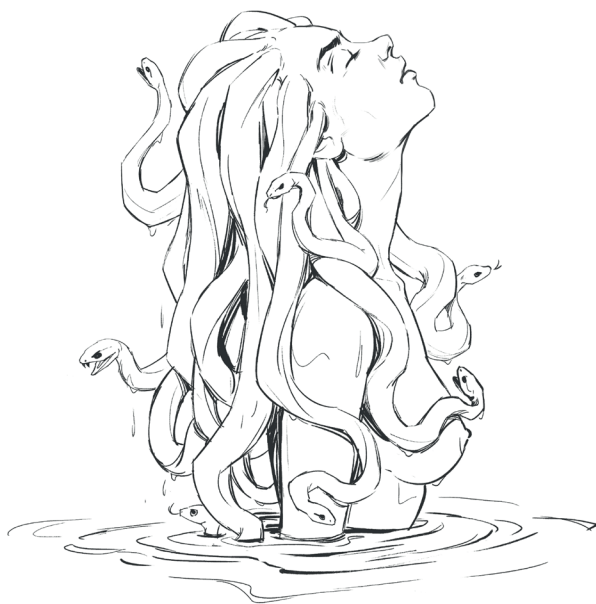


MEDUSA



S. A. SCARLET

Lonely Lighthouse Publications

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MEDUSA

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Of the gorgons, ever has there been only three. Three women, sisters by birth. Mortals.
But this was before they were changed, before they were punished. Tread carefully
traveler, for beyond this point . . . there be monsters.

PROLOGUE

It was the best moment in her life. Her eyes were closed, and even though the incoming sea wind was cool, the sun on her skin warmed her in the most wonderful way. She was wearing her favorite dress. One her mother had helped her make on a stormy day when they had been stuck indoors. It was white, cool—flowy when the wind hit it just right. She had sewn small orchids on it herself. Not many, just two—one large, one small, placed in exactly the right spots, down low near the hem.

The world around her was calm, quiet, but alive with the sounds of spring. Most notably, she could hear bees buzzing about. Serious things, bees, she thought. They were always working. Though her eyes were closed, she knew they were of the fuzzy variety. Friendly things if you left them alone, quick to be cross if you didn't.

But it was not the sun on her skin, the sounds of spring, or her pretty dress that made this the best moment in her life—it was what she liked to call the “Tingling.” She had never spoken of it out loud. It was a secret thing, something she had kept all her own. Even now it pulsed, almost like her heartbeat in rhythm, always accompanied by a pleasantly scratchy sound. Each time it started, the tingle would begin at her crown and then travel, lightning-fast, all the way down to her toes. Her skin went gooseflesh from the sensation. She was happy, and in the moment, the power of it overwhelmed her.

She felt a tear emerge from under her closed lid, then trace its way down her cheek, doing a tickling of its own. Her mother's brush suddenly stopped.

“What's the matter, little one?” she heard her mother's voice ask.

"Nothing," she said, noting that her own voice was hoarse and strange, like it often was when she had strong feelings. "I'm just happy," she said.

She felt her mother's hands on either side of her face, then felt lips touch her forehead.

"Well, if you're happy then I'm happy. I love you," her mother said, the words accompanied by a hug, which created a warmth of its own.

"I love you too, Mama," she said. She didn't use that word often anymore. At nine, she was starting to get too old for such things, but sometimes it was nice to remember what it felt like to be little again. The brush resumed its rhythmic work, and the Tingling began to dance over her skin once more.

The brush. She marveled that such a wicked-looking thing could create such pleasant feelings. Its bristles were made from fish bones that had been bleached white by the sun. The fish caught by her very own father. The brush had been a gift he'd made for her mother while he'd been out to sea, gifted upon his return.

"One must brush their hair twice a day, that is, if you want to have silken hair and not a nest of brambly tangles," her mother said.

"I know, Mama. I do every day, like you told me," she said.

"That's good, little one. It's important to brush your hair . . . brush your hair . . . brush your hair. . . ."

The last words echoed out strangely and faded. She suddenly no longer felt her mother's presence, nor the sun— though she did feel warm. The "Tingling" was gone, and the world she sensed around her had shifted in that it had a different feel to it. She remained very still. There was only the blackness of her still-closed eyes. She felt tears well up under her lids then escape to freedom, tickling their way down her cheeks, though the reason for their birth was quite different now.

It's interesting how I was once frightened by nightmares, and now long for their return, she thought.

She still had not moved and knew why, though she hated the reason. Hated herself for allowing it to surface. Still, she could not seem to purge it from her, and slowly she raised reluctant fingers to her head.

An angry hiss of surprise issued forth, then a searing pain erupted from her hand. She stifled a scream, knowing it would just encourage him further. She opened her eyes to see Verdis staring at her. He hissed once more, baring glistening fangs.

"Do not think we have forgotten what you have done! Do not seek to touch

usss!” he said, his reptilian eyes unblinking.

The others had been awakened by his shouting and most were now casting baleful looks at her.

“What do you mean? What’s going on?” Sthara said, still not quite awake yet. Her forked tongue flicked out and noticed that the air tasted strange. It was a familiar taste, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“Ssshe tried to murder usss again!” said Benthiss. *“I jussst knew ssshe would!”*

“Oh, murder mossst foul! Horrible woman creature!” Sthevenis said.

The others were all quite agitated and writhed about. Sthevenis, with his sleek emerald-green skin so dark as to almost appear black, had been upset as well, but suddenly he went very still. He gazed at her face with hypnotic persistence.

“We should bite her,” he said, slowly moving closer.

“Bite her!” Benthiss said.

“Oh, you’re just saying that because we’re close to molting and you’re irritable,” Felara said.

“Ssspeak for yourself. I’ve yet to bite anything and maybe she has it coming—I should be the one to do it!” Erevum said.

“I don’t think we should bite her. Maybe ssshe just had an itch. I had one the other day but rubbed against a rock while ssshe was laying down, and it felt glorioussss,” Mordiss said, his one odd fang hanging outside his lip.

“Oh, ssshut up, all of you. I already bit her. And it looksss like it worked, for now her handsss are in an acceptable place,” Verdis said.

The others seemed mollified by this, and their writhing was suddenly less so.

“I wasn’t going to touch you, or hurt you. I was still sleeping, and was brushing my hair in my dreams,” she said.

“Hair! A filthy businesss, that. It’sss a good thing that you have been sssshed of such disgussting sstuff. Sometimes I think humansss are just wagonsss for transporting lice about,” Sthara said.

“Hmph! Sssleeping indeed,” Verdis said, his eyes fixed on her with a baleful glare. *“Lucky for you fools, I wasn’t sssleeping. You keep your hands away from usss. I won’t be caught by surprise like the lassst time.”*

“I wasn’t planning on doing that again. Besides—”

She stopped short. Something wasn’t right. She suddenly felt it in the very air of the place. Human eyes suddenly became less so, became slitted, then slowly scanned

the room. The red, glittering glow appeared as it always did. Though her inner sanctum was dark, a small vein of lava flowed through it on one side, providing both light and heat. She could see that the statues out in the temple proper stood in their customary places. The soft roar of the molten rock was present, the crackle of torches—absent. She'd left none lit before sleeping. She then closed her eyes but heard no sounds other than the lava flow. Then she tasted the air through her brood.

Men! she thought. A chorus of hisses, sounding as one, arose from the *others*.

The scent of the invaders was strong upon the soft breeze that flowed through the temple. She uncoiled from the floor, rising upward. She retrieved her quiver, silently slinging it over her shoulder, and picked up her bow. There were twenty unique scents in the air, meaning at least twenty men. She sensed but did not hear them yet. She then noticed that her serpents had grown quite still, as if they instinctively knew what was to come. This was not surprising, after all—it had been so before. They'd come for her within her first century upon the island. And then throughout the centuries since. Through sunlight-glinted waters and gale-force storms, they came. Came to murder her. Came to claim her head.

They called themselves heroes.

CHAPTER ONE

Galen stared out to sea, unaware that his life was soon to come to a violent end. It was the storm that had drawn his eyes away from work. A calloused hand rested upon his shovel, the handle so worn it was now perfectly smooth, while his eyes took in the sight.

By the gods, it fills the horizon and rises so high as to challenge the gods, he thought.

Though dark, the clouds were occasionally illuminated from lightning flashes within. Thunder rumbled, but it was a far-off sound even though the storm seemed close. Living on the coast, they often experienced harsh weather, but nothing like what was slowly rolling toward land now. Galen estimated that the storm would make landfall soon, perhaps even this evening, and his ship, the *Sotiras*, would once more remain moored. A frown split his sun-weathered skin.

“Denied yet again. It’s as though I’ve angered Poseidon in some way, though I can’t imagine how,” he said, his voice soft in the quiet of the day.

The garden at his feet was now forgotten as he leaned upon his shovel. It had been nearly two months since he was last at sea. His reverie was disturbed by a tug at the cloth of his skirt.

“Papa,” he heard a small voice say. He looked down to see the youngest of his daughters standing there, her green eyes glowing up at him. She was ever the quiet one.

“Yes, Medusa,” he said. He smiled and picked her up. She leaned her head against

his bare chest.

“You smell,” she said, her nose crinkling.

He laughed.

“That I do, I suppose. Work is a most important thing, but it is hard and makes a mess of you sometimes,” he said and kissed her forehead.

