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Opening extract from

Corydon And The Island of Monsters

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To the True and Ancient Order


N
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S
The Minotaur's Beehives
Snake Girl's Promontory
Corydon's Sheep
Pharmakos Rock
Village
Lady Naguina's Stronghold
Cave of the Nymphs
Sphinx's House
Gorgons' Cave
Heroes' Landing Place
Nemean Lion's Rock
Gateway to Hades
Battle

ἀλφα

One

High up in the island's mountains, a shepherd boy looked out over his flock. They were resting in what shade they could find from the heavy heat of noon. The boy rested too, on dry grass under a rustling olive tree.

Below him, he could see the whole valley. Cypresses pierced the sky like spearpoints. The hillside he sat on was tawny, parched like an old lionskin.

The boy's name was Corydon. He had been an outcast for almost as long as he could remember. He was always alone.

There was something about his body, something that made him different. It was lucky, for a shepherd, but it had always been bad luck to him. His own mother had helped to chase him from the village, to the desolation of the Pharmakos Rock. 'You belong there!' she had screamed.

His mother's fury was part of the boy's flickering memories of a past different from his present. They mostly came in dreams. When he was awake, he tried not to remember.

When he dreamed of the time of pharmakos, what he remembered was the food. Figs, the dry crisp husks of barley embedded in the good bread, and the soft white tang of cheese, as good as the cheeses he now made himself. He remembered the peppery green, glistening streams of olive oil. The sweetness of the honey and how it overpowered his mouth, making his teeth hurt. It was the only time he'd had enough to eat in his whole life.

Months of food. But with the food came a sly kindness that he felt was all wrong. It was like when boys trick one of themselves into being the butt of a joke.

Then the terrible moment had come.

He pushed the memory away. He forced himself to think about something else.

Kleptis, for instance. Or sheep-stealing, really. No one called it that, though.

Kleptis was the only thing Corydon had ever been good at.

The boys of his village – the older ones – liked to go out and take a sheep or a lamb from someone they didn't much care for. Someone who had shouted at them for playing noisily during a sacrifice, for instance. Corydon had loved to go with them. He loved the cool walk through the moonless night, the excitement of creeping

up to the flock, the stealthy and dangerous business of grabbing one sheep without disturbing the whole flock and alerting the shepherd. Corydon had often been the one doing the grabbing. Somehow, the sheep seemed to treat him almost as one of themselves. He'd even taken goats, the hardest animal of all to steal. And once he'd been on a daytime raid, deadly dangerous, because the shepherd being victimised would beat any boy he caught. Corydon remembered how he'd managed to snag twin lambs, and to carry them to the koumos, a scrabbled hole of stones in the hillside. He had dumped the lambs in the hole and covered them with pine branches, working frantically, hearing the belling of the shepherd's dog . . . He had been terrified. But the older boys had clapped him on the back and had given him the best pieces of the stolen meat. Later, the village headman had forced them all to make it up with the man whose sheep they'd stolen; they'd all gone off to the altar of Zeus and sworn an oath of friendship, between clenched teeth.

It had been this man who had said, first, that Corydon should be the pharmakos. The scapegoat.

And the boys who had helped him become an adept kleptis had been among the first to throw things at him on the day of the pharmakos.

But they had also been his salvation. Kleptis had kept him alive, given him a life.

It had taken him a while to build up his small flock of sheep. But after the pharmakos time, he had been left bare on the hillside, with nothing between him and death but the knowledge he had. And because of his days as kleptis – or perhaps because of something in himself – he had a way with the grazing beasts of the hills. He could scramble and clamber down cliffs and along ledges and down sinkholes, nimble as a goat, to places where other shepherds had been forced to abandon sheep because they were not so agile as he was.

And often, gloriously, he stole his animals. Lambs, ewes. Revenge on those who had cast him out was sweeter even than the meat he devoured.

Now he prized his animals fiercely. They were his livelihood and his friends.

