MEDUSA'S TALE

A one-act drama by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MEDUSA, a Gorgon.
PERSEUS, a hero.
POSEIDON, a god.
ATHENA, a goddess.
GIRL, a mortal.
YOUNG MEDUSA, typically played by the performer who plays Medusa, but may also be played by a different actress.

SETTING

(Before the lights rise, we hear the low murmur of men's voices and the clatter of metal cutlery and plates, which steadily rise in volume as the lights rise on PERSEUS. He faces the audience, holding aloft a leather bag. He shouts to be heard, perhaps bangs on a table. The other voices gradually subside as he speaks.)

PERSEUS: Listen!

Listen!

In this leather pouch is the severed head of Medusa, the Gorgon known throughout Greece to be the most loathsome of creatures. Hideous vipers grow from her scalp. They are still alive and writhing though she is dead. One glance at them and you would turn to stone. Many men perished trying to slay this monster. Then I came to the barren island where she lived in exile.

(A rising wind whistles through a desert landscape. Snakes hiss. The scene shifts. MEDUSA is on stage. There are statues in the background: would-be heroes turned to stone by the gaze of Medusa. Perseus enters at a run, breathing heavily; he carries a sword and mirrored shield and carefully avoids looking at Medusa.)

MEDUSA: Hey, you!

PERSEUS: What?

MEDUSA: Slow down. You'll catch up with your destiny whether you run or crawl.

PERSEUS: I am the hero Perseus, son of the great god Zeus.

MEDUSA: And I'm Medusa, cast out by gods and kings. You've come to slay me, I presume?

(Beat.)

Cat got your tongue? You warriors, you're all alike. Look at these fellows: civilized young men, from the very best of
families, but no appreciation whatsoever for the art of conversation. They do make handsome statues, though, don't they?

**PERSEUS:** It's true, then.

**MEDUSA:** Of course. Not a word to say, any of them, even when they were living flesh. Just brandish and brazen and then go to it.

**PERSEUS:** It's true that you turn people to stone just by looking at them?

**MEDUSA:** So they say.

**PERSEUS:** Evil monster, beware—

**MEDUSA:** Do I look like an evil monster? Tell me. I want to know.

**PERSEUS:** Don't think you can trick me into meeting your eyes. Athena has blessed me with wisdom. She has sent me to carry out her will.

**MEDUSA:** Athena! If you're her slave, then I'll gladly stop your blood dead in your veins.

**PERSEUS:** I am not her slave. I am her brother. She is the greatest goddess of them all, sprung fully armed from Zeus's noble brow. And I, too, am a child of the almighty Zeus, lord of the heavens.

**MEDUSA:** You and a few thousand other Greek bastards.

**PERSEUS:** I am the son of Zeus. Who but he could have slipped through the bars of that tower, a hundred feet high, where she was locked up, my mother—

**MEDUSA:** And how did Zeus manage this fancy trick? Did he come as a mosquito and buzz in between the bars of her prison window? Did he impregnate her with a sting?
PERSEUS: Blasphemer! He came as a shower of gold.

(Taken aback, Medusa studies Perseus for a long moment before speaking.)

MEDUSA: Are you Danae's child? You can't be. She did have a son, but they were both drowned long ago, she and her baby.

PERSEUS: Did you know my mother?

MEDUSA: I knew Danae.

(Beat.)

We were girls together. She used to braid my hair while I told her stories of distant lands. She was hungry for knowledge. But then her father killed her.

PERSEUS: My mother told me we were rescued from the sea when I was a baby.

MEDUSA: Is she alive? Is she all right?

PERSEUS: Yes. She's fine. She...she is the beloved of Zeus! Even now, kings beg to marry her and she turns them down.

MEDUSA: But suppose they don't beg or even ask permission. What can she do then?

PERSEUS: When I've cut off your head and can wield your power, no one will dare to touch her. I'll turn them all to stone if they so much as look at her.

MEDUSA: When you get angry, you knit your brows just the way Danae used to do. No! Don't turn away from me. Close your eyes. Let me look at you. You've got your mother's figure—long and slim.

PERSEUS: Don't touch me, hag! I don't believe you knew my mother. She would never have gone near such a monster as you.
MEDUSA: I was no monster then. I was honored for my beauty. Poseidon himself was in love with me.