“Euryale stole my brush again,” Medusa said. She looked up at him just then, and he was struck by the unique contrast of her appearance. Her eyes were a deep green, her hair auburn in color, though more brown than red, and it fell in loose, gentle spirals from her crown whilst framing lightly tanned skin. He noticed her hair was getting too long again and made a mental note to cut it later.

“Oh, she did, did she? What are you going to do?” Galen said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, Papa, I’m telling *you*, so *you*’ll do something,” she said.

He set her down on a bench nearby, then sat down beside her, his eyes returning with some regret to the untended garden.

“And what if I do nothing?” Galen said after a while.

A glance to Medusa showed she was less than pleased by this prospect.

“*You’re* the father. You’re *supposed* to do something. She shouldn’t have taken it. It’s mine,” Medusa said.

“This is true, I am the father. The brush is yours, and you’re right—she shouldn’t have taken it. But being the father doesn’t mean that I solve all your troubles for you. Sometimes it means I teach you to solve problems for yourself,” he said. Medusa’s face had scrunched up at this last part. It drew his attention to the dusting of freckles across her nose.

He continued, “I could take the brush back from her and spank her.” Medusa smiled at that, which he ignored. “But then Euryale would be angry with me *and* you, and she would likely just take the brush again. I could get her another brush, since she obviously doesn’t like her own—she likes yours, but perhaps she wouldn’t like the new one, either. It is a difficult problem, to be sure.

“I think I would like for you to solve it,” Galen said after a moment’s thought.

“*Papa*—” Medusa said.

“Don’t *Papa* me. And yes, I think that’s the answer for sure. I want you to solve it. Two rules, though: I don’t want you to steal it back, and however you do it, I want you to be nice,” Galen said.

Medusa’s cheeks puffed out then deflated as she let out an exasperated stream of

air.

“I don’t want to be nice,” she said, defiant, though she lowered her eyes when she said it.

“She’s your sister, Medusa, and you’ve only got two of them. That means she is precious to you, just as you are to her. She is not bad, though she might be behaving badly. Be nice to her and be clever in how you fix the problem. Perhaps it will bring both of you closer,” Galen said.

Medusa hissed.

“Enough of that now, little one. Run, gather your sisters, and pick some olives to go with tonight’s supper. But give me a hug before you go,” Galen said.

Medusa let out another sigh but gave him a hug, then crinkled her nose.

“Papa, dunk yourself in the sea before you come in for supper,” she said, then ran off before he could respond.

Galen smiled as he watched her disappear into the house. Then his hazel eyes returned to the coming storm. He was surprised that Medusa had not mentioned it, but he supposed she had other problems on her mind.

“As do we all,” he murmured, then returned to work, not noticing that a pair of slitted eyes watched him intently from within a nearby bush which had recently begun to sprout red berries.



SHE SHIMMERED INTO existence on a hilltop, her form silhouetted by moonlight. A golden circlet adorned her brow, giving off a faint glow that illuminated her regal features. Her eyes appeared a silvery white, as if lit from within by starlight. A breeze arose and the sheer dress she wore fluttered out in the evening air into a flowing diaphanous dance. Her skin tightened in response to the night’s coolness. The feeling of the cloth lightly dancing over skin was luxuriant to her, and she reveled at the feeling of her power within about to be uncoiled. She could see far off in the distance, farther than any mortal could have, the woman down on the path. Her perfect lips curled slightly at the sight.

She then cast her magic out upon the wind. It carried a cry of the hunt, of danger,

of darkness. Only a few moments passed before the first arrived. It was only a pair of disembodied eyes that magically moved through the nearby woods. Eyes that glowed from moonlight. It was only when it got closer, when it emerged from the forest, that she could see its midnight black fur. It came close to her but stopped not four feet away, then sat down, waiting. She could feel its bloodlust surging within, but it was a cool thing. The wind caressed its lush, dark fur, which moved as if alive, though the creature itself remained still.

“Soon, my fearless friend. Soon shall you hunt,” she whispered, for it would not do for others to hear her now. It would not do for others to know her involvement in what was about to come. If that happened, then *he* might find out that she had been responsible. *He* believed her a fool. Her eyes glittered in anger at the thought.

Several others had arrived, just as silently as the first, and sat waiting expectantly. She pulled a piece of cloth out, then passed it beneath each of their snouts. She then began to sing softly, her magic intertwined with the words, and the creatures grew in size. Their teeth, which were formidable before, were now dire to look upon. She could feel the bloodlust within them bloom to a frenzied need. Her lips twisted into a cruel smile. A delicate arm slowly rose to point toward a small lantern bobbing far off in the distance down below. The creatures’ cries suddenly rent the air, and they tore off down the hill, now looking like murderous wraiths in the silver-gilded darkness.



A LOUD POP from the fireplace caused an almost-asleep Stheno to jump in his lap.

“Easy, daughter. Just a log protesting its fiery end,” Galen said, stroking her hair, and she settled back down with her head against his chest once more.

“You know your’re probably getting too big for this now,” Galen said.

“Too big for what?” Stheno asked.

“Sitting on my lap,” Galen said. Stheno curled up more, making herself smaller.

“Not if I scrunch up like I just did,” she murmured. Galen chuckled and pulled her closer.

Medusa and Euryale were on the floor by the fire. Euryale was drawing on a piece of flat stone he’d found for her with some chalk. At the moment, a forest was springing

into life by the sea, with a boat that looked remarkably like his own.

“Looks like you’re starting to get pretty good at that, Euri,” Galen said.

Euryale flashed him a smile that was all teeth with her eyes closed, then immediately returned to her sketching. Out the corner of her eye, she cast a sly glance at him along with another smile before resuming her drawing in earnest.

“I’ve almost got your boat right, Papa. Each time it gets a little better, I think,” Euryale murmured, a strand of hair drifting down into her eyes. She brushed it back and continued, now oblivious to all else in the room.

Galen noticed that Medusa was being unusually quiet, even for her. He looked over and saw that she was holding her doll, but watching her sister in a secret way, her brow furrowed.

“Don’t forget the pennant, Euryale,” Galen said, his eyes still on Medusa.

She looked up. “The what?”

“The little strip of cloth that flutters in the wind above the sail. You haven’t added it yet,” Galen said.

He glanced back over and saw the pennant begin to take shape at the top of the mast, fluttering suitably, Galen noted.

Medusa wrapped a blanket around her so that just her eyes showed above it, green eyes that continued to watch Euryale, who still drew, oblivious to the scrutiny.

“Papa?” Stheno said.

“Yes?” Galen said.

“Can I go to sea with you tomorrow?” Stheno said. She was still cuddled against him and hadn’t looked up.

“I likely won’t be going to sea tomorrow. You must have missed seeing the storm moving in. I won’t be able to go until it passes,” Galen said.

“Can I go with you then?” Stheno said.

“No, Stheno. You’re still too young, and the sea can, at times, be a dangerous place. Perhaps next year,” Galen said. She wasn’t too young, but he was loath to remove her from the protective cocoon of their home. He knew he was holding on too tightly but couldn’t help himself.

Firelight glinted off of Medusa’s watchful eyes. She was twirling a portion of her blanket in her fingers.

“That’s what you said last year, Father. I’m not going to be little forever. Soon I will have a husband and will be raising children of my own. Then I won’t be able to go

to sea at all,” Stheno said.

Galen heard a wolf howl in the distance. Then several others answered in kind. Things were likely not going to go well for some poor creature this evening. He recognized the calls as the hunting kind. He thought it strange to hear them, as they hadn’t had any in the area for years. The thought reminded him to answer Stheno.

“That is still a year or two away. There is still plenty of time. Besides, we have to find a suitable boy to marry you off to first,” Galen said.

Stheno was quiet and said nothing to this.

“Euri,” Medusa said, lowering her blanket, “can I brush your hair?”

“I suppose so. But be gentle, I want to keep drawing. This one’s going good,” Euryale said, not looking up.

Medusa slipped out of her blanket and padded over to where the brushes were. She picked up both her brush and Euryale’s before returning. She then knelt beside Euryale and began to brush her hair with Euryale’s brush.

“Your hair is pretty. It’s almost like it has sunshine in it,” Medusa said.

Euryale smiled but continued drawing, her brow furrowed, lips pursed as several small seagulls materialized.

Medusa was being quite careful, the brush moving in slow, smooth movements through Euryale’s blond curls. Even so, Medusa was often hitting tangles that stopped the brush. Since she was being gentle and paying attention, the brush hitting the tangles never bothered Euryale enough to jar her from the sketching. Medusa stopped for a moment, and examined both her brush and Euryale’s, her fingers plucking at some of the tines. Outside, the song of the wolves had grown louder and closer, but the girls seemed not to notice. Euryale’s brush was set down, then Medusa resumed brushing Euryale’s hair with her own brush. Medusa’s brush flowed through Euryale’s hair smoothly, going through tangles with little resistance. Medusa frowned, then looked carefully at the tines of each of the brushes once more. She then used each on her own hair, her face concentrating intently. Euryale was oblivious that the brushing had stopped; seaside cliffs were now materializing with a waterfall cascading from them. This was something new, for there was no waterfall where Galen moored his ship.

“Euri?” Medusa said.

Euryale continued drawing, but when nothing further was said, she looked up.

“Yes?” Euryale said, chalk poised.

“My brush is really special to me. Papa made it,” Medusa said.

"I know, he made mine also," Euryale said.