As he looked them over, he saw that the sheep furthest down the mountain were startled by something moving below them, something that was itself climbing, something they feared. As the frightened sheep moved faster, he noticed that the panic was spreading, so that the whole flock began hurrying over the rocks, slithering in the light, dry grass, heading uphill.

Whatever it was moved below the hazel thicket.

As his favourite ewe rushed past, her heavy belly full of lambs, Corydon scrambled to his feet and ran after her. He wondered what had scared them so – wolves? bear? He fumbled for his only weapon, a small slingshot he

had made himself. The leather had dried a little, but it still held one neat stone. He ran, stumbling a little, and turned around, ready to hurl his stone at whatever was menacing his sheep far below.

He saw that there were many of the menacing things. They were half-hidden in the hazel thicket, making it rustle and tremble.

Wolves, then. Bears did not hunt in packs.

As he looked down, he saw that one of the attackers was larger than the others. Perhaps it was the leader. He decided to aim at it. Whirling the sling around his head, he flung the stone towards the shadowy figure. As it came out of the shade of the trees, he gave a great start. This was no wolf, but something huge, something metallic that caught the light. Surrounding it were men, more men than he had ever seen together on the hillside, at least six of them, and a whole train of carts, each cart burdened with what looked to the boy like giant metal houses. His stone had bounced off the largest of these.

To his horror, he realised that one of the men had noticed the stone he had thrown, and was scanning the hillside. Instantly Corydon dropped into the warm dust, flat on his belly. He lay as still as a rock, rigid with terror. His hands gripped the hard, baked earth in front of him. Now he couldn't see the men or their strange houses, but he could still hear, and what he heard increased his dread, for one of them was speaking:

'Hmm. This rock. Don't think the sheep dislodged it. Maybe we have a local here, someone who could tell us what we want to know.'

The boy crouched still lower. But a movement behind him made him look up.

It was his own favourite ewe, in lamb. She was gazing down at him, bleating. The silly beast had given him away. He heard the man cry, 'Hey, look!' and begin scrambling hastily up over the rocks towards him. Instinctively, he remained crouched in the dust. The next thing he knew, a huge hand seized him by the hair, and another hand went over his mouth. He was hauled into the air, struggling, and he heard the voice of the man who had captured him. 'Who do you think you're throwing stones at, you little wretch? Oy, what's this?' he said, grabbing Corydon by one leg, still holding him by the hair. 'Look what I've found here, captain!' he called eagerly. 'A new attraction! Just look at his leg! He's a right funny one and no mistake.'

The captain clambered up the slope. 'I've never seen this before,' he said. 'One of his legs is shaped like a goat's leg. Great gods! Add him to the other freaks.'

Corydon writhed desperately. He had no idea what 'freaks' were, but he knew that the man had noticed his leg. Now would come the beating, and perhaps this big angry man might even kill him. But instead of feeling a hard whip across his back or a knife in his belly, he found

himself slung over the man's shoulder and carried down the mountain.

Behind him he heard one of the pirates muttering, 'Mormoluke, mormoluke.' To Hellene villagers, the mormoluke was a goat-footed demon who stole and ate children. This man, at least, was like the people of Corydon's village.

But the others were puzzling. They touched him willingly; they seemed not to fear him, and they even met his eyes. After all the men had looked at him, a kind of metal house was brought out. He was shoved into it, and the metal house was loaded onto a cart, like the others.

The slow procession continued all the long afternoon. As the sun set, everyone stopped – for the night, Corydon thought.

Looking out, he saw that the men were bringing tents. He felt his cage being lifted into the air and placed in a small circle of cages. Some of the pirates disappeared, to look for water. It was almost dark now, and it was hard to see what the other cages contained. From the one directly opposite him he heard a faint bellowing, low and deep like the waves crashing in a sea cave. Corydon peered towards the sound, and gave a start backwards. He saw the heavy torso of a man, but it had the head of a bull. His head was thrown back, and he was making that deep bellowing sound. Very loudly, from the cage next to him, he heard a hissing. He strained his eyes towards the cage on his right. He saw the body of a

lizard, and the long neck and head of a snake, but there was not merely one of these heads. There were five. He could see ten eyes surveying him, lit from within, like cats' eyes, but these were all different colours. Then they shut.

