

Jessie Burton



# MEDUSA

THE GIRL BEHIND  
THE MYTH

ILLUSTRATED BY OLIVIA LOMENECH GILL

BLOOMSBURY







For my god-daughters, Florence and Elsa

J.B.

For

O.L.G.

BLOOMSBURY YA

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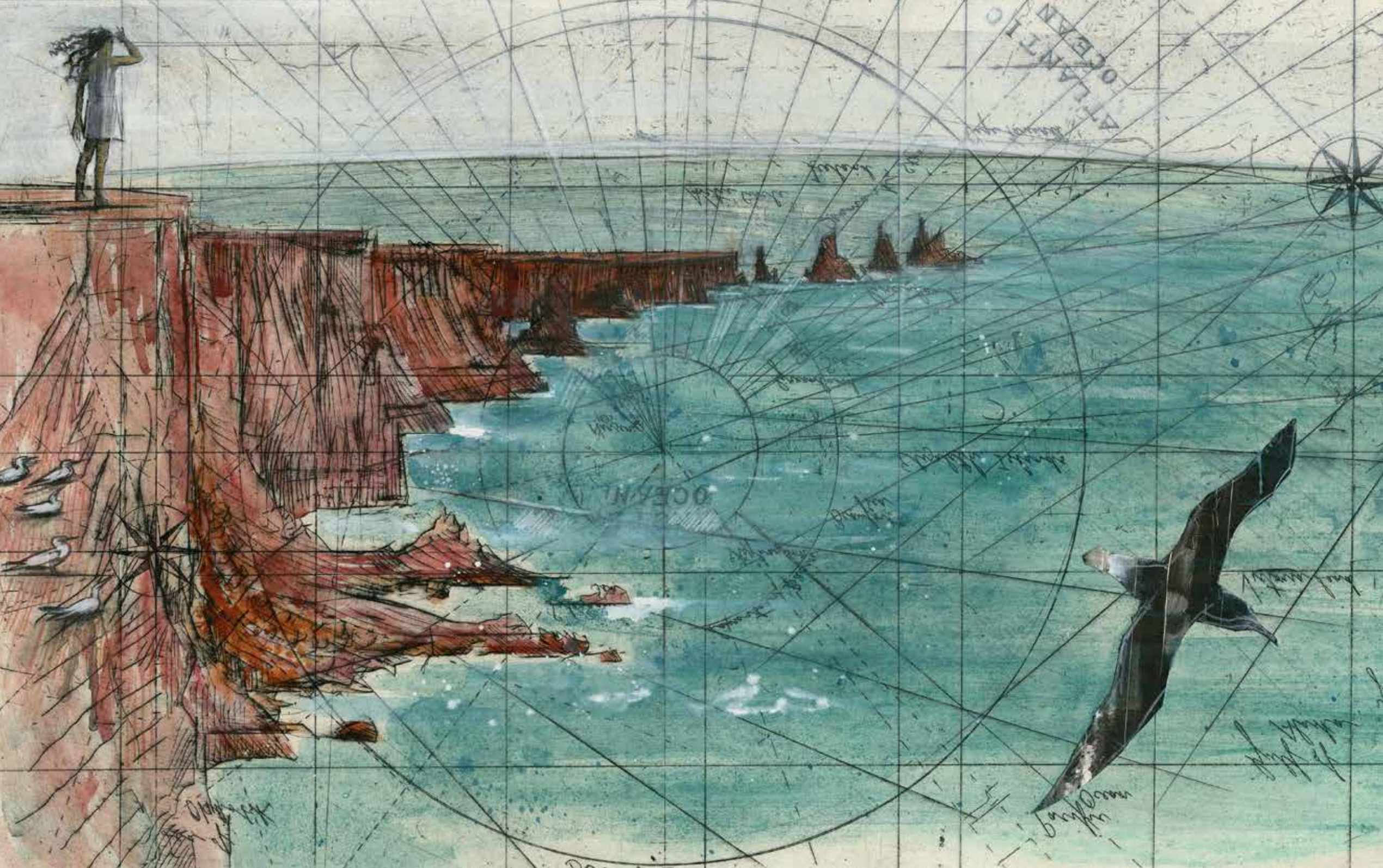


