on flowery pastures and knows no fiery gladness, no heart-bleeding pain.”

Then Athena, laughing for joy because she loved so well a hero’s soul, showed him a picture that made even his brave heart sick with dread, and she told him a terrible story.

In the dim, cold, far west, she said, there lived three sisters. One of them, Medusa, had been one of her priestesses, golden-haired and most beautiful, but when Athena found that she was as wicked as she was lovely, swiftly had she meted out a punishment. Every lock of her golden hair had been changed into a venomous snake. Her eyes, that had once been the cradles of love, were turned into love’s stony tombs. Her rosy cheeks were now of Death’s own livid hue. A grinning mask looked on the world, and to the world her gaping mouth and protruding tongue meant a horror before which the world stood terrified and mute. There are some sadnesses too terrible for human hearts to bear, so it came to pass that in the dark cavern in which she dwelt, and in the shadowy woods around it, all living things that had met the awful gaze of her hopeless eyes were turned into stone. Then Athena showed Perseus, mirrored in a brazen shield, the face of the fallen priestess. And as Perseus looked, his soul grew chill within him. Athena, in low voice, asked him, “Perseus, would you have the will to end the sorrow of this piteous sinful one?” He answered, “Anything you ask, I will do – the gods helping me.”

And Pallas Athena, smiling again, left him to dream, and Perseus awoke, in sudden fear, and found that in truth he had but dreamed, yet held his dream as a holy thing in the secret treasure-house of his heart.

In the daylight, he found that his mother walked in fear of Polydectes, the king. She told her son – a strong man now, though young in years - about the king’s unwelcomed advances. Perseus saw red blood, and gladly would he have driven his keen blade far home in the heart of Polydectes. But his vengeance was to be delayed by the wily king.

Polydectes was hosting a feast, and on that day everyone in the land brought costly offerings to honor him. Perseus alone came empty-handed, and as he stood in the king’s court as though he were a beggar, the other youths mocked him.

“Thou sayest thy father is one of the gods!” one young man said. “Where is thy godlike gift, O Perseus?”

And Polydectes, glad to humble the lad who was protector of his mother’s honor, echoed those foolish taunts.

“Where is the gift of the gods that this noble son of Danae has brought me?” he asked, and his fat cheeks and loose mouth quivered with ugly merriment.

Then Perseus, his head thrown back, gazed in the bold eyes of Polydectes. Son of Zeus he was, indeed, as he looked with royal scorn at those whom he despised.

“A godlike gift thou shalt have, in truth, O king,” he said, and his voice rang out as a trumpet-call before the battle. “The gift of the gods shall be thine. The gods helping me, thou shalt have...the head of Medusa!”

A laugh, half-born, died in the throats of Polydectes and of those who listened, and Perseus strode out of the palace, a glow in his heart, for he knew that Pallas Athena had lit the fire that burned in him now, and that though he should shed the last drop of his life’s blood to win what he sought, right would triumph and wrong must be defeated

Still quivering with anger, Perseus went down to the blue sea that gently whispered its secrets to the shore on which he stood.

“If Athena would but come,” he thought – “if only my dreams might come true.”

For, like many a boy before and since, Perseus had dreamed of gallant, fearless deeds. Like many a boy before and since, he had been the hero of many great adventures in his heart. So he prayed, “Come to me! I pray you, Pallas Athena, come, and let me dream true.”

His prayer was answered.

Into the sky, there came a little silver cloud that grew and grew ever closer, and then, as in his dream, Athena came to him and smiled on him as the sun smiles on the water in spring. Nor was she alone. Beside her stood Hermes of the winged shoes, and Perseus knelt before the two in worship. Then, very gently, Athena gave him counsel, and then she gave more than counsel.

In his hand, she placed a polished shield; no mirror shone more brightly than this shield’s smooth surface.

“Do not look at Medusa herself,” she advised. “Look only on her image here reflected – then strike home hard and swiftly. And when her head is severed, wrap it in the goatskin on which the shield hangs. So wilt thou return in safety and in honor.”

“But how, then, shall I cross the wet gray fields of this watery way?” asked Perseus. “If only I were a white-winged bird that skims across the waves.”

And, with the smile of a loving comrade, Hermes laid his hand on Perseus’ shoulder. “My winged shoes shall be thine,” he said, “and the white-winged sea-birds shalt thou leave far, far behind.”

“Yet another gift is thine,” said Athena. “Gird on, as gift from the gods, this sword that is immortal.”

For a moment, Perseus lingered. “May I not bid farewell to my mother?” he asked. “May I not offer burnt-offerings to thee and to Hermes, and to my father Zeus himself?”