Corydon felt rising panic. Anxiously, he struggled to see into the remaining five cages. It was by now too dark to make out much, but he could see that one held a vast beast of some kind, crammed into the tiny space, and he heard a high, sharp laugh from another cage.

'Oh, Zeus, help me!' he breathed. 'Great God Pan, come to my aid!'

Nothing happened, but he began to feel a little better. Slowly, steadily, Pan kindled courage in his heart, and he felt it burning with a steady flame. 'After all,' he thought, 'they did not kill me. I am alive, and perhaps tomorrow I can escape from this horrible place, and go back to my gentle sheep.'

A voice broke into his thoughts. 'Why are you praying?' it enquired. It sounded like a woman, but somehow different – thinner and sharper and harder. It was a voice like a knife blade. He knew at once that whoever was speaking was also the one who had laughed.

Corydon's mouth was dry with fear. He swallowed desperately, mustering his courage. Then he spoke up boldly, inspired by Pan. 'I was praying for a way to escape from here,' he said. This was not quite the truth,

but Corydon had no intention of confiding his fears to whatever had spoken to him out of the darkness.

The shrill laugh came again. 'Escape!' said the high, sharp voice. 'No chance of that. I have tried and tried. And if *I* cannot escape, how can a puny child like *you* expect to get away?'

Corydon had not made a plan yet, but he began to try to think. None of these monsters had got away – how could he? 'Perhaps a miracle of the gods?' he suggested tentatively, expecting to be laughed at.

But there was a cold, hard silence. Then the voice came again, full of hate. 'Gods! Gods are the ones who did this to me. If you still have faith in their goodness, then you're doubly caged, my little one.'

Corydon wondered why the creature had said this. Finally, he said, 'Why am I doubly caged if I believe in their goodness?'

The simplicity of the question might have startled the creature, for it answered at once, with equal simplicity: 'Because faith in them keeps you passive. If you expect them to do the rescuing, you'll sit here till you die. And if you do get out, you'll think it's their doing and not yours.'

Corydon didn't really understand what the creature was talking about, but he was frightened by the bleakness of its voice. 'I think I'll go to sleep now,' he said shakily.

'Goodnight, little boy,' said the creature. It was mocking him, but there was something comforting about it too. Corydon lay down on his straw, looking forward to morning when he would see the creature in daylight and know what it was that had – yes – befriended him.

He slept deeply, but woke as the stars were growing pale. The dream had come again, the dream that made his heart ache.

It was always the same dream.

The small village of his birth shone white under the heavy, bright sun.

Down its main street, a procession wound slowly. Men and women beat drums and sounded cymbals. Children ran about in the dust.

They were all laughing, and pointing at him; he was somehow at the centre of it all. He walked with his hands bound behind him; the ropes hurt, dragged at his arms.

He saw the white painted houses with their pots of herbs, the women in their black headscarves, the other children.

He knew he was saying goodbye to everything he knew. Even in the dream, he could sometimes feel his eyes fill with tears.

'Pharmakos! Pharmakos!' shouted the people.

That was him. He was the pharmakos, the scapegoat whose death would heal the village. Every few years, the village purified itself by sending out a pharmakos, someone who was blighted in some way, as he was. That person was never seen again. They died somehow in the wilderness beyond the villagers' fields.

This year, he knew, the cleansing was badly needed, because plague had come on the wings of summer. All over the village, babies had flushed scarlet, felt hotter and hotter, cried and cried, and finally stopped crying in the stillness of death. The villagers had begun to look for the plague's cause, and their search had led them to the boy.

In the dream, he always walked passively, while his mind hunted frantically for an escape.

The procession drifted on in the thirsty dust, straggling out of the village and through the parched, empty fields.

At last they reached the Pharmakos Rock, where the scapegoat was usually tied in place.

The boy was tied tighter. But his arms didn't ache as much as his heart. Would no one speak for him?