*Books by Jessie Burton*

The Restless Girls

Medusa









## CHAPTER ONE

If I told you that I'd killed a man with a glance, would you wait to hear the rest? The why, the how, what happened next? Or would you run from me, this mottled mirror, this body of unusual flesh? I know you. I know you won't leave, but let me start with this instead: a girl, on the edge, a cliff, her strange hair blowing backwards in the wind. A boy, down below, on his boat. Let them spill themselves out to each other, their story older than time itself. Let them reveal themselves until they reveal too much.

Let me start on my rocky island.

We'd been there four years, my older sisters and me, an eternal banishment we'd chosen for ourselves. And in almost all things, the place suited my needs perfectly, being deserted, beautiful, inhospitable. But forever is a long time and there were days when I thought I might go mad – that in fact, I already had.

Yes, we'd escaped, yes, we'd survived – but ours was a half-life, hiding in caves and shadows. My dog, Argentus, my sisters, me: my name sometimes whispered on the breeze.

Medusa, Medusa, Medusa – in repetition and decisions made, my life, my truths, my quieter days, the thoughts that formed, had fallen all away. And what was left? These jagged outcrops, an arrogant girl justly punished, a tale of snakes. Outrageous reality: I'd never known a change that wasn't monstrous. And here was another truth: I was lonely and I was angry, and rage and loneliness can end up tasting the same.

Four years stuck on an island is a long time to think about everything that's gone wrong in your life. The things people did to you that were out of your control. Four years alone like that sharpens the hunger for friendship and it bloats your dreams of love. So you stand on the top of a cliff, hiding yourself behind a rock. The wind slaps a sail, and the barking of a stranger's dog starts up. Then a boy appears, and you feel that your dreams might soon become reality. Except this time, life won't be outrageous. This time, it will be good and happy.

The first thing I saw of this boy – me on that cliff edge, peering down, him on the boat, unseeing – was his back.

A lovely back. The way he dropped his anchor in my waters. Then, as he straightened up, the outline of his head. A perfect head! Turning round, his face tipped up towards my island. He looked, but he did not see.

I know a lot about beauty. Too much, in fact. But I'd never seen anything like him.

He was around my age, tall and in proportion although a little underweight, as if he'd been travelling far in that boat of his and hadn't known how to fish. The sunlight loved his head, making diamonds in the water to crown it. His chest was a drum on which the world beat a rhythm, and his mouth the music to dance above it.

To look at that boy was painful, yet I could not turn away. I wanted to eat him up like honey cake. It might have been desire, it might have been dread: I think it might have been both. I wanted him to see me, and was frightened that he might. My heart astonished me like a new bruise that wanted pressing.

He seemed to be gauging the scale and insurmountability of my rocks. A dog, source of the bark that brought me to my



A painting of a tan dog, possibly a Weimaraner, sitting and looking to the right. The dog is rendered with visible brushstrokes, giving it a textured appearance. Above the dog's head, the word "ORADO" is written in a stylized, serif font. The background is a soft, warm yellow with a large, white, circular brushstroke behind the dog's head.

# ORADO

lookout in the first place, dashed on the boat deck like a ball of light.

‘Orado!’ the boy called to this ball of light. ‘For the love of Zeus, calm down!’

He sounded stressed, but his voice was clear. He had a strange accent, so I assumed he’d come from far away. Orado the dog sat down on his rump, and wagged his tail. My bruised heart lifted as I watched this creature. A friend for Argentus? I asked myself, thinking how lonely my dog had been for his own species.

But you know what I was really thinking: A friend for me.