PERSEUS: Liar! Crone! I'll kill you for your evil lies.

MEDUSA: Kill me? You don't even dare to look at me.

PERSEUS: I can see your hateful image in my shield. Athena told me what I was to do.

MEDUSA: It's hard to fight with your back to death.

(Perseus swings his sword at Medusa. She easily dodges it.)

Careful! Don't hack away at your fellow heroes. You'll only ruin your blade. Look! I'm right behind you. Oops. You missed. You can't hit a moving target with your eyes squeezed shut... Uh-oh. Watch out!

(Perseus collides violently with one of the statues. It topples and pins him down. He gasps in pain. His sword skitters from his hand. Medusa picks it up.)

All these dead heroes, they get in the way, cluttering up the landscape, falling on top of people.

PERSEUS: My sword!

MEDUSA: (Hiding the sword:) Don't worry. I've got it.

PERSEUS: Go ahead if you're going to kill me. One quick thrust will do it.

(Beat.)

What are you waiting for?

(Beat.)

Don't expect me to beg. Even in death I'm the son of Zeus.

MEDUSA: ...And of Danae. How long before she stops thinking you'll come running off the next boat bursting with pride?
(Beat.)

Swear by her name that you'll leave without trying to harm me and I'll let you go. Even if you are Athena's minion.

PERSEUS: Go? With no proof that I'm a hero? If I were content with that, I'd have stayed at home. I must prove that Danae has received the love of Zeus.

MEDUSA: Why? What good is the love of Zeus?

PERSEUS: I didn't come here to discuss theology. Kill me and be done.

MEDUSA: But I want to discuss theology. Do you know what the love of the gods has done for me?

PERSEUS: Everyone knows that you were cursed by the gods for your crimes.

MEDUSA: No one knows!

(Pause.)

If I set you free, will you listen to my story? Will you go home and tell Danae?

PERSEUS: I'll never go home unless I can take your bloody head with me.

(Pause.)

MEDUSA: All right. If it has to be that way.

(Medusa sets to work trying to roll the statue off of Perseus. He cries out in pain.)

PERSEUS: What are you doing? You're crushing my leg.

MEDUSA: I'm trying to set you free. Are you going to help or just lie there?

(Perseus struggles to assist Medusa in freeing him from the weight of the statue.)
That's it. Push. There we go… Can you stand on that leg?

(Perseus attempts to stand but his injured leg buckles beneath him.)

PERSEUS: Ow!

MEDUSA: Well, you might as well sit down, anyway. Put your feet up. I want to tell you a bedtime story.

PERSEUS: Where's my sword?

MEDUSA: It's safe. You can have it back when the story is over. Listen closely so you may judge for yourself what the love of the gods is worth. Close your eyes. That's a good boy. Now we are in Athens. Look there. On the hill. Above the well. Glaring white against the blue horizon. Athena's sanctuary. See the columns. Tall and strong and straight. Like the goddess herself.

(As Medusa speaks, the lights dim. Buckets creak. Women's voices murmur. An owl hoots. Scene shifts. The lights rise as ATHENA enters.)

And there she is. The goddess of justice. Favorite daughter of Zeus.

(We hear the tread of inhumanly weighty steps. A sea gull cries raucously. POSEIDON enters.)

And here comes Poseidon, Earthshaker. Brother of Zeus and Lord of the Ocean.

ATHENA: Honored uncle, what brings you to my blessed city?

POSEIDON: Just passing through. How's the olive business?

ATHENA: Flourishing. Thanks to the olive tree, all the citizens of Athens enjoy my bounty.
POSEIDON: And the women and slaves of Athens enjoy a mule's life.

ATHENA: Slaves must drive the mill wheels so their masters may be free to keep the wheels of justice turning. In a just state, each man shoulders his proper burden.

POSEIDON: To stand around in front of the courthouse arguing all day—is that the proper burden of a free man?

ATHENA: I have given the Athenians the gifts of law and commerce—and they adore me for it.

POSEIDON: They're afraid of Zeus and his thunderbolts, that's all. If they snubbed you, it would make him angry.

ATHENA: You're jealous of the love these mortals bear for me.

POSEIDON: Love! You're far too icy-hearted to know anything about love.

ATHENA: Naturally, I disdain the appetites that drive mere beasts to grunt and thrash.