He looked around at a sea of hostile faces.

Heard his own mother cast him out.

Then the dream changed.

Some of the villagers were looking anxiously at the sky.

A huge storm cloud was rolling up from the west, livid and green. A cold wind blew from it, and on the wind came a harsh sound, a heavy clashing of metal.

The villagers heard the sound, and were alarmed. 'Hurry, hurry!' they cried to the men. Then they could wait no longer; they began to run back down the dusty track to the village, looking over their shoulders.

The clashing sound grew louder, the sound of a soldier's spear, clanging on his shield. It mixed with the first clap of thunder from

the storm cloud. The sun had disappeared behind the cloud now, and the cold wind grew stronger, whipping hair into his eyes.

He had no idea what was coming, but knowing it was near made his belly tighten on itself, as if he were going to be sick.

He shut his eyes; he didn't want to see what was coming. Already he could smell the metallic stench of fresh blood. Something enormous stooped over him; he felt heavy metal brush his cheek, stinging him.

He heard a voice like the harsh grating of bronze on bronze. It was like the cry of a hunting hawk.

He waited for the owner of the voice to kill him. Yet nothing happened.

Except – suddenly his bonds were gone. He fell forward, onto his hands and knees. As the first drops of rain struck his parched body, he found the courage to look up at the sky.

He saw them flying into the heart of the storm: two of them, brazen-winged, enormous, calling to each other in their high, harsh voices. The lightning played about them, and their heavy bodies shimmered.

That was when he always woke. And sometimes cried.

He wanted to know what it meant; it must mean something. Was it a true dream?

'Great Pan,' he sighed. 'Tell me who I am.'

But the hills and forests were silent in the cold grey of early dawn.

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Two

Sitting on her rock in the cave's entrance, the gorgon Sthenno watched the stars grow pale, and noticed that the North Star was farther west than usual. 'Strange,' she thought.

A few moments later, her sister, Euryale, clattered into the cavern, claws rasping on the hard rock. She spoke impatiently: 'Sthenno, I know that some star or other is in an unusual position, but I *am* rather hungry.'

'We ate only five minutes ago,' Sthenno replied, not taking her eyes off the North Star.

'Look, Sthenno, why don't you at least try to rest?'

'I can't *rest*. You're an immortal too. You know how it is for us. Anyway, I like looking at the stars.'

'Well, I'm going to try to rest,' said Euryale. She disappeared into the darkness of the cavern. Sthenno heard a crunching noise, then silence.

Left alone, Sthenno scrabbled about and retrieved a bundle of fragments from under another rock. Sitting down on her own rock, she began to leaf through the old, crumbling scrolls, trying to find out about the different phases of the North Star. Finally, on a yellow parchment stained with age, she found something. When the North Star was west of its normal position, it usually meant that a god or a goddess was happy – and sometimes, that a god or goddess was angry. 'Hmmm,' thought Sthenno, 'but which god or goddess? And happy or angry?' Carefully, trying not to tear the fragile parchment, she turned it over, hoping to find some more information, but all she found were examples of the gods' wrath. She sat on her rock all night, thinking about it, wondering. Who could have angered a god?

As full morning broke the greyness with clear pink and gold, Sthenno's meditations were disturbed by the clash of Euryale's metal wings. She clashed them every morning at dawn, and it never failed to annoy Sthenno.

'I had just found out something and was pondering it when you came along and clashed your bronze wings.'

'Sorry,' said Euryale. She didn't sound it. 'Now can we go and have breakfast?' she asked hopefully.

Sthenno thought for a moment. 'Oh, all right,' she said irritably. 'What do you want today? I suppose you'd like a chunk of cow's liver?'

'Actually, I was thinking of a change,' said Euryale with dignity. 'I was thinking of duck's head.'

Euryale would never eat just the head, Sthenno thought. She would eat the whole bird. 'If you want,' said Sthenno. 'But remember it's a bit unhygienic.' Her thin body rippled with a delicate shudder.