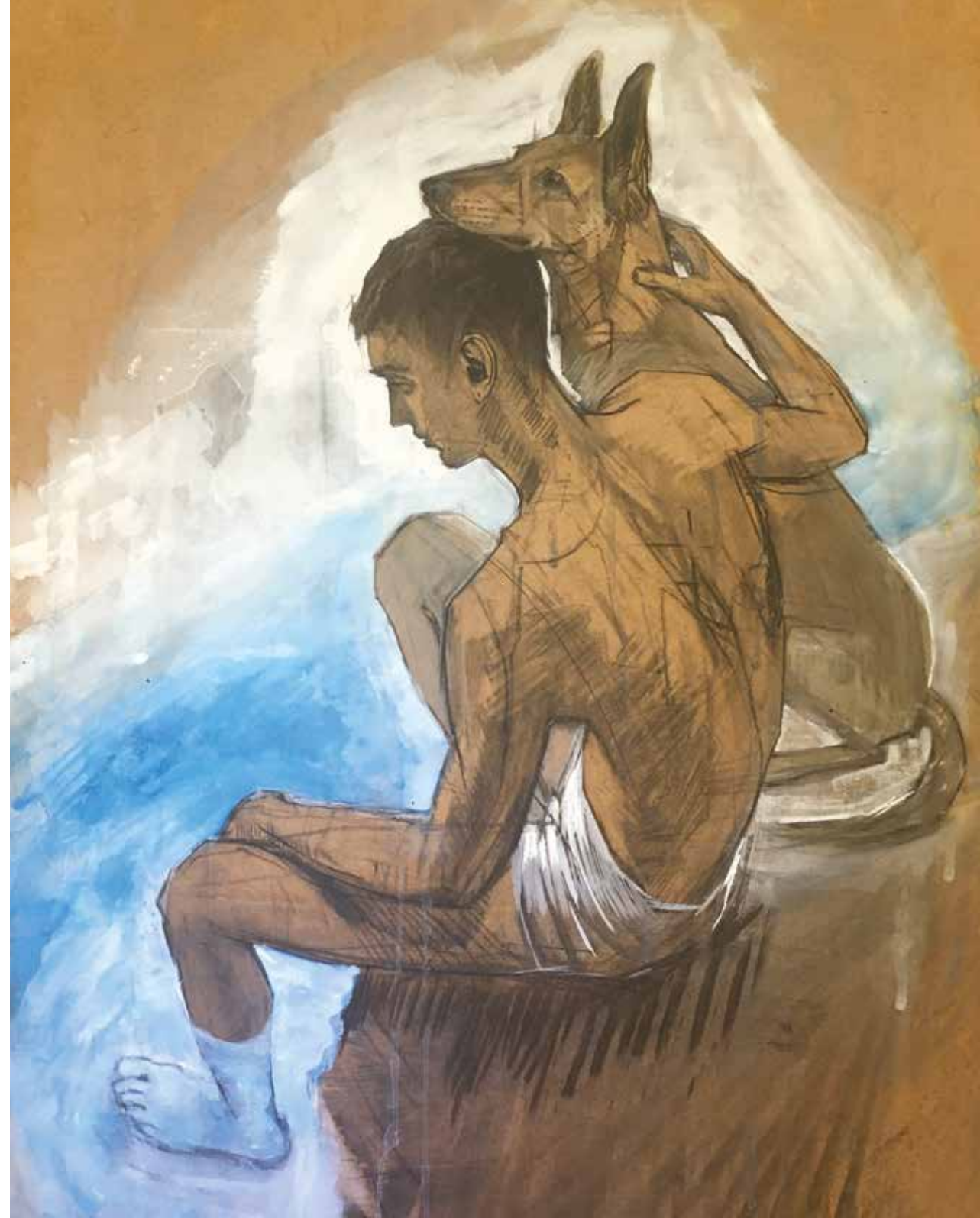
## CHAPTER TWO

This young man pulled himself on to a rock, and sat with his legs dangling in the water, doing nothing except patting Orado on the head. His hunched pose gave me the impression that he didn't want to be here, and also that he was completely lost. He looked ready to jump back on to his deck, unfurl his sails and leave.

Do it, I urged him, silently, from my hideout. Leave this place. It'll be better for both of us. My cliffs are too high for a reason.

Just as these thoughts bloomed in my head like unwanted flowers, so too came another. Come, come up here. Come up and see me!