But Athena rejected his respectful idea. At his mother’s weeping, she reasoned, his heart might relent, and the only offering that the Olympians desired was the head of Medusa.

Then, like a fearless young golden eagle, Perseus spread out his arms, and the winged shoes carried him across the seas to the cold northern lands just as Athena had directed.

Each day, his shoes took him a seven days’ journey, and ever the air through which he passed grew more chill, till at length he reached the land of everlasting snow, where the black ice never knows the conquering warmth of spring, and where the white surf of the moaning waves freezes solid even as it touches the shore.

It was a dark, grim place to which he came, and in a gloomy cavern by the sea lived the three gray sisters that Athena had told him he must seek. Old and gray and horrible they were, with only one tooth and one eye amongst them. From hand to hand, they passed the eye, muttering and shivering in the blackness and the cold.

Boldly, Perseus spoke to them and asked them to guide him to the place where Medusa and her sisters, the Gorgons, dwelt.

“No others know where they dwell,” he said. “Tell me, I pray thee, the way that I may find them.”

But the Gray Sisters were kin to the Gorgons, and hated all the children of men, and ugly was their evil mirth as they mocked Perseus, refusing to tell him where Medusa could be found.

Perseus was focused on accomplishing his goal. As the eye passed from one withered, clutching hand to another, he swiftly held out his own strong young palm, and in her blindness one of the three placed the eye directly in his hand.

“Wicked you are and cruel at heart, and blind shall you remain forever unless you tell me where I may find the Gorgons,” he challenged them. “Tell me only that, and I give back your eye.”

Then the women whimpered and begged of him, and when they found that all their beseeching was in vain, at length they told him.

“Go south,” they said, “so far south that at length thou comest to the uttermost limits of the sea, to the place where the day and night meet. There is the Garden of the Hesperides, and of them must thou ask the way....Now, give us back our eye!” They wailed again most piteously, and Perseus tenderly placed the eye into a greedy trembling old hand; in an instant, he launched and flew south like a swallow that is glad to leave the gloomy frozen lands behind.

To the garden of the Hesperides he came at last, and amongst the myrtles and roses and sunny fountains he found the nymphs who there guard the golden fruit, and begged them to tell him which direction he must wing his way in order to find the Gorgons. But the nymphs could not tell.

“We must ask Atlas,” they said, “the giant who sits high up on the mountain and with his strong shoulders keeps the heavens and earth apart.”

And with the nymphs, Perseus went up the mountain and asked the patient giant to guide him to the place of his quest.

“Far away I can see them,” said Atlas, “on an island in the great ocean. But unless thou wears the helmet of Hades himself, thy going will be in vain.”

“What is this helmet?” asked Perseus. “And how can I acquire it?”



“One who wears the helmet of the ruler of Dark Places will be as invisible as a shadow in the blackness of night,” answered Atlas, “but no mortal can obtain it, for only the Immortals can brave the terrors of the Shadowy Land and return. Yet if thou wilt promise me one thing, the helmet shall be thine.”

“What is it that you want?” asked Perseus.

And Atlas said, “For many a long year have I borne this earth, and I grow weary of my burden. When thou hast slain Medusa, let me gaze upon her face, that I may be turned into stone and suffer no more forever.”

And Perseus promised. At the bidding of Atlas, one of the nymphs sped down to the land of the Shades, and for seven days Perseus and her sisters awaited her return. Her face was as the face of a white lily and her eyes were dark with sadness when she came, but with her she bore the helmet of Hades, and when she and her sisters had kissed Perseus and bidden him a sorrowful farewell, he put on the helmet and vanished.

Soon, the gentle light of day had gone and he found himself in a place where clammy fog blotted out all things and the sea was black. And in that silent land where there is neither night nor day, nor cloud nor breeze nor storm, he found the cave of horrors in which the Gorgons dwelt.

Two of them, like monstrous swine, lay asleep, but a third figure paced the hall, turning her head from side to side, as if on patrol. She moaned aloud and shrieked in her despair because the golden tresses of her hair were moved by writhing snakes that hissed and spit as she walked.

In the shield of Pallas Athena, this picture was mirrored, and as Perseus gazed on it his soul grew heavy, seeing the beauty and the beast intertwined. “To slay her will be kind indeed,” he thought to himself. “Her beauty has become corruption, and all the joy of life for her has passed into the agony of remembrance, the torture of unending remorse.”

When he saw her brazen claws that were greedy to strike and to slay, his face grew stern, and he paused no longer. She rounded a corner and Perseus stood poised; at the perfect moment, using the mirrored reflection as his guide, he swung his sword and smote her neck with all his might. To the rocky floor the body of Medusa fell with brazen clang, and he wrapped her head in the goatskin, while he turned his eyes away. Aloft then he sprang, and flew swifter than an arrow from the bow of Artemis.