The two gorgons went into the main cavern and looked at the enormous rock which served as their table. Euryale rushed to a space in the cavern wall where the food was stored and seized five large ducks. Hurling one onto the table in front of her sister, she immediately began to eat, tearing off great chunks of the duck and cramming them into her mouth.

Sthenno watched with distaste as Euryale devoured the duck. Her sister was always either hungry or hunting for food. Her only other pleasure was to make small pictures with her claws on the walls of the cavern. The pictures were always of huge slabs of meat, fresh and bleeding, or of animals stuck with spears or arrows. It was all part of her sister's primitive nature, Sthenno thought. Euryale was just primitive enough to believe in magic, and she seemed to think the food pictures magicked the food into her waiting claws, that they gave her success as a huntress.

Euryale had no ideas at all, Sthenno thought. She might be an immortal, but she was all belly and no brains. She nibbled her own duck's head without appetite. Euryale

had already finished her first head and was starting on her second. Sthenno looked up and watched her sister, partly in amazement and partly with horror. By the time her sister began on her fourth, Sthenno had had enough. The sound of crunching bones disturbed her thoughts, and she wanted to concentrate on the odd activities of the North Star. She got up and went outside, and gazed out to sea, hearing the familiar sound of waves breaking slowly on the shingle.

Stealthily, Euryale began eating Sthenno's unfinished breakfast.

There was a screeching noise of claws on rock. Sthenno knew Euryale had finally finished eating and was now drawing one of her tiny pictures of food.

Sthenno began to walk back towards the cave. Because it wasn't fed by a spring, their cave was surrounded by dust, pale and gritty, that stuck in claws and wings. Parched furze struggled to grow in the grey heat. The entrance cave had a hole in its high ceiling that let in sunlight, so it was fringed with ferns; thyme drooped into the hole from above, its purple flowers a bright dry splash of colour.

But none of this meant anything to Sthenno. She wasn't interested in things, but in ideas and patterns.

Without her beloved stars to study, Sthenno was at a loss. She hated the daylight hours. Still, there were always her scrolls. She resolved to complete her logbook of star

movements. She knew that if she kept very meticulous records, never neglecting a single tiny trembling star, she could find out how they moved, and why – and unlock the secrets the Olympians were keeping from the rest of the immortals. Yet she kept losing the records she made so carefully. Sometimes, Sthenno wondered if Euryale ate them.

Euryale completed a careful, delicate picture of a deer lying on her side, bleeding from gashes in her flesh. She knew she'd have to go hunting again soon. No matter how much she ate, she couldn't eat enough to fill the great aching gap inside her. She didn't know where the hole inside came from. Sometimes she thought it had been with her from birth. Sometimes she was bored with the daily round of their lives – Sthenno's obsessions, her own appetite – that she wanted to throw back her head and howl. But she could never do that, just as she could never get away from Sthenno, from this cave, from this island. Centuries of the same old thing. But how could she go when she couldn't even imagine it? Go where?

So she went hunting again. 'She always leaves me to get the food,' Euryale thought, resentfully, watching as her sister crouched over some fragments of papyrus in the cave entrance. 'If she gets any thinner she'll blow off the island.'

She frightened herself, thinking even that. The only thing worse than living with Sthenno would be living alone.

Euryale set off, and began to wander among the thickly wooded slopes of the island's mountains. Heavy with the scent of cypresses, thick with a springy mattress of fallen needles, they were her favourite hunting grounds. Pigeons and doves had been calling from the trees, but fell silent as Euryale approached them.

Deep in the woods, she saw not a deer but a small quail. Euryale felt a moment of self-doubt. 'My picture might not have been good enough to enchant the deer, to make them come to me,' she thought. She crawled on for a bit longer, looking for something bigger than a bird. Finally, she saw the deer of her dreams, a soft brown doe, and leaning against her warm body was her dappled fawn. Euryale rushed forward, talons outstretched to seize, yet utterly silent. The deer watched her come as if fascinated, unable to run. Then she bent her head to nuzzle her fawn one last time, and Euryale suddenly stopped dead. The soft nose of the mother deer, the delicate legs of her tiny baby; why should these make her unable to strike? Furious, with herself, with the deer, she leaped forward again and plunged her bronze talons into the deer's soft neck. The beast gave up her life with a gentle sigh. The terrified fawn pressed his head against his dead mother's flank, refusing to leave her, and giving small bleats. Again, the sight maddened Euryale, and she struck again, killing it with one quick slash of her claws. As blood poured from her victims, Euryale let out a long brazen cry of pleasure.