But he could never see me. Medusa, I said to myself. Imagine the moment. No way. For what would he see – a girl or a monster? Or both at the same time? As if sensing my agitation, my head began to writhe. I reached up my hands and heard a gentle hiss.





Four years previously, I'd had lovely hair. No – I should say: four years previously, everything had been different, and the very least of it was that I'd had lovely hair. But seeing as I've been accused of vanity enough times by people who nevertheless thought it their right to ogle me, I might as well tell you: my hair was lovely. I wore it long and unbound, except when fishing with my sisters, because you don't want hair in your eyes when you're trying to catch a squid. It was dark brown, it waved down my back, and my sisters would scent it with thyme oil.

I'd never thought about it much. It was just my hair. But I would come to miss it.

These days – from the nape of my neck, over the crown and right up to my forehead – my skull's a home for snakes. That's right. Snakes. Not a single strand of human hair, but yellow snakes and red snakes, green and blue and black snakes, snakes with spots on and snakes with stripes. A snake the colour of coral. Another one of silver. Three or four of brilliant gold. I'm a woman whose head hisses: quite the conversation starter, if there was anyone around to have a conversation.

No one in the world has a head like mine. At least, I don't think they do: I could be wrong. There could be women all over the world with snakes instead of hair. My sister Euryale thought they were a gift from the gods. While she had a point – it was literally the goddess Athena who did this to me – I begged to disagree. My creel of eels, my needy puppies; a head of fangs, excitable. Why would a young woman trying to get through her life want that?

When I breathed I felt the snakes breathing too, and when I tensed my muscles they rose to strike. Euryale said that they were intelligent because I was, varied in colour and disposition because I was. They were unwieldy because I was, and, at times, disciplined because I was. Yet we were not quite in symbiosis, because despite all that, I couldn't always predict how they would behave. Four years together and I was still not entirely their mistress. They scared me.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think about Athena and her awful warning before we fled our home: Woe betide any man fool enough to look upon you now! Athena hadn't hung around to explain herself further; shocked and sorrowful, we had fled soon



after. I was still in the dark about what kind of woe she'd meant.

Anyway, it wasn't that I wanted anyone to look at me. I was so tired of being stared at my whole life, and now, with the snakes, the only thing I wanted to do was hide. They made me feel hideous, which I suspect was entirely Athena's intention.

I felt a twitch from the small serpent I'd called Echo. Echo was pink in colour, with emerald bands all up her body, and actually, she was sweet of nature. I turned in the direction that Echo was straining, and something snagged my eye. A tip of a sword, glinting on the deck of the boy's boat, under a sheet of goatskin. Not just any old weather-beaten sword, covered in nicks and rust-coloured blood, like other men's. No. This was a brand-new number, and its point gleamed.

Never been used, I was sure.

Echo hissed, but I closed my mind to her warning. I'd been without company my own age for four long years, and the boy was so beautiful. I'd risk the sword if it meant I could keep looking.



It was Argentus and Orado who started it for us; our canine Cupids. My dog caught the scent of the boy's dog on the breeze, and before I could stop him, Argentus had rushed from our cave, making a long-legged skitter down the hairpin bends of the rock face towards the shore.

Orado, for his part, jumped off the promontory and loped towards my looming wolfhound like an emperor greeting his island ambassador. I hardly dared to breathe as our animals circled each other. The boy rose to his feet with a puzzled expression, looking up again at the sheer rock as if trying to work out how on earth Argentus had appeared. He turned back towards the deck of his boat, to where the sword lay partially exposed. To my relief, he left the weapon where it was.

'Hello, you,' I heard the boy say to Argentus.

At the sound of his voice, even up on the cliff edge, my snakes recoiled, curling into themselves so that my head was a nest of snail shells. Argentus began to growl. Hush, I told my snakes. Watch. The young man crouched to pat Argentus on the head, but Argentus backed away.

ARGENTUS





‘Who are you?’ I called down. I spoke in panic, worried that Argentus’s suspicion of this new arrival would drive him to his boat at any moment. And I spoke in hope: it felt of utmost importance that this boy should stay on my island – for a day, a week, a month. Maybe longer. A change in fortune was coming. I wasn’t going to let it slip.