"When I was brushing your hair just now, my brush worked in your hair really well. Your brush catches on your tangles easier. I think it is because the tines of your brush are closer together. I know your brush is special to you, like mine is to me, but I wonder if we could switch. You could take my brush and I would take yours. You could have yours back later if you decide—" Medusa said.

Euryale dropped her chalk and hugged Medusa.

"Thank you, Dusi! I've been wanting to ask you, but I was afraid it would hurt Papa's feelings. It's okay, isn't it, Papa? I still like my brush a lot and would keep it if you want me to," Euryale said.

"It's all right. You girls may switch if you want," Galen said and smiled.

He saw Euryale give Medusa another hug, this one more determined. Medusa smiled at him over Euryale's shoulder, her eyes shining, then closed them to concentrate on the hug. Galen felt a warm paternal pride flow through him. The moment was shattered by something crashing against the door, followed by horrific snarls, then a feminine scream of rage and terror.

Galen leapt from the chair, Stheno tumbling from his lap but landing on her feet. There was another crash at the door, followed by a cry of pain from one of the wolves. Galen's spear was already in hand when the latch began to raise on the door. In an instant, the door flew open, and a woman threw herself through the threshold. She whirled in place and attempted to slam the door closed, but a wolf was already partially inside. He snarled and snapped his teeth at the woman, who struggled to keep the door from opening farther. There were streaks of blood staining several places on her dress.

"Mama!" Medusa said and began to run toward her, but Galen was faster.

His spear launched forward, piercing the shoulder of the wolf, who cried out, then instantly bit at the spear shaft.

"Get back, Helen!" Galen said. The woman fell to the side.

He threw his shoulder into the door. A loud snap erupted like a branch breaking, and the wolf cried out and withdrew. Galen slammed the door shut and dropped the crossbar down.

Galen crouched down, his gaze rapidly darting over his wife's body before returning to her eyes.

"Helen, are you all right?" Galen said.

Her breathing was labored. She looked at him briefly, then her eyes rolled up, and

she collapsed. Galen quickly checked her for any serious injuries but found none.

There was a tremendous impact, and the door rattled on its hinges. A chorus of snarls arose just outside.

He lifted Helen and moved her away from the door, which shook from another impact.

“Girls, see to your mother,” Galen said, leaning his spear against the wall.

He retrieved a torch and thrust it into the fire. It flared into life. He then drew his sword from its scabbard and headed for the door. Euryale was there, a dagger in each hand.

“I’m going with you,” she said, her face grim.

He saw that Stheno and Medusa were tending to their mother. Medusa was crying but working through it.

He knelt, keeping the torch well clear of Euryale’s golden curls. Red torchlight played across her face.

“You will be staying here,” he said in low voice. “There is more than one way into this house. I need you to guard your mother and sisters. I also need you to bar the door behind me. Can you do it?” Galen said.

Euryale nodded.

“Good. Get ready. When it happens, it’ll happen quick. Keep your daggers and your wits about you. If I don’t return, don’t venture outside until daybreak,” Galen said above the snarls still coming from outside.

He lifted the crossbar, and the door shook from another impact. He placed his left foot near the door, then released the catch. The door flew open, but only a few inches before being stopped by his foot. The jaws of two wolves burst through, snarling and snapping. Galen jammed the torch into the top one, hearing the sizzle of burning flesh, the fur alighting. The lower one got his sword, which was razor-sharp and passed through flesh into bone. Both animals cried in pain and withdrew. Galen opened the door farther and threw himself through the opening, into the waiting jaws of night. The door slammed behind him, with Euryale locking it once more.



MEDUSA'S EYES WERE closed, her head bowed. She felt her mother's warm body in her arms and heard snarls and inhuman screams coming from outside. Her mother was very still, unnaturally so. Medusa could hear violence raging out in the night but could not hear her father's voice. She held her mother tighter.

Call out, Papa! Sing the song of war so that Ares might hear you, might strengthen your arm! Medusa thought.

Medusa . . .

She began to rock back and forth, gently running her fingers through her mother's hair.

The sounds of violence intensified but now sounded as if they were moving farther away. She still could not hear her father.

Medusa . . .

Ares, hear my prayer. Help my papa. Strengthen his arm. Sharpen his sword. Aid him in battle and I will—

"Medusa!" a voice said.

It was Stheno's voice. She opened her eyes, to see Stheno's face close to hers. Stheno, who was always the calm one, whose face was a placid pool of moonlight surrounded by a dark forest of hair. Her face was nearly unrecognizable to Medusa in the moment, and her stomach began to twist into knots.

"Stop crying, Dusi, I need help! Get some water, a towel, and the herb jars from the kitchen. Here; put this below Mother's head when you get up," Stheno said, handing her a rolled-up blanket.

Medusa did as she was told, then ran to the kitchen. She saw that Euryale was standing near the door, a dagger in each hand. Her whole body tensed.

"I'm going outside," she heard Euryale say as Medusa entered the kitchen.

"No you're not! Father said to stay inside," Stheno said.

"And what if he's hurt and needs my help?" Euryale said.

"And what if he gets hurt because he's suddenly more worried about you than protecting himself? Stay in here. Besides, you heard him say that you're to protect Mother in case one of those things gets inside," Stheno said.

Medusa heard no reply to this. She gathered the last of the supplies and returned. She dipped the towel in the water and began to gently probe at her mother's wounds, most of which appeared to be superficial. Stheno began making medicinal creams for the lighter wounds, poultices for the deeper ones. Thankfully, so far, there was only one

serious enough to require a poultice.

Medusa then heard the front door creak open.

“Dusi, lock the door behind me,” Euryale said softly, and before Stheno could protest, she was gone.

Medusa ran to the door, locked the latch, then dropped the crossbar. She waited at the door, listening, trying to hear Euryale, but no sound came from outside. Just when she turned away from the door, she heard a crash in the back of the house. She moved to look, and a moment later, in the dim light, she saw a pair of eyes emerge in the back hallway. A low growl rumbled forth from the shadows, then the eyes began to advance toward her.



EURYALE SAW TWO large dark shapes on the ground just outside the door.

Father’s killed two already, she realized.

She could hear the battle farther away to her left and was filled with the desire to run down the trail. Instead, she stood very still for a moment. The moon was full, and few clouds were above, allowing her eyes to rapidly adjust to the darkness. There was a slight breeze, and she could see lightning flashes in the clouds out to sea. A low rumble of thunder could be heard as well as the battle far off; otherwise it was quiet, nothing moving. The stench of death filled the air.

She knelt near the closest wolf and plunged a dagger into it. No movement. She did the same to the other. For a moment she thought she heard a crash from inside the house, but when it remained quiet, she moved farther away and out onto the trail heading to the left.

She encountered three more fallen wolves, crouching at each and sinking a dagger as she went. Her heart pounded, her hands shook, but she held her daggers with a white-knuckled grip. The trail rose to a blind hill, a glow coming from beyond, lighting its curve on the horizon. Then suddenly all went quiet—too quiet, save for the low rumble of thunder.

Papa! Euryale thought.

She had been moving at a brisk but cautious pace. All thoughts of caution were

discarded now as she ran to the hill crest, and in an instant was standing at its peak. Fear seized her heart, and for a moment, she froze.

Her father was not more than sixty paces ahead, blood streaming from several wounds. He still held the torch in one hand, his blood-soaked sword in the other. Only two wolves remained, one to either side of him, just inside the golden-red glow of his torch. She realized now how truly massive the wolves were, their shoulders nearly four feet tall. Both had fangs bared and were moving toward him. But it was not the wolves that bothered her; it was the look on his face. She saw something she had never seen before there. She saw defeat. She saw despair.

He was exhausted. Just then he fell to one knee, and the wolf to his left reared back to leap.

“Father!!!” Euryale screamed.

It was a scream of fear, of rage. It was a battle cry, a call to arms. The wolf on his left exploded into motion, not toward her father, but toward her! And in the last few moments before it closed the distance and was on her, she saw fire reignite in her father’s eyes.



“STHENO,” MEDUSA SAID, never taking her eyes off of the wolf, her voice low, “hold very still. One of them is in here with us.”

A large paw broke the plane of shadow of the back hall, crossing into firelight.

Medusa took a step backward but was brought to an abrupt stop by her back hitting the wall.

A black, shiny nose appeared next, followed by a mouth filled with gleaming sharp yellow teeth. A low growl, which mirrored the thunder outside, rumbled forth; then another paw came forward from the darkness. The beast now seemed to fill the hall. Its bloodshot eyes were locked onto hers with hypnotic intensity. She noticed that the eyes stood higher than her own.

She did not look at Stheno or her mother, afraid that it would draw the wolf’s attention to them. Her heart was now pounding so hard she felt it was luring the wolf closer. Clammy hands scrambled around behind her, feeling for anything that might

aid.

Now the front shoulders were visible. It *was* massive. Its eyes flared red, as though there were flames within, and it no longer seemed a wolf, but a thing of evil escaped from the depths of Tartarus.

Its teeth were now all she could see, saliva dripping from sharp points. Then her right hand closed on something round, and after a moment, realization struck her.

Father's spear! she thought.

The nightmare exploded into motion, charged forward, and leapt, teeth and red glowing eyes closing in on her. She brought the spear down, and jaws snapped shut on flesh. Medusa screamed, felt a horrific pain, and the world turned black.