From afar, Sthenno heard Euryale's shriek of happiness. She knew that Euryale had found her prey. Sthenno smiled. Even though Euryale was sometimes annoying, she was nice in her own way. Sthenno could enjoy her gusto, though only from a distance. Close up, Euryale was far too noisy.

Sthenno watched the edge of the trees, waiting for Euryale to return. While she waited, she looked up at the sky. It was almost midday; Helios stood directly above the earth, and his beams scorched the dry grass brown and baked the soil into hard cracks. Sthenno knew it was time to seek the shade; noontide was unlucky, for baby lambs and for careless shepherds.

Suddenly, as she formed these thoughts, she remembered the boy. The mormoluke. The special boy.

His black hair. His thin brown face. His eyes, big and dark.

She and Euryale had saved him. Perhaps it was the most important thing they had ever done. For he was important. Sthenno knew that.

His village had thought him unlucky. Sthenno knew why. She still remembered his thin arms and legs, the bony feel of them in her claws. One of his legs had been different. Not wrong, but different: furred and goat-footed.

But she had known him at once and her heart had leaped with joy. He was the mormoluke. The one the

stars foretold. She had the scrolls which revealed his importance. She and Euryale had saved him, though she didn't know where he had gone since then. She had known it was not yet the right time.

He would come when he was needed.

She knew this, but still she worried. Had he survived, out there on the mountainside? Was he lonely?

He must return soon, she thought. The stars were never wrong.

It was time for one of Sthenno's prayers to the stars. Absorbed in her thoughts, she had almost missed the exact moment. Anxiously, she rushed towards her study, where she knew her special praying circle was waiting. The floor was reddish, with green coppery markings. Sthenno had made a crude circle on the red rock with a charcoal stick. She looked up at the blazing blue sky of noon through the hole in the ceiling. She began her first prayer. She decided that she would say it to one of the stars in Scorpio's tail. She had picked Scorpio because she knew it was directly overhead, beyond the blueness.

As she looked up, she prayed to Artemis. Though not a huntress, like Euryale, Sthenno was warmly devoted to the virgin huntress: she who lived alone amidst wild beasts, on the wild mountainside. Sometimes Sthenno thought that roaming the mountain was like roaming the heavens with your eyes.

She wandered out of the cave again, and stood staring out at the sea. A happy Euryale called up to her. 'My picture helped me!' she cried, presenting the deer and fawn. She dived past Sthenno, into the cave, and Sthenno could hear her clattering about, her claws rasping on the bare rock of the dining alcove.

Though Euryale had just hunted, she had enjoyed it so much that she wanted to go hunting again as soon as possible, and she bounded off before lunch to see if she could find something bigger.

As she walked, she suddenly remembered the boy.

The thin, dark boy they had saved.

Where was he now?

Euryale shrugged. There was no way to know. He was somewhere. Alive. That was all that mattered. One day he would turn up.

As she returned, this time carrying a dead boar, Sthenno came to meet her.

Just then both sisters heard an astonishing sound. It was the shingle rattling under the tramp of feet. Human feet.

Euryale stood alone. Sthenno began to creep timidly back towards the entrance to the cave.

'Sthenno,' said Euryale, 'it might be an adventure.'

The sound of feet got louder.

'I'll stay,' said Sthenno at last, after a long pause.

The footsteps stopped. The sisters heard a mutter

of voices and the beginning of what sounded like an argument.

