

The story of Perseus and Medusa

King Acrisius of Argos learned from an oracle that his daughter Danae would have a son, and that son would kill him. To prevent this he locked Danae in an underground room made of bronze, but Zeus turned himself into a shower of gold and visited Danae. Danae gave birth to a son, Perseus; the king was very angry and so he put Danae and Perseus into a wooden chest and set it adrift in the sea. Eventually the chest washed ashore on the island of Seriphos. A kindly fisherman, Dictys, took them in and looked after them as Perseus grew up.

Perseus became a fine and good young man. One day King Polydectes, who was Dictys' brother, came to visit; he fell in love with Danae and wanted to marry her. Polydectes was not a well-liked king, and Perseus did not like the attentions he paid Danae. Polydectes knew that Perseus would be an obstacle to his marriage to Danae and so he hatched a plan to get rid of him.

Polydectes pretended that he wanted to marry another woman. In order to woo her he gave a great feast at his palace and ordered everyone on the island to bring a great gift. Perseus arrived at the feast but, being very poor, he had no gift to give to the King. Polydectes was angry at this and so Perseus said, 'I will bring you any other gift that you desire'. Polydectes seized his chance, 'Bring me the head of Medusa the gorgon' he declared.

Medusa was one of the gorgons. She had once been a beautiful maiden, but she had offended the gods and so had been turned into a hideous monster. She had snakes for hair, scaly skin and was very ugly; anyone she looked at or who looked at her was instantly turned to stone.

Perseus was a brave young man, but he did not know where to find the gorgons let alone how he was going to slay one. Nevertheless, he set out on his quest. He was soon visited by the goddess Athena, who gave him a shield that was so highly polished and shiny it was reflective. She also told him that to find the gorgons he first needed to visit the graeae.

The graeae were three old women who lived in a cave; they had one eye and one tooth that were shared between them and the sisters took turns in using them. They were also the sisters of the gorgons and so knew where to find them. Perseus stole their eye when they were passing it between them so they

could all see him; he refused to give it back unless they told him where the gorgons resided.

On his journey to the gorgons Perseus travelled through Hades and at the river Styx he met the water nymphs and the god Hermes. The water nymphs gave him the cap of invisibility to help him escape unseen by Medusa's gorgon sisters and a magical bag to carry Medusa's head in once he had chopped it off, for Medusa's eyes kept their power to turn anyone to stone even after she was dead so he had to keep it hidden. Hermes gave Perseus a special curved sword that could never be broken and a pair of winged sandals that would enable him to fly.

So, Perseus set off with his magical equipment to Medusa's lair; he made his way in past the stone remains of her victims. Medusa and her sisters were sleeping, so Perseus crept closer looking at her only in the reflection of his shield so he would not be turned to stone. He cut off her head and placed it in the magical bag. As he removed her head the winged horse Pegasus emerged from her severed neck. Putting on his cap of invisibility and his winged shoes, Perseus made his escape before the other gorgons could take revenge.

On his way home Perseus spied a beautiful maiden, chained to a rock in the ocean. The maiden was Andromeda, who was to be sacrificed to a sea monster. Perseus rescued Andromeda and took her with him back to Seriphos to be his wife.

On returning to Seriphos, Perseus found that Polydectes was still pursuing Danae against her wishes. Perseus went to see the King in his court to present his gift. 'What have you brought me', enquired the King. 'I have brought you the head of the gorgon Medusa,' Perseus replied, and with that he took the head from the magical bag and the King and his entire court were instantly turned to stone.

Perseus lived on happily with Andromeda in Seriphos and made Dictys king. In return for her help he gave the head of Medusa to the goddess Athena, who mounted it on her shield to make it an even more powerful weapon. Perseus decided to return to Argos and meet his grandfather, Acrisius. All went well until Perseus took part in a sports contest; unfortunately during the discus competition Perseus's discus went further than expected and into the crowd. It hit his grandfather on the head and killed him, fulfilling the prophecy.