BITS OF TURF flew into the air from the wolf's paws, its legs a blur as it hurtled toward her. The world seemed to shrink as the beast drew near, far faster than Euryale would have thought possible. For a split second she found herself unable to move, her mouth going dry. In that moment, her hands squeezed reflexively, and she felt her daggers' handles. The feeling of them caused the fear in her to flee, only to be replaced by fury. She screamed once more, then charged forward, closing the distance. The wolf, not expecting an attack, faltered and veered to one side. Euryale lashed out with one of her daggers and earned a howl of pain and rage, accompanied by a chunk of fur flying upward. The wolf skidded through a turn and came back at her, teeth flashing. But wherever teeth were, an even sharper dagger was there to meet them. The wolf became more enraged until finally it leapt in frustration, seeking to bear her to the ground with its mass. She fell backward but kept her arms stiff, daggers pointed upward. As her back hit the ground, the wolf's chest met her daggers, one slipping through ribs to soft flesh and vital organs. The creature's jaws snapped shut an inch from her nose, and suddenly the creature was still. She kept her arms locked straight, levered the beast to one side, and it crashed to the ground. When she had fallen, she had been fortunate enough not to land on the flat of her back, but just to one side, so the wind hadn't been knocked from her. She rose up, placed a hand on the wolf's chest, readying her dagger for one final strike, but the chest was still, with no life felt beneath her fingers.

Euryale looked up to see her father upon his knees, the remaining wolf dead before him. His sword arm was down, though he still grasped it, and its point was in the dirt. He still held the torch, but held it low, its life nearly extinguished. His face was choked with an emotion she couldn't fathom. Perhaps many. She stood, but found herself suddenly lightheaded and had to pause for a moment while she swayed in the breeze. She felt herself steady, her head clear once more, and then she ran to her father.

He was covered in blood, numerous cuts, and bite wounds. One appeared to be serious, on the back of his left calf. But the thing that most troubled her were the tears that streamed down his face. She had never seen him cry, and it frightened her. She reached up with a blood-soaked hand and traced one of the tears away with a thumb, smearing blood across his cheek. She had not yet sheathed her blades.

"By the gods," he said, then faltered, unable to speak further.

The daggers fell to the ground. She knelt and put her arms around him, laying her head on his chest. She could feel that his heart was still beating fast, but not recklessly so.

"By the gods, I thought I was going to lose you, and I had not the strength to prevent it. Even now, I am unsure if I can stand," he said.

Euryale pulled away and looked up at him.

"My father did not train me with my daggers or raise me to fall to a simple dog. You had nothing to worry about," Euryale said.

Galen had the strangest look on his face for a moment, then he laughed through his tears and pulled Euryale close.

"By the gods," he said again. "What a daughter you are."

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the torch finally went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Phaeton was suddenly flying through the air. *It's strange, I thought flying would be more enjoyable*, he thought, moments before crashing to the ground. He rolled to his back and saw that Timenious was standing over him. The dark-haired man offered his hand, which Phaeton took, and Timenious pulled him onto his feet.

"Come now, Phaeton. You'll have to do better than that if you want to survive the Gauntlet," Timenious said. He stepped back to lean against a nearby tree, just off the path they had been running down. The day's light was almost gone, and what was remaining shone dimly through the surrounding foliage.

"True, though I'm in no hurry to brave it. But you have to admit, that root was the most fearsome of opponents," Phaeton said, dusting himself off.

Timenious grinned.

"Undoubtedly there's many a hero that have been laid low by such things. But have you not even tried the Gauntlet?" Timenious said.

"No, of course not. Have *you*?" Phaeton said.

"Yes, twice," Timenious said, twirling a stick in his fingers in the effortless manner with which he seemed to do all things.

"It's forbidden to ones our age," Phaeton said, raising an eyebrow.

"I've noticed that forbidden things only tend to be troublesome when you are caught. I'm not worried about such things," Timenious said, snapping the twig in two in one deft movement and casting both pieces aside.

“Not worried about getting caught, even when sentries have been posted?” Phaeton said.

“There are no sentries at night, Phaeton,” Timenious said, a slight smile on his lips. Phaeton’s eyes went wide. “Are you mad?”

“No. If I was, I would have tried it on a night with no moon. The two attempts I’ve made were on nights with a full moon. If you wait a while, it’s easy enough to see,” Timenious said, smiling.

“You didn’t make it all the way, did you?” Phaeton said.

“No, sad to say. I stopped at what I think they call the Path of the Fearless. Attempting that at night would not be brave, it would be stupid. And I’m no fool. It’s just as well, for beyond the path I saw two green glowing spots in the distance. They were there only for an instant but then disappeared. Perhaps I was seeing things. It did stir an uncomfortable feeling in me, and that was when I decided to quit,” Timenious said.

“So there is finally something that will give even you pause,” Phaeton said.

“Actually, going back down was so difficult that I almost considered finishing it, but there is just too much risk at night. There are things you must be able see clearly on the Path to properly negotiate it,” Timenious said. “But enough of such things. Let’s hurry, lest we miss it.”

Both boys broke back into a run, disappearing down the path into the dusk light.



“**MANY YEARS AGO**, across the western sea, sailed the hero Tericus. Long had he been gone from our lands, traveling strange seas and even stranger shores. Adventure was his drink, danger his sustenance. But, as it is with most of us, eventually the call of the familiar rose within him, the call of home,” Krylios said.

It was a humble beginning. Firelight played across both the room and the faces of the crowd, dancing and chasing shadows about. Though many were present, there were no sounds save the crackle and soft roar of the fire. They were all still, captive—just how he liked it.

Suddenly the tavern door burst open, two boys spilling through into the warm

room, both red-faced and panting. They quickly came up short as all eyes turned toward them.

“What’s this then? Foul ruffians come to disrupt things, smack us all about a bit?” Krylios said, his voice incredulous.

“Certainly not, famed Krylios. Just two fools who lost track of time and realized that a little rudeness was a lesser transgression than missing one of your stories,” the blond one said. He bowed slightly.

“Well, it’s a honeyed tongue you’ve got, young ruffian. Have you a name as well?” Krylios said. He knew the boy’s name—actually knew them both, having watched them carefully over the years but pretended otherwise.

“Phaeton, good storyteller. Well met, though I’ve seen you and heard your magnificent tales many times over the years. And my apologies for the interruption,” Phaeton said.

“And do you know the meaning of that name, Phaeton?” Krylios said.

“Yes, my mother says it means ‘shining one,’ named for the strands of sunlight laced within the darker locks of my hair. Her words, not mine. My father says it’s because I’ve got regrettably few moments of greatness sewn within a field of foolishness. I have to say, I’m more inclined to believe my mother on that name business,” Phaeton said.

Some of the crowd chuckled.

“And what of your ally? Has he a name of such ostentatiousness also?” Krylios said.

“My name is Timenious, named for the black hawk that flies at night, a hunter without peer. I don’t think it’s ostentatious, though, merely true,” Timenious said, a subdued smile on his lips.

“Oh, ho! A true hero then, are you? Well then, I’ve some questions for you both, but we’ll save those for later, for I’ve a story to tend to first,” Krylios said, fixing both with a direct look.

The boys found seats, and the crowd resettled themselves. Krylios stroked his long white beard, deep in thought.

“Now then, where was I?” Krylios said.

“Tericus the great hero was returning home from strange lands. Though I’ve never heard of such a hero before, and I’ve heard of many,” a girl near the front said. She smiled, revealing two missing teeth that hadn’t been replaced yet.

“There’s a lovely lady, you’re exactly right. Tericus the great hero was returning

home. There is a reason that you've never heard of him, though we'll learn of that later in the story. But to continue: strange indeed were the lands Tericus had traveled. He'd left in search of things that drive most men: adventure and riches. And on his journey, he'd had his fill of both. He'd climbed a mountain so high that snow never leaves its top and discovered that when one goes so high, there is a strange quality to the air that makes it difficult to breathe. He also encountered and vanquished many terrible monsters, and you might think that I am going to tell you stories of them, but you'd be wrong," Krylios said.

A groan rose up from the crowd.

"Now, now—I understand your disappointment. But you're only thinking what you are losing at the moment, not seeing what you are about to gain.

"Have you heard of the gorgons?" he said.

The crowd was silent.

"Yes, I thought as much. Well then, sit back, keep your wine close—because you are going to need it on this one, and let me tell you the tale of their discovery . . .

"It begins, as all good stories do, on a dark and storm-filled night. Thunder shook the skies, and our hero Tericus had returned home. He sat at his candlelit table admiring gold coins won during his adventuring. But as the horrific storm descended, battering his modest house, noble Tericus's face fell and a frown marred his normally stoic countenance, for he realized suddenly that the luster of his gold had begun to fade.

"Now in truth, they shone just as bright on that eve as the day when he had won them, but in *his* eyes they had grown dim. He realized then that the gold was just metal, which sat lifeless on his table or hidden away in his chest. It was the feelings he experienced when battling the seas, calling for Poseidon's aid, or hunting terrible monsters and realizing that they were hunting him back. It was these feelings that he felt coursing through him at such times, when he felt vibrant and alive. It was this that he missed. The thought struck him just as a bolt of lightning struck the ground outside his window. Its light gleamed in his eyes for a moment—blinding him, and when he could see once more, he gathered up a fair amount of gold, hid the rest, then donned a cloak and stepped out into the storm, disappearing into the night.

"Later that very night, down at the tavern near the docks, the door blew open, ushering in wind, rain, and a hooded and cloaked stranger," Krylios said.

"It's Tericus!" said a young boy, half jumping to his feet.