The biggest voice boomed out: 'It was a mistake to leave the creatures down by the shore just to go and look for a settlement. Especially Her. For all we know, She might have escaped. And now She might be creeping up behind us to turn us all to stone. And – there's that new one, the morm—'

'Don't say the word, for Zeus's sake!' screamed one of the smaller men. He was already wearing a blue bead, to ward off ill luck.

There was an uneasy silence.

'I vote,' said a smaller, slyer voice, 'that we should go back and bring the monsters with us. Then if there are any people on the island, they might pay us money to see them.'

'Money, on this island?' scoffed the first voice. 'Some hope! The only people you'll find here are villagers. There's nothing else here but bones.' A kicking noise showed that a booted foot was stepping on what might well be an old discarded bone of Euryale's. 'And no wonder,' the voice added, 'considering what we've found here today.' Again there was an uneasy silence.

'I agree with Belshazzar,' said a third voice. 'Let's not try to haul them very much further today. Get the skins out, Belasmir. Let's get the fresh water. I thought I saw lights to the west.'

'All right, captain,' said the first voice. 'But I don't like

it here. There's something about this place that gives me the creeps.'

'You're an old woman,' came the captain's voice. 'What do we have to fear?'

The voices began to fade into the distance. A crunch of shingle told that a small boat was being put back to sea.

'Did you hear that?' said Euryale in a whisper. 'There are monsters, and they're on their ship.'

'I'm afraid,' said Sthenno softly. 'They said one of them might turn people to stone.'

'But we're not people, silly. We're immortal. I bet if those pirates saw us, *they'd* be scared.'

Sthenno brightened a little. 'I think,' she said, 'that the monster might be an enormous bright light with patterns of the stars on it that only an immortal could see. And when a human looks at it, because of the bright light, they shrivel into stone, like a flower in the sunlight.'

'I think,' said Euryale, 'that it would look like a vast boar, with two crimson eyes, and long white tusks, so long they look like snakes. And its anger would scorch the hunter until he withered like a dry leaf.'

Both sisters were silent for a moment. Then, 'I'd better prepare,' said Euryale. She went into the cave, got her sharpening stone, and began to sharpen her claws.

Sthenno followed her. She was wondering what the pirates had found on the island.

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Medusa, too, had seen the dawn break. In its faint light, she couldn't help seeing herself in the mirrors all around her. The cage she was in was made of mirrors. Everywhere she looked, there was another copy of herself. She hated seeing herself. Most of all she hated her face. It was mauve, with a few darker purple spots and a greenish tint. Like a bruise. Medusa herself nearly threw up at the sight. And now she had deep purple eyes, eyes like the poisonous plants near what had once been her home.

The pirates had built her cage of mirrors so that they could show her off and make money from her. People couldn't look at her directly; if she met their eyes, they died, and died terribly – in fact, they turned to stone.

She remembered the first time it happened. An ancient priestess of the goddess had blundered upon her, and Medusa had looked up, angry, ashamed. The woman had slowly hardened, her mouth freezing just as it opened to scream. Others froze instantly, the greyness of rock rippling down their bodies as fast as water.

She had been to many little towns now, and the children had fled from her, crying.

She remembered how the small hands of children felt; a friend's small daughter had loved to brush her shining golden hair.

She looked out at the landscape reflected in the mirrors around her, hating it for being so beautiful.

As she looked, she noticed a cave. In it something

caught the sun, a glint of something – gold? bronze? Perhaps it was a sword she could use to kill her captors. Then she could escape.

She saw Belshazzar and realised he'd noticed it too. No hope, then. She hated him even more than the others. He was the one who beat her. If she turned someone to stone, he beat her, not because he cared, but because it might reduce ticket sales. She felt sure putting her on show had been his idea, largely because the others never had any ideas, good or bad.

'Um – I'm just going for a bit of a walk in these lovely woods, captain. Might pick up something for dinner if I take my bow.'

She heard his oily voice. Anyone brighter than the captain would know he was lying. He was going after the metal gleam, hoping it was gold. From inside her cage, she laughed, a mad screech like the ragged cry of a bird.

'Shut up!' all the men shouted. Belshazzar slipped away in the confusion.