With hideous outcry, the two other Gorgons awakened to find the body of Medusa, and, like foul vultures that hunt a little song-bird, they flew in pursuit of Perseus. For many a league, they kept up the chase, and their howling was grim to hear. Across the seas they flew, and over the yellow sand of the Libyan desert, and as Perseus flew before them, some blood-drops fell from the severed head of Medusa, and from them bred the vipers that are found in the desert to this day. But bravely did the winged shoes of Hermes bear Perseus on, and by nightfall the Gorgon sisters had passed from sight, and Perseus found himself once more in the garden of the Hesperides. Ere he sought the nymphs, he knelt by the sea to cleanse from his hands Medusa’s blood, and still does the seaweed that we find on sea-beaches after a storm bear the crimson stains.

And when Perseus had received glad welcome from the fair dwellers in the garden of the Hesperides, he sought Atlas so that he might fulfill his promise; eagerly Atlas beheld him, for he was weary of his long toil. Without speaking a word, Perseus uncovered the face of Medusa and held it up for the Titan to gaze upon. When Atlas looked upon her whose beauty had once been as pure as a flower in spring and he saw only anguish and cruelty, foul wickedness, and hideous despair, his heart grew like stone within him. To stone, too, turned his great, patient face, and into stone grew his vast limbs and strong, crouching back. So Atlas the Titan became

Atlas the Mountain, and still his head, white-crowned with snow, and his great shoulders far up in misty clouds, would seem to hold apart the earth and the sky.

Then Perseus again took flight, and in his flight he passed over many lands. Far down below him as he flew one day he saw something white on a purple rock in the sea.

It seemed too large to be a snowy-plumaged bird, and he darted swiftly downward that he might see more clearly. The spray lashed against the steep rocks of the desolate island, and showered itself upon a figure that at first he took to be a statue of white marble. The figure was actually that of a girl, slight and very youthful,



yet more fair even than any of the nymphs of the Hesperides. Invisible in his Helmet of Darkness, Perseus drew near, and saw that the fragile white figure was shaken by shivering sobs. The waves, every few moments, lapped up on her little cold white feet, and he saw that heavy chains held her imprisoned to that great rock in the sea. A deep anger stirred the heart of Perseus, and swiftly he took the helmet from his head and hovered beside her. The maid gave a cry of terror, but there was no evil thing in the face of Perseus. Nothing but strength and kindness and purity shone out of his steady eyes.

Thus when, very gently, he asked what was the meaning of her cruel imprisonment, she told him her piteous story. Her mother was queen of Ethiopia, she said, and very, very beautiful. But when the queen had boasted that no nymph who played amongst the snow-crested billows of the sea was as fair as she, a terrible punishment was sent to her. All along the coast of her father's kingdom, a loathsome sea monster terrorized the people and hideous were its ravages. Men and women, children and animals, all were equally desirable food, and the whole land of Ethiopia lay in mourning because of the beast. At last her father, the king, had consulted an oracle that he might find help to rid the land of the monster. And the oracle had told him that only when his fair daughter, Andromeda, had been sacrificed to the creature that scourged the sea-coast would the country go free. Thus had she been brought there by her parents that one life might be given for many, and that her mother's broken heart might expunge her sin of vanity. Even as Andromeda spoke, the sea was broken by the track of a creature that cleft the water as does the forerunning gale of a mighty storm. And Andromeda gave a piteous cry.

"Lo! he comes!" she cried. "Save me! Oh, save me! I am too young to die."

Then Perseus darted high above her and for an instant hung poised like a hawk that is about to strike. Then, like the hawk that cannot miss its prey, swiftly he swooped down and smote with his sword the devouring monster of the ocean. Not once, but again and again he struck the beast, until all the water round the rock was churned into blood-stained froth, and until his loathsome combatant floated on its back, mere carrion for the scavengers of the sea.

Then Perseus hewed off the chains that held Andromeda, and in his arms he held her tenderly as he flew with her to her father's land.

Who so grateful then as the king and queen of Ethiopia? And who so happy as Andromeda? For Perseus, her deliverer, dearest and greatest hero to her in all the world, not only had given her her freedom but had given her his heart.

Willingly and joyfully, her father agreed to allow Andromeda to become Perseus' bride. No marriage feast so splendid had ever been held in Ethiopia in the memory of man, but as it went on, an angry man with a band of sullen-faced followers strode into the banquet hall. It was Phineus, he who had been betrothed to Andromeda, yet who had not dared to strike a blow against the monster for her rescue. Straight at Perseus he and his men rushed, and fierce was the fight that then began. But from the goatskin where it lay hid, Perseus drew forth the head of Medusa, and Phineus and his warriors were instantly turned into stone.