(Two GIRLS approach from the distance, chattering and laughing; one of them is the young Medusa. They are carrying pitchers full of water.)

POSEIDON: Now here comes a truly lovable being. Who's she? The dark one with her hair down her back.

ATHENA: She? She's not half so pretty as the other.

POSEIDON: Ugh. I abhor your pale, sickly Athenian girls— their cheeks painted with lead—they look as if they were dying.

ATHENA: The dark one is Medusa. Her father is Phorcys, one of your minor deities, I believe. She's been conducting a
faithful pilgrimage to all my temples. She blesses me for protecting her chastity, the wellspring of her freedom.

POSEIDON: Chastity! The emptiest of all the empty virtues.

ATHENA: She loves me with a girl's pure virtuous love.

POSEIDON: Ah, but if she knew the love of a real god—

ATHENA: She would spurn you. And your brutish love.

POSEIDON: Do you think so? Let me have just half an hour alone with her.

ATHENA: You may have half of all eternity. Nothing you can do could wrest her love from me.

POSEIDON: We'll see.

(Athena and Poseidon step aside and watch the girls as they come nearer.)

GIRL: (To Medusa:) I don't know what girls are like where you come from, but around here your father would beat you for talking to girls in the street.

MEDUSA: My father's much too busy to worry about that sort of thing. He's responsible for the whole of the Aegean Sea.

GIRL: Really? What does he do?

MEDUSA: Oh, everything. He manages riptides and whirlpools, tends to the undersea forests, stuff like that. When I was a little girl, he used to let me help him. Once I sunk a ship by mistake and I cried and cried, but he just laughed and got the men to shore somehow.

GIRL: I don't believe you really sunk a ship.

MEDUSA: Well, hardly anybody was drowned.

GIRL: Would you show me something?
MEDUSA: Actually… No, I can't. I never learned to do much of anything on my own. I only did what Father told me to. And when I got older, he didn't ask me to help him anymore.

GIRL: But he lets you go anywhere and talk to anyone?

MEDUSA: I haven't even seen him in months.

GIRL: But that's horrible. Who will arrange a marriage for you?

MEDUSA: I don't want to get married. At least not until I'm much older, maybe twenty-five or even thirty.

GIRL: Nobody will want to marry you then.

(Pause. Whispering:)

Do you suppose the wedding night is fun?

MEDUSA: Probably not half so much fun as being courted.

GIRL: What's fun about that? The man looks you over, he asks your father about the dowry –

MEDUSA: I don't mean that part of it.

GIRL: What else is there?

MEDUSA: Oh, you know…

GIRL: Tell me…

MEDUSA: Well…say for instance, when a man catches your glance in the marketplace and you look away and then look back and he's smiling and you can almost feel his eyes on you.

GIRL: But I would be afraid to look at a man that way.

MEDUSA: Or suppose he pretends to notice that your hair comb is slipping and he buries his strong fingers in your locks and his breath warms your neck.

GIRL: I'd better go. I thought you were chaste, or I would never have spoken to you.
**MEDUSA:** Of course I'm chaste. I'm as chaste as Artemis or Athena. I don't want to be stuck like other girls, nursing babies and fetching water. Like that girl, what's-her-name? Chrysis. The one who begged me to fill her pitcher for her…?

**GIRL:** But if you're chaste—

*(Poseidon saunters a little closer, perhaps whistling a sea song to attract their attention. The Girl notices him first. She is surprised and alarmed.)*

Oh!

**MEDUSA:** *(Turning to look:)* You needn't stand there gaping. It's only Poseidon.

**GIRL:** Only Poseidon!? Don't you know what they say about him? He's famous—infamous, I mean—for ravishing women.

*(Beat.)*

He's looking at us. Oh, dear. I think he's coming over here.

*(The Girl turns to go.)*

**MEDUSA:** Are you running home to your mother?

**GIRL:** You should run, too.

**MEDUSA:** Why? Athena will protect me.

**GIRL:** Look, he is coming over here.

*(The Girl hurries away, leaving her pitcher. Poseidon approaches Medusa. Athena watches from a distance.)*

**MEDUSA:** *(Calling to the Girl:)* You forgot your pitcher.

**POSEIDON:** I hope that I haven't driven your friend away.

**MEDUSA:** We just met at the well. I don't even know her name.

**POSEIDON:** And what's your name?
MEDUSA: Medusa. I'm the daughter of Phorcys.
POSEIDON: Phorcys? How dare he make you fetch and carry like an ordinary girl?
MEDUSA: Who says he does?
POSEIDON: Not he? Then what man enthralls you?
MEDUSA: No man has ever enthralled me.