"You're right, of course, it was Tericus. But now, who is telling this fine story,

young sir? You, or I, if you please?” Krylios said, but winked at the mollified boy before continuing.

“The cloaked, hooded, and *secret figure*,” Krylios said, fixing the boy with a conspiratorial glance and another wink before continuing, “closed the door, shutting out the storm, then spoke to the barkeep in hushed tones. The barkeep gestured toward a man who sat by himself. The cloaked figure then moved through the tavern to stand before the seated man and spoke.”



“**I UNDERSTAND, OF** all the sea captains here, you are the most well traveled,” said the cloaked man.

“You’ve the right of it, sir. There is no man here who’s had more leagues under him than me. And what might your name be, and what it is you want on this foul night?” said the captain.

“I am Tericus, hero and adventurer. I’d returned home, but the road and adventure call to me once more. What is your name, good Captain?” said Tericus.

“Teredes. My ship’s the *Trident*. Name given out of respect for Poseidon, king of the sea upon which I make my living,” said Teredes.

Tericus had sailed upon a score of *Tridents* but thought it unwise to mention such information.

“Well met, Master Teredes. Might I join you and discuss possible work then?” Tericus said.

Teredes gestured to the empty seat across from him. Nearby the fire flickered, and Tericus sat down with his back to it.

“To be blunt, Captain, I hunt monsters. The more terrifying the better. Have you come across any in your travels?” Tericus said.

“Many, including the Tyrian Hydra, but no one sane hunts that one, and I gave it a wide berth. I will take you to any monster you wish, save one,” said Teredes.

“What is the one you won’t take me to?” said Tericus.

“Long ago, I was caught in the worst storm of my career. It was a ship killer. Only through luck was I able to survive, but I was blown far off course. The storm blew itself

out, and I found myself near an island. I didn't recognize the isle but was running low on supplies. So we sailed near and found a suitable place to land. There was a thick forest of trees, and I had spied a temple on the far side of the island when we were still out at sea. I thought to travel through the forest and seek aid from those at the temple.

"I sent six scouts ahead, while I and the rest of my men secured the boat and the immediate area at the beach. Once the area was deemed safe, I took the remainder of my men, save two sentries left behind to guard the boat, and we entered the forest.

"We hadn't traveled long before I heard the most horrific scream, which was suddenly cut off in an unnatural kind of way. We continued farther, then moments later heard another.

"I hate to admit it, even now after all this time, but the sounds unmanned me. I am no hero. Brave the seas, pirates—I can do both all day, but monsters . . . such things are beyond me. Most that I'd seen had always been from afar, from a safe distance. Clearly, here we had unwittingly stumbled onto one, and the poor scouts I'd sent ahead, judging from the screams, were lost. Were we to continue, I likely would have lost my remaining men and my own life. For a moment, I was frozen with indecision.

"But the decision was suddenly made for us, for I saw the brush being disturbed not far ahead. I called for my men to flee, and we returned to the boat as fast as our sea legs would carry us. It was the most terrifying moment in my life, for as you know, no ship returns to sea quickly. Time stretched by while the boat was relaunched and slowly rowed away from shore. I kept waiting for the thing to burst from the foliage and murder us all, but it never happened. The foliage of the shoreline stayed disturbingly still," Teredes said.

"If a creature never emerged, then how can you be sure anything of concern was there? Perhaps one of your men fell and the other was bitten by a viper. Perhaps—" Tericus said.

"It never happened because once we were two hundred feet from shore, an arrow thudded into the bow spine timber of my ship. It hit with enough force for the tip of the arrow to go all the way through, stopping about two handwidths on the side toward me.

"There was no mistaking what that arrow was. It was a warning to stay away and not return. As I said, we were two hundred feet out, and the arrow was put dead center in the middle of that timber. Monsters have all manner of formidable methods of attack, but this one has even taken up the weapons of man, though that arrow was like none I'd ever seen, making it far more dangerous. After a few minutes of sailing, the arrow

disappeared from the timber. I asked later, and all denied touching it. Most monsters are just creatures—formidable, to be true, but not truly cunning. This one is. And Zeus only knows what other wicked abilities the thing has. Because of the disappearing arrow, I think it must possess magic of some sort,” said Teredes.

“Then that’s the one for me,” said Tericus.

“You don’t understand, I’ll not—” Teredes said.

“You needn’t get within two hundred feet or even four. Stay a thousand feet out. Two thousand if you like. Give me three days’ time on the island. If I’ve not returned within that time, you may sail away and never return,” Tericus said.

“You’re wasting your time. Let me take you to a land with known chimaeras, or another with harpies,” Teredes said.

“No. It’s the mystery island and the unknown,” Tericus said.

He pulled a small sack from within his cloak and plunked it down onto the table, where it sat fat with promise. He noticed the captain’s eyes had not left it once he heard the distinct clink of coins within.

“It is filled with gold coins, good Captain. Do as I ask, and upon our return you shall have nine others exactly like it, to make an even ten. I shall swear to all here upon my name that it will be so.

“Well then, Captain, what will it be?” Tericus said.

The captain stared at the sack for a long time before replying.

“Three thousand feet, not one foot closer. One additional sack up front, the remaining eight upon return, and three days—no longer. The remaining eight are to be held by the owner of this tavern. He is a trustworthy sort,” said Teredes.

“Done. I’ll return in a few days’ time with the second sack; you may keep the first. You will witness me handing the remaining eight to said owner. We will leave on the third dawn from today,” said Tericus.

“Agreed. Till the third dawn then,” Teredes said, sliding the bag from the table and into a secret pocket.



“**AND THAT, I think,** is a good place to stop for the night,” Krylios said.

MEDUSA

The audience groaned.

“But we didn’t even get to the good part,” said the small girl in the front.

“True. So it’s quite important that you all return tomorrow. Especially our two heroes in the back,” Krylios said.

CHAPTER THREE

Two diminutive figures stood in the light of dusk at the cave's darkened entrance. Its opening rose perhaps seven feet above them. Ivy hung down a third of the way over the shadowed opening. The ivy fluttered outward slightly with an unnerving rhythmic persistence. Not far in, the darkness was impenetrable.

"Today is the day, Basileios," said Kassandros.

"Will you wait here for me?" Basileios said.

"Of course. It's customary," Kassandros said.

"All right, then. It's my time," Basileios said, using the ritualistic words.

He stepped forward and within moments was swallowed by the darkness.



AFTER WALKING ABOUT fifteen feet, Basileios turned to see if his friend was still at the cave's entrance. He was relieved to see that he was, though he imagined that it was likely not possible for Kassandros to see him now. He hadn't been able to see this far into the cave just moments before.

He turned and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Supposedly there

were lichen inside the cave that gave off just enough of a glow to see by, but he must not have been far enough into the cave, for he didn't see any light save for the scant amount coming from the now faraway entrance. What little light there had been was nearly gone now. Still, he was beginning to make out the details of the walls, slick with moisture and moss, which surprised him. He hadn't expected to see green plants in the cave. *Perhaps it's close enough to the opening to catch some of the sunlight*, he thought. This must have been true, because the moss stopped just a few feet farther.

He stopped suddenly, feeling that he'd heard a sound, like that of something smooth sliding against stone. But when he stopped, there was nothing except the pounding of his heart. *Everyone says the cave is empty and has been for years. It's just a test of courage*, he thought. He remained still for a moment, concentrating on the cave's details. It smelled strongly of earth and something else, but the second scent was odd, and he couldn't place it. It had a hint of decay to it, which he decided was not out of place here. He placed a hand against the stone wall of the cave. There was a surprising roughness to it, though it was coated with wet slime, which made him regret his curiosity. He wiped the hand on his tunic and lamented the necessity, knowing his mother would be less than pleased. Basileios shrugged and continued on into the shadowed gloom, making slow progress.

It had taken him a long time to work up the courage to enter the cave. Almost all the other boys his age had already done it a year before, but he could not bring himself to commit. He supposed part of the problem was that he had visited the cave often, perhaps too often. He had watched the opening's ivy drift out and in, like it was stirred by the breath of some sleeping creature farther in; it had unnerved him. In the spring, the ivy had sprouted flowers, and its movement had stilled. He had almost gone in then, but it didn't seem in keeping with the purpose of entering. And so he had delayed. He would watch the cave when no one else was making an attempt, but he discovered that the more he watched, the more he was convinced something was inside. Something horrible. It was nonsense. All the other boys his age had done it, and all to no ill effect, though there was some hierarchy to those who had completed the task. He didn't know what it was. Something that bothered him today was that no one had attempted the cave for several months now. It was possible that a bear had taken residence. He shook his head. If a bear was present, he would deal with it. He was the last who needed to walk the cave, and the other boys that hadn't were all a year too young to make an attempt. He would shame himself if he waited to walk with them.

It was now pitch black, and even with his dark-adjusted eyes, he could no longer see. He inched his way forward carefully, with his arms held out before him. His heart had still not calmed and flitted about in his chest like a captured bird. He took a deep breath, steadied his nerves, and continued forward. After a few moments, he suddenly realized that he could see, albeit not well. A ghostly glow was now present, coming from lichen that adorned the walls. He continued and noticed that the glow pulsed, slowly growing brighter, then dimmer. When it was dim, it was nearly black, and it was during a dim spell when he ran into something. His hands reflexively lowered to catch himself from falling, but he hadn't been moving fast, and his hands came down gently against something hard. Smooth stone, cool to the touch, was beneath his hands. He felt precise ridges, but they didn't seem sharp. He pushed himself back up, resigned that he would have to do some climbing.