For seven days, the marriage feast lasted, but on the eighth night Pallas Athena came to Perseus in a dream.



"Nobly and well hast thou played the hero, O son of Zeus," she said. "But now that thy toil is near an end and thy sorrows have ended in joy, I come to claim the shoes of Hermes, the helmet of Hades, the sword and the shield that are mine own. Yet the head of the Gorgon must thou yet guard awhile, for I would have it laid in my temple at Seriphos so I may wear it on my shield for evermore."

As she ceased to speak, Perseus awoke, and lo, the shield, helmet, sword and winged shoes were gone. His dream was no false vision.

Then did Perseus and Andromeda sail away westward, until at length they came to the blue waters of the

Aegean Sea, and saw rising out of the waves before them the rocks of Seriphos. When the rowers rested on their long oars and the red-prowed ship ground on the pebbles of the beach, Perseus and his bride sought Danae, the fair mother of Perseus.

Black grew the brow of the son of Danae when she told him what cruel things she had suffered in his absence from the hands of Polydectes. Straight to the palace Perseus strode, and there found the king and his friends at their revels. For seven years Perseus had been away, and now it was no longer a lad who stood in the palace hall, but a man in stature and bearing like one of the gods. Polydectes alone knew him, and from his wine he looked up with mocking gaze.



“So thou hast returned, O nameless son of a deathless god,” he said. “Thou didst boast of a gift, but methinks thy boast was an empty one!”

But even as he spoke, the jeering smile froze on his face, and the faces of those who sat with him stiffened in horror.

“O king,” Perseus said, “I swore that, the gods helping me, thou shouldst have the head of Medusa. The gods have helped me. Behold the Gorgon’s head.”

Wild horror in their eyes, Polydectes and his friends gazed on the unspeakable thing, and as they gazed they turned into stone – a ring of gray stones that still sit on a hillside of Seriphos.

With his wife and his mother, Perseus then sailed away, for he had a great longing to take Danae back to the land of her birth and to see if her father, Acrisius, might repent of his cruelty to her and to his grandson. But there he found that the sins of Acrisius had been punished and that he had been driven from his throne and his own land. The people of Argos were heartened by the arrival of Danae, their castaway princess, and they eagerly acclaimed the heroic Perseus to be their glorious king. But Perseus refused. “I go to seek Acrisius,” he said. “My mother’s father is your king.”

Again he sailed away on a difficult mission, searching for the fallen king. Finally, in the town of Larissa, a sporting festival was underway when Perseus arrived. Beside the king in the royal viewing booth sat Acrisius, an aged man, yet a kingly

one indeed. And Perseus thought, “If I, a stranger, take part in the sports and carry away prizes from the men of Larissa, surely the heart of Acrisius will soften towards me.”

Thus did he take off his helmet and armor, and stood unclothed beside the youths of Larissa, and so godlike was he that they all said, amazed, “Surely this stranger comes from Olympus and is one of the Immortals.”

He chose a discus from the stack of equipment, and full five fathoms beyond those of the others he cast it, and a great shout arose from those who watched, and Acrisius cried out as loudly as all the rest.

“Further still!” they cried. “Further still canst thou hurl! Thou art a hero, indeed!”

And Perseus, putting forth all his strength, hurled once again, and the discus flew from his hand like a bolt from the hand of Zeus. The watchers held their breath and made ready for a shout of delight as they saw it speed on, further than mortal man had ever hurled one before. But joy died in their hearts when a gust of wind caught the discus as it sped and hurled it straight at Acrisius, the king. And with a sigh like the sigh that passes through the leaves of a tree as the woodman fells it and it crashes to the earth, so did Acrisius fall. To his side rushed Perseus, and lifted him tenderly in his arms. But the spirit of Acrisius had fled. And with a great cry of sorrow Perseus called to the people, “Behold! I am Perseus, grandson of the man I have slain! Who can avoid the decree of the gods?”

For many years thereafter, Perseus reigned as king of Argos, and to him and to his fair wife were born four sons and three daughters. Wisely and well he reigned, and when, at a good old age, Death took him and the wife of his heart, the gods, who had always held him dear, took him up among the stars to live forever and ever. And there still, on clear and starry nights, we may see him holding the Gorgon’s head. Near him are the father and mother of Andromeda – Cepheus and Cassiopeia – and close beside them stands Andromeda with her white arms spread out across the blue sky as in the days when she stood chained to the rock. And those who sail the watery ways look up for guidance to one whose voyaging is done and whose warfare is accomplished, and take their bearings from that constellation.

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