(Beat.)
I met a girl on her way to the well—
POSEIDON: That skittish creature who ran away just now?
MEDUSA: No, another girl. Chrysis. We got to talking. She was a young bride, and she was in a great hurry because she wanted to visit her mother. So, since I had nothing better to do, I said I'd fill her pitcher for her and meet her here.
POSEIDON: If she were my young bride, she wouldn't want her mother's arms.
MEDUSA: She was a very young bride. Fourteen at most.
POSEIDON: How old are you?
MEDUSA: Seventeen.
POSEIDON: Too old for a mother's caresses.
MEDUSA: I never knew my mother. She died when I was born.
POSEIDON: You're old enough to be a mother yourself.
MEDUSA: I don't want children. That's why I follow Athena.
POSEIDON: Do you know who I am?
MEDUSA: Of course. You're Poseidon. My father works for you.
POSEIDON: The land and the sea work for me. I command earthquakes and tidal waves.

(Poseidon gestures. There is a great crashing and roaring of water, which rises to a crescendo and then—upon another gesture of Poseidon's—abruptly ceases. Pause.)

Wouldn't you like to bear the child of a god?

MEDUSA: No.

POSEIDON: But it's gold laid up in the heavens!

MEDUSA: My friend Danae had a child by Zeus and her father killed her for it. An oracle told him that he'd be killed by his grandson. So he killed the baby and Danae, too, so she wouldn't produce any more sons. He tossed them both in a casket and shoved them out to sea. They must have drowned. Or starved.

POSEIDON: A god would never allow a son of his to come to harm. For all you know, Danae could be seated on a throne on the top of Mount Olympus... Or, lying at the bottom of the sea.

MEDUSA: (On the verge of tears:) Well, I can't wait for that girl Chrysis forever. If she's not here by sunset, she'll just have to fend for herself.

POSEIDON: Of course I could easily pay a visit to my brother Zeus and find out about Danae for you.

MEDUSA: Would you?

POSEIDON: For a price.

MEDUSA: Oh.

POSEIDON: Don't you care to know what's happened to your friend Danae?

MEDUSA: What good would it do? I'm sure she's dead.
POSEIDON: All right, then. Be seeing you.

(He begins to walk away.)

MEDUSA: Wait!

(Beat. Almost a whisper:)
What is your price?

POSEIDON: To intercede on behalf of your friend? What would you give me?

MEDUSA: My hair. I'll cut off all my hair and give it to you.

(Poseidon laughs.)

Men always beg me for just one lock. They say they will keep it always, it will be their dearest treasure.

POSEIDON: You have a dearer treasure than your shiny hair. Have you given that away?

MEDUSA: I don't know what you mean.

POSEIDON: Don't you? I think you do.

(Medusa begins to back away.)

Don't run away.

(Poseidon grabs hold of her and pulls her close.)

MEDUSA: You're hurting me. Let me go!

POSEIDON: All I want is a kiss. Hmmm. Don't clench your teeth.

MEDUSA: Stop it! You promised to let me go.

POSEIDON: After a taste of your lips? What did you expect? If you didn't intend to be friendly, you should have run away long ago. Ow! So you bite, do you? Vixen! Oof! And kick, too? That's all right, I like a little spice in my stew. Go ahead. Run to Athena's sanctuary. It's a fine and private place.
(Medusa breaks free of Poseidon and runs for Athena's temple. She struggles to open the heavy doors.)

Let me get that door for you, my dear.

(Medusa exits into the temple. Poseidon follows her off, leaving Athena alone on stage. Medusa's and Poseidon's voices echo from inside the temple.)

MEDUSA: In Athena's name. Please. This is holy ground.

POSEIDON: Wherever I am is holy ground!

MEDUSA: Athena! Please! Save me, Athena!

(Poseidon laughs. Medusa screams. Then there is silence. Finally, we hear Medusa sobbing. After a moment, Poseidon emerges; the temple doors clang shut behind him, muffling the sound of Medusa's sobs. He rejoins Athena.)

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