The lichen's glow intensified once more, and he froze. He then saw movement off to one side and realized in horror what he was looking upon. He whirled in place and began to run. He made it six steps before a terrific blow took him off his feet and he crashed to the cave floor, feeling a searing pain in his back. He struggled to move but found that he could not. Nor could he cry for help. A panic arose in him. It was then he felt himself being dragged backward, and a moment later, blackness took him.



IT WAS A boring job being the Watcher. Still, it was an important one, and Basileios was his friend, so volunteering when Basileios had finally said he was going to attempt the cave had been easy to do. It was the waiting that was so difficult. It was always difficult for anyone going in for the first time, and the Watcher never knew how long he would be standing there. And so Kassandros waited.

No one could remember who was the first to initiate the ritual of the Watcher and the Walker, but it was, at its essence, a test of courage. While most boys were destined to be farmers or fisherman, all wanted to be heroes. There seemed to be no shortage of monsters present, at least if the stories were to be believed, and judging from those stories, the hero business was a lucrative one, bringing money, fame, and women. Still, the problem was how to break into the business. No one, at least no one that Kassandros

had talked to, had ever seen a monster locally. They had only heard about them from the traveling storytellers. He wondered about the truth of their words, but his father had said they were honor bound to report deeds that were verifiable as true. In short, the head of the vanquished monster or beast had to be presented.

But at some point, one of the boys had decided that if any were to become heroes, they would have to have some way of building courage. Not the “jump off of the top of the tree into the lake” kind of courage, but real courage in the face of danger. The solution had been the cave. And it had worked well thus far, both instilling courage in the Walker, who had to enter alone, and camaraderie in the Watcher, who acted as both protector and verifier. The rules were as follows. The Walker must go into the cave alone and walk to its end, touch the wall, then return. It was important that the walker not return before a count of three hundred. If one did, they were to be branded as both a coward and a liar, for it was not possible to touch the end and return before such a count. The Watcher was honor bound to count to at least three hundred, then wait for the Walker’s return. So far, no boy had ever failed, though one had made his Watcher wait nearly half the day before his return. The final rule was that the test was to be done during daylight. Kassandros was uncertain as to the reason for that rule, so he felt no guilt in breaking it.

While the rest of the boys had not been hard on Basileios about not going in yet, Basileios had been hard on himself. He’d confided in Kassandros that he was afraid, and the fear bothered him. So he decided to confront his fear and make the test as difficult as possible and do the walk at night, or at least as close to night as they could get. If they weren’t home shortly after sundown they would get in trouble, so the boys had tried to time it, and Kassandros thought they had done rather well. At the count of three hundred, the far horizon was faintly pink; by five hundred it was night, and he could see the stars above.

His guess was that Basileios might take to a count of a thousand to return. If not, then he would go in after him. Kassandros knew the cave quite well, having been a Watcher for many other boys over the past year. One thing that the Walkers didn’t know was that once you came back out, you had to run back in with the Watcher and race to the end and back. Since the cave floor was flat and the lichen were always bright at the end, the risk of falling or serious injury was low. Kassandros knew this and had decided that they would finish that task on the morrow. It would be a small change to the ritual, but he didn’t think the other boys would mind.

He suddenly went stone still, listening carefully. He thought he had heard something coming from inside the cave. The sound had been brief, though, and he was now uncertain if he'd really heard anything. He looked up and saw the moon was high enough that he was going to be in trouble when he got home.

He reached down and uncovered a secret weapon. It was an agreed-upon agent that was to be used as a last resort, or if it was suspected that someone was truly in danger. It was a flash bug lantern, a large jar with flowers at the bottom and filled with at least one hundred flash bugs. He gave the jar a rattle, and the flash bugs obliged with an irritated glow that lit up the cave's entrance. He entered.

Having light gave him even more confidence than he usually had, and he made good time until the flash bugs decided to go to sleep. He continued for a bit until he hit the really dark section and stopped. He gave the jar a shake, but the flash bugs remained quiet. He wondered briefly if they had run out of flower to eat, but then thought that maybe it was air. He removed the cork from the top and swirled the jar around a few times. A flash bug lit up near his head and then another near the ceiling, and he quickly replaced the cork. He held up the jar once more and shook it. A glow rose from the imprisoned horde and he smiled, then frowned.

He was looking through the jar at what appeared to be a large rock. *Had there been a cave-in?* he wondered. Then he caught a bit of movement to one side and saw a strange shape with a slit in its center. He suddenly realized with horror that it was a large eye looking at him.

He dropped the jar and heard the glass shatter behind him as he began to run. A sharp pain struck him in his back, and he froze in place. A moment later he realized that he wasn't frozen but was in the creature's jaws. The light was dim once more now that the flash bugs had dispersed. Then it went black. Pain flooded his body, which felt like it was on fire, and he realized that he couldn't breathe. Suddenly, light flared from a solitary flash bug near him. He found himself looking into the lifeless eye of his friend Basileios, the flash bug perched on his now ghostly pale cheek. The light from the flash bug began to fade, and then all was black.

CHAPTER FOUR

Medusa's eyes blinked open to see her father's face above her, looking down. A white smile split his tanned face.

"I see the spear maiden has finally awoken," Galen said.

She saw he had numerous cuts and scrapes on his face and arms. She moved to sit up but winced in pain and fell back on the bed.

"Yes, I'm afraid you've got quite the battle wound on your left forearm. Rest back, little warrior," Galen said.

"What happened?" Medusa said.

"Your mother was chased by wolves on the trip home," Galen said.

"That's never happened before. We've never even heard of wolves being around here," Medusa said.

"I know. It's strange, but it happened. Anyway, I went outside to run the wolves off, and they can usually be driven off with fire, but not this time. Again, strange. I singed several with the torch, but instead of running, they just became more enraged. Finishing them with the sword was the only option. I had killed all but two. At least, that is what I thought at the time. But with the last two, I was at the end of my strength and about to fall to them, but then your sister Euryale showed up. She screamed a battle cry that Athena herself must have heard. In that moment, it changed me. It ignited some small spark of a reserve that I used to finish one wolf. Then I had to watch in despair as the remaining wolf ran toward Euryale, for my strength had left me.

“But then the most miraculous thing happened. She did battle with the wolf. Athena must have heard her cry, for she handled the wolf with her daggers, with only a few small scratches to show for it,” Galen said.

Medusa’s eyes suddenly widened.

“The wolf! Is Mother all right? Is Stheno?” Medusa said, sitting up and wincing once more in pain.

“They’re fine, both of them. It appears we had another wolf slayer back here at the house,” Galen said.

He picked up a cup of tea from nearby.

“Since you’re sitting up at this point, you might as well have some tea,” Galen said.

Medusa took it with both hands, now moving gingerly. She glanced down at her bandaged left forearm.

“What happened with my wolf? I remember it leaping at me. I remember dropping the spear, and then terrible teeth and nothing else,” Medusa said.

Galen noticed that the hands holding the teacup were still quite small. He shook his head.

“The wolf had enough momentum that his body weight kept driving him forward, impaling himself upon your spear. As he came to stop, his jaws snapped shut on your forearm. Stheno pried them open, then took your arm out and bandaged it. The bandages were replaced this morning by myself,” Galen said.

Medusa started to tear up.

“I prayed, Papa. I prayed to Ares for you to call out, to give a battle cry so I would know you were safe. I prayed for him to strengthen your arm—” Medusa said, then stopped, overwhelmed, and wept.

Galen set aside her tea and pulled her close.

“Easy now, Medusa. Easy, little one. Everything is all right now, as are you. Your prayers were answered last night, for not only did Ares help me but you as well. Stheno told me that you braced the spear and wielded it just like heroes in the stories. She said that as the wolf flew at you, massive and snarling with wicked teeth gleaming, you screamed a defiant battle cry. I’m proud of you,” Galen said, and kissed her forehead.

Medusa hugged him back.

“Will you teach me to use a spear, like you taught Euryale to use her daggers?” Medusa said.

“Well, you certainly did well with the spear, but you might still be a little small for

it. I'll have to think about it, but we'll come up with something for you. Get some rest and remind me in a few days' time," Galen said, then left.



A HOWL, LONG and drawn out, cut through the crisp night air. The sound drifted to her from off in the distance, perhaps even as far as the mountains. Helen stopped for a moment, listening, then heard it again.

It's a wolf, she realized.

Strange, we've never had wolves in these parts before, she thought. *It's a lonely sound.*

Another cry rose in the night air. This one was different from the first, both in sound and location, but was still far away.

She continued down the path. It was an unusual night in that there was a full moon, bright enough to see the area around her, but there was an immense storm darkening the horizon out to sea. A wall of black was dotted by occasional flashes of lightning, giving the dark clouds a ghostly glow. Thunder rumbled in periodically, a promise of the storm's impending landfall.

The howls in the distance increased to a chorus.

I wonder if they speak to each other or are just singing, she thought.

A twig broke in the nearby forest, causing her to jump. She stopped for a moment, listening. Nothing . . . even the wolves had gone quiet, which admittedly made her feel some relief. She continued, warmed by the prospect that she was nearing home.