Startled, the boy looked up, but I knew he couldn’t see me: I’d become an expert at hiding in plain sight.

‘My name is Perseus!’ he called back.

Perseus. Just like that, as if the clouds should know his name. No hiding.

Oh, gods. Perseus. Even now, his name sends a shiver snaking up my spine.

Maybe if Argentus hadn’t snarled?

Maybe if I wasn’t lonely?

Maybe if I hadn’t spoken?

Maybe, maybe, maybe; why do we mortals always look back and imagine there was a simpler path? We think none of this

would have happened. We think, for example, that Perseus would have sailed on his way, with his sword and Zeus knows what else underneath that goatskin, and I wouldn’t be talking to you like this. I might still be waiting on that island, even today. I certainly wouldn’t be here.

But it didn’t happen like that. And the simpler path has never been for me.

Perseus began pacing back and forth beneath the scree that led directly to where I was hiding. ‘Who are you?’ he said.

Oh, nobody. Just a girl who took a one-way ticket to an island with her weird sisters and her dog. Nothing to look at here ...

‘Stay where you are,’ I shouted, for he had begun to look for a space in the rocks to climb up.

Perseus stepped back and looked at the desolate promontory. ‘What – here?’

‘There a problem?’ I sounded cockier than I felt.

‘Who are you? I can’t see you.’ He made to move to where Argentus had emerged.

‘You can’t come up!’ I cried.

‘Do you have anything to eat?’ he shouted back. ‘I’m – I mean, my dog’s quite hungry.’

‘Sea’s behind you. You could catch a fish.’

‘Not my strong point.’

‘Can’t handle a rod?’

Perseus laughed, a sound to make cracks in my resolve, a sound even now to be found in my soul. So here was a boy who could laugh at himself. Rare.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘I promise I won’t bother you for long.’

‘Where’ve you got to be?’ I called down.

Perseus spun round, taking in the water’s endless blue. ‘Perhaps I’m here already,’ he said. He spread his arms wide, turning back to the red of the rocks that towered to the sun. I wondered what would happen if I jumped off, tumbling down; whether he would catch me.

‘All right,’ he went on. ‘I’ll admit it. I’m lost.’

‘He can’t fish, and he can’t read the stars,’ I said. ‘Anything he can do?’

Perseus ran a hand through his hair, and my heart weakened like yolk in a pan. Come here, a voice within me urged. Come close and let me see you.

And then, that other voice: Woe betide any man fool enough to look upon you now!

‘I was sent on a mission,’ Perseus said. ‘The wind’s blown me off course.’

‘A mission?’

‘I can’t really talk about it. I certainly don’t want to shout about it up a rock.’

‘Didn’t your mother teach you not to speak to strangers?’ I said.

‘You could be anyone,’ he replied.

‘Exactly. You shouldn’t be here, Mr Perseus.’

‘I agree entirely,’ he said. ‘But when a king decides to ruin your life, you don’t have much say in the matter.’ Perseus kicked a rock and stubbed his toe, but kept his wincing silent.

What king was he talking about? And why had he clammed up when I mentioned his mother? I wanted to know. I wanted



stories, company, closeness. But I was in an agony of self-doubt. Perseus should be left down there; I knew that. Argentus knew it. My snakes knew it. It would be better to ignore him, to tell him to get on his boat and go back to wherever he came from.

But when put together, the ache of loneliness and the bitter soup of boredom are more dangerous than any snake venom. And by the sounds of it, Perseus had powerful men interfering in his happiness. So: already we had something in common.

I looked out to the horizon. Nearly dusk. Stheno and Euryale, my sisters, would be back soon. What would Perseus say when he saw them looming from the sky – and what would they make of him? We could have a dead boy on our hands. I was going to have to make a decision, fast.

‘I’ve just grilled a couple of fishes,’ I said. (Epic words.) ‘You can have some, if you like. There’s a cove round to the left, with a concealed entrance. You can moor your boat in there.’

This was the most I’d ever said to a boy in my entire life, and when Perseus grinned, my heart began to sting. A matter of minutes and my life was changed. And, briefly, I will say it: happy.