This stretch of forest always made her a little nervous to walk by. Monsters never took the well-traveled path, but always struck from the shadows. And at night, the forest was alive with shadows. It occurred to her then how fortunate her family was never to have encountered any monsters. To hear the stories, their lands were rife with such creatures, but apparently heroes kept their number in check to where they had almost become myth rather than a solid reality that would need to be dealt with. Oh, she'd heard of cyclops attacking this village, and a chimera attacking that traveler, but it was through a friend of a friend of a friend. She glanced once more to the forest but could perceive no movement, could see no glowing, menacing eyes. It was an uncomfortable

glance, furtive and fearful that it might come across a real nightmare, that it might see a clawed foot emerge from the shadows, or a pair of eyes appear—red and glowing. She stopped and turned to face the forest.

This is ridiculous. There are no monsters, she thought.

She stood waiting in front of the darkened wood, which remained quiet. Then the howls of the wolves rose once more, though this time the sounds were not far off. It sounded as though they were not more than a few hundred yards away. It no longer sounded musical. She ran.

The world became a blur around her as she flew up the path. Her dress and cloak ribboned out behind her as she ran. She cleared a familiar rise and could see her home down below. The howls continued to get closer, and then she tripped and crashed to the ground.

She started to rise but saw that they were there already—that there would be no escape.

She rolled to her backside. They formed a semicircle around her, each with glowing red eyes. Their mouths were disproportionately large, filled with wicked teeth. Each was massive, with shoulders at four feet in height. Their fur was as black as the night and raised in aggression. Strangely, they had gone silent. They just kept slowly moving closer, eyes fixated on her. Then, suddenly as one, their heads rose and focused on something beyond her. She took advantage of the distraction to pull out a dagger and took a glance over her shoulder to see what had distracted them.

A small figure had stepped out of the front door to their home. It was Medusa. She was small, like she was when she was no more than three or four years of age. Helen saw her face clearly in the lantern light of the entryway. She saw recognition light Medusa's face, and she began to move toward Helen in the uncoordinated way of small children. Just as Medusa began to move toward her, the wolves burst past, tearing up turf. Now howling, the sound a dark and wicked thing. But there was no fear on Medusa's face, no recognition of the danger.

"No!" Helen said, rising to her feet. "Noooooooooooooooooooo—"



HELEN SHOT UPWARD, heart pounding—disoriented. Her eyes focused, and she realized that she was in her bedroom. Then remembrance of the reality of last night came back to her. And then Galen stepped into their bedroom.

“Medusa! Is she—” Helen said.

“Our wounded warrior is fine. I just came from visiting her. Stheno is fine. Euryale is fine. And I am fine as well,” Galen said and sat on the bed, next to her.

A great sigh of relief escaped Helen, and she felt Galen’s arms around her. He spoke a moment later.

“And glad I am that you are fine. We heard the wolves off in the distance. Then later heard them getting closer. Never did I think that you were their quarry,” he said with a sigh. “Ah, wife, the thought of your loss hurts my heart. Why would you leave and travel during the night? Never mind. I’m just glad you are here and safe.”

Her eyes were closed and suddenly teeth were tearing flesh, and her eyes jolted back open. Her vision blurred.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice thick. “This area has always been a safe one for us and our family. A quiet place that the monsters can’t touch. We hear tales of terrible creatures, but they have always been something far off, something mythical.

“I’ve made the journey countless times and thought this would be just like the others. Even when I first heard the wolves, they were distant—it was a danger that wasn’t going to touch me. But then it did. Then it harmed me and my family.”

Helen took a deep breath. She felt Galen’s arms pull her tighter.

“What happened?” Helen said.

“Our house is a fairly open one, much for the reasons that you had mentioned earlier. So even when you burst in, and we managed to close the door, I knew that it was a temporary stay. I knew that, if the wolves were truly determined, they would eventually get inside the house.

“Would it had been safer if I’d stayed inside? I’m uncertain. Dusi was hurt, and that hurts me as her father, but as I said earlier—all of us are safe.

“But to return to your question, once you were inside and safe, you collapsed. I checked to make sure you were all right, then told the girls to watch over you and went outside, with Euryale closing the door behind.

“I began thinking that I could simply drive the wolves off, but after burning two and them not running, I realized it was more serious. I then sought to draw them away from the home, slaying as many as I could. I had the pack down to just two, but was

exhausted and at my end. I thought at the time that I was finished, that my energy reserves had all been used up. Then Euryale arrived. I saw her at the crest of the hill, and she gave a battle cry that would have given the Tyrian hydra pause. It both terrified me and rejuvenated me. Terrified me because my small daughter had just drawn their attention. Rejuvenated because . . . well, because you, Stheno, Euryale, Medusa . . . you are all the reason why I drew them away in the first place. I'd lost sight of that in my exhaustion, in my despair, in my loneliness, because in that moment I was alone. But then Euryale was there. And at that moment I remembered that I drew the wolves away because you are all something worth fighting for, worth dying for, and I didn't want my daughter to see me fall and then be in danger herself.

"But her cry triggered the worst thing, because one of the wolves took up pursuit of her faster than I could get to him. I killed the other. But then I had to watch as the escaped one ran down my daughter because I had not the strength left to get there in time." Helen saw tears begin to stream down Galen's cheeks, but he did not stop. "I watched as Euryale froze, and for a moment I thought I was going to lose her. But then she charged the wolf and it panicked, darting off to the side. She lashed out with a dagger, and it howled in pain. But then the fight began in earnest, with teeth gnashing, daggers flashing. Almost as soon as it began it was over, with what I thought was the final wolf dead and Euryale victorious, walking toward me. Even now, I feel like shouting to the heavens, chasing her down, and hugging the life from her myself.

"But at this point we were both exhausted. My torch had gone out, and it was a long walk back to the house. When we arrived, we found we had left behind another wolf-slayer, who was being bandaged by Stheno," Galen said.

"It would seem that the other wolf-slayer is now a spy, for I see small eyes peeking at the door," Helen said.

Galen looked back and saw Medusa at the cracked open door.

"Come here, you," he said.

Medusa slowly opened the door and slipped into the room.

"How is your leg, Father?" Medusa said.

"Oh, kill a wolf and it's 'Father' now? All grown up, and I'm no longer 'Papa'?" Galen said.

Medusa's cheeks puffed out, then she let out an exasperated breath.

"No, Papa, I'm still little, and worried about you," she said.

"My leg is fine, spear-wielder. How is your arm?" Galen said.

“It still hurts, but not as bad as it itches,” Medusa said.

“Well then, you’d better get in the bed so I can scratch it around the edges,” Helen said.

Medusa climbed up onto the bed and into Helen’s lap, which she was too big for, but Helen pulled her in anyway.

“You know, Dusi, when you’re injured, it makes it hard,” Galen said.

Medusa frowned.

“Makes what hard?” she said.

“It makes it hard . . . to get away from tickles,” Galen said, a wicked look now in his eyes.

Medusa’s eyes went wide.

“Papa, I’m hurt bad,” Medusa said, shocked.

Galen chuckled.

“I suppose you’re right. It’ll have to be just hugs for now then, I guess,” Galen said and hugged both his wife and daughter.

“I love you, Galen,” Helen said, at last feeling that everything was going to be all right, and the fist that had been tightly closed around her heart finally relaxed.



TEARS FELL, TO be instantly lost amidst bubbles in dishwater. Stheno saw her hands going through the action of cleaning the dishes from the prior night. It was a mindless task that they seemed to perform of their own accord, though they did so quietly. The window was open, and she could hear her father speaking to her mother, speaking of battles and daughters, but she was not in those stories. She heard the pride in his voice at the mention of the spear wielder, and again at daggers. She heard the tale recounting the night before. All she could remember was being dumped off of his lap and not thought of since. She heard of injuries sustained in defense of loved ones, but she had none. There was not one scratch on her perfectly pale skin from the prior night.

Euryale had saved him. Their father would be gone now had it not been for her. Medusa had saved her, saved their mother. They would both be gone were it not for Medusa. Stheno saw more tears fall into the dishwater and hated them, her tears.

She heard laughter drift in from the other room and was reminded of the quietness of her own room. She looked up to see outside, through the window above the tub she was using. It was day and the sun shone brightly, but the entire horizon was darkened by a storm out to sea. Lightning flashed and she waited for the thunder, but it never came. There was a strange stillness to the storm, a stillness she felt a kinship to, for the world seemed to rage around her but she was not touched by it. It watched her with indifference.

Her eyes fell back to the dishwater, where her hands had nearly finished their work. She saw that all that remained was the large cooking knife. It sat gleaming in the bottom of the sink, in water where the bubbles were almost gone. She watched her hands pull the knife from the water, watched the light glint off of its keen edge. Her long, nearly black hair hung straight down, channeling her vision to where all she could see was the blade. She watched it until the water dried from it, and its metal shone brighter.

Then with a quick, deft flick of her wrist, a red line appeared on her left hand. It was a shallow cut, but blood welled instantly, then ran off to fall into the dishwater below. She cleaned the blade and set it aside. The cut bled a little, but it did not last long, and she continued to stare at the water, which was remarkably clear, though slightly tinged with red. She saw her reflection perfectly. Her large brown eyes, so dark as to appear black. Her fine white skin, with not a hint of flush.

“I hate you,” she said. But the words were quiet ones that the midmorning breeze lazily whisked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

K rylios saw a red glow coming from the inside of the tavern and sighed. He leaned on his staff for a moment and looked to the heavens. The evening sky was crystal clear, a dark violet tapestry that glittered with the jewels of night. A breeze was present, making it cool, but not unpleasantly so. Fall fast approached, with a tinge of turn touching the colors of the foliage. At night, though, all looked dark. Still, the smell had changed. It was no longer the vibrant and thriving smells of summer. There was a slight change to the air around that signaled the world was beginning to prepare for the long sleep of winter. It was an air of melancholy that, at the moment, mirrored his inner heart.

Why did I begin that story? he thought.

His eyes fell to the path that led away from the tavern. To the right sat the tavern, with its warmly inviting red glow and familiar-smelling chimney smoke, the sounds of laughter drifting out from an open window. Laughter that he no longer ever felt a part of. To the left, the dirt path was dark and lonely, draped only in starlight. It was a sight all too familiar to him.

It was the boys that did it, that have unmanned me, he thought.

Another voice in his head replied, *It always amazes me how good you are at lying to yourself.* He recognized the voice as the one he had never listened to when he was younger. It seemed only to torment him in his old age now. It was the voice of the best version of himself, the one he'd failed to live up to when he was in his prime, and now

only ever reminded him of that failure that he no longer had the vigor of youth to make good on any of the suggestions.

Krylios shook his head. “You’re right, as always, but the truth is a harsh mistress. Beautiful, but sometimes beauty is hard to look upon when you know it is something you can never touch. I don’t know why I started that story.”

I do, the voice said.

“So do I, though it never helps,” said Krylios.

It will this time, and you know why . . . the boys, the voice said.

“You think they will be there,” Krylios said, his voice hopeful. He’d watched the boys over the years and knew them well, even though the prior night was the first time he’d ever spoken to them directly. Fear had driven that decision as well.

It could not be otherwise. You will just have to do something you have not been able to do for so long, the voice said.

“Show courage,” Krylios whispered.

He suddenly found himself at the tavern door. His hand reached for the door, but instead of grasping the handle, it laid his palm flat against the wood in one final act of rebellion. His head bowed, the sounds of laughter, of camaraderie reaching his ears once more. In that moment, he had never felt more alone.



THEY HAD BEEN there long enough for whispers to begin to travel through the crowd. There were a few that were oblivious, ones with noses too deep in their wineglass, but aside from those few, a genuine undercurrent of concern had arisen in the rest of the crowd. Storytellers were a valued part of a community, and even though they were nearly always transient, they were treated with respect. Krylios was now overdue by at least an hour.

“. . . Keltos said he left in a huff,” said a voice.

“Saria saw him on the eastern trail leaving town. . .” said another.

“. . . not coming this night,” said a third.

“. . . treated him rudely,” another said.

Phaeton settled back and felt his recent sip of wine warm him.

“What say you, friend Phaeton? Will we hear the end of Tericus this eve?” Timenious said.

“I’ve no doubt. He’ll show soon,” Phaeton said.

“It’s not like a storyteller to show so late. They’re always the first ones here. You get more free meals and wine that way. The evening meal has already come and gone. I have to admit, I’m beginning to think it likely he’s left town, though I wonder why,” Timenious said, taking a sip of his own wine.

“There’s no way he doesn’t show,” Phaeton said, though he secretly was beginning to get nervous. He’d heard more than a few whispers of “if he had not been rudely interrupted.” A comment that was undoubtedly a reference to their late arrival the prior evening.

“How are you so certain?” Timenious said. He’d finished his wine and kept glancing with covetous eyes to a pair of cups sitting nearby.

“He set up the story too well. Nobody goes to that kind of effort not to pay it off. He did so well that I was surprised the crowd relented and let him leave last night,” Phaeton said.

Timenious was about to reply, but the door swung open and Krylios stepped through the threshold, a twist of a smile on his lips, his eyes shining.

“Well! There’s certainly a lot of folks here this evening. I wonder if something exciting is about to happen,” Krylios said.

A tittering raced through the crowd, an audible show of nervousness at Krylios’s late arrival. Even the small boy who had been unable to contain himself the prior eve was unusually subdued, Phaeton noticed.

“Greetings and good eve, esteemed storyteller Krylios. My friend and I wanted to apologize for our interruption of yesterday’s tale. Again, we felt missing the story seemed the more egregious of sins, but we felt some measure of atonement was in order. In this regard I humbly offer you a cup to keep your palate conditioned during this evening’s work,” Phaeton said. He took the cup and placed it on the table near where Krylios had sat the prior evening.

“Well met, honored Krylios. I too am ashamed of our rudeness, but regret it not if only for its necessity, so masterful was your tale’s beginning. I too offer a cup that I mightily wanted to partake of myself, as mine now sits dry, in so that if your tale travels into the darker hours of eve, that you might have a moment of respite close at hand. Phaeton and I arrived a full hour’s measure of time before the quenching of the day out

of respect for your craft,” Timenious said, adding his cup to Phaeton’s.

“My, my, not only are these young masters heroes in the making, but their lips part and the petals of roses flow forth. Would that I had such a honeyed tongue at their age. Men, keep your daughters away from these two, at least for a few more years, I suppose,” Krylios said. This finally drew a few chuckles from the crowd.

He made his way to the storytelling spot near the fire and took a sip of the wine there. The crowd settled back into place, and he spoke once more, a hush falling over the tavern as magic rose into the air created by mere words.



THE DAWN OF the third day arrived, and Teredes’s ship was in order. All gear was neatly stowed and secured for rough seas. Supplies, ample for an extended time at sea, were located centrally, covered and protected by the ship’s only launch boat. Though his ship had a shallow draft and could easily be beached, he still found it more than useful to keep the launch to get into small areas, or if he anticipated a need to leave a beach in a hurry—it was far simpler with the smaller craft. It was a lesson he’d learned on his last visit to the island that he was about to brave again. The launch would be easy to abandon at the first hint of trouble, and three thousand feet ought to be more than enough of a head start for him, should the beast make an appearance. He took one last look over his ship. No matter how many times he left land, he always had the nagging sensation that he was forgetting something. A noise distracted him from his worry, and a glance to the docks showed four men approaching.

Tericus was in the lead, with three strangers in tow. Tericus was an interesting figure as a hero. He was not overly tall, nor excessively muscled. He had clever eyes but was just not physically imposing. The same could not be said of his companions. All three were at least six feet, four inches in height, if Teredes had to guess, and were heavily muscled. Each was armed with a sword and dagger, save one, who had two handles poking up at a diagonal from either side of his back. That one was the tallest of the lot, though he would have stood out anyway, as his hair was blond in contrast with the others, who had swarthy hair and complexions. Whereas Tericus had a mysterious, ingratiating air about him, his companions exuded pure aggression, if not

outright hostility. Teredes doubted it would serve them well where they were going, but with Tericus leading them with his cleverness *and* the additional numbers, they might prevail. And with their success, he would receive a windfall, allowing his retirement.

“Well met, Captain Teredes. I’ve arrived as promised and have brought some companions to aid me in this endeavor. Do you have enough stores aboard to sustain the extra men?” Tericus said.

Teredes nodded and said, “And to spare. Do you have what we agreed upon?”

Tericus produced a plump sack similar to the one Teredes had already received. It flew through the air a moment later to land in Teredes’s hand with a clink. He hefted the sack for a moment, then squirreled it away into a pocket.

“Well met then, Tericus. You and your men come aboard, and we’ll get under way,” Teredes said.

Tericus leapt into the boat, his men following suit. Each of them paused to clasp his hand as they boarded, the blond man entering first.

“Gennadius” . . . “Erastos” . . . “Phaidros.”

Moments later the sail rose, and the ship slipped into the sea and was soon lost to the horizon.



THE SEAS WERE neither rough nor placid, but middling, which made for fairly easy sailing. Because of this, it was not long before the thing that has plagued sailors since man took to the seas took hold: boredom. Of the four men, only Tericus’s gaze was on the horizon; the other men’s eyes quested over his ship many times, restless. Not more than one day had passed before questions began to flow. Not surprisingly, it was the blond one, Gennadius—whom he had pegged as the leader—that spoke.

“So then, friend Captain, tell us of this island we journey to, and what we may expect to find,” Gennadius said.

Teredes noticed that Tericus still gazed upon the horizon, either oblivious or unconcerned that the questions were not being directed his way.

“The island is not unlike many in the region. Its white beaches are guarded by trees, which quickly become a forest, though not an impenetrable one. Far in the distance

the temple can be seen on a plateau that juts out from the mountain. At the end of the temple sits a flat area devoid of any statues or adornments. Perhaps it is a courtyard, though one that is not long-lived, for at its end is a cliff face, and, I imagine, the sea waits below,” Teredes said.

“And what of the creature? Tericus told us of a creature that caused you to flee for your life. Did you see anything that might be of aid?” Gennadius said.

“It is as I told Tericus. I saw nothing of the creature, and glad I am that I can say such. What I can tell you is that when my men died, their cries were cut off. Now, any time a man is stabbed or murdered, their cry, scream—whatever drags out—it doesn’t just stop. I don’t know what happened to them. Perhaps they were eaten. The creature wields a bow for sure, and perhaps it possesses other weapons. Perhaps the screams were cut off because their heads were cut off. I don’t know. All I know is that whatever it is, it was able to place an arrow with pinpoint accuracy at a distance of more than a few hundred feet.

“I can also tell you that my men were hardened seamen. Men who’d been in no shortage of tough spots, taken gruesome wounds. Their screams were not borne of the sight of a weapon, but of something truly terrible, something monstrous.

“You’re tough men, I can see as much. No doubt, if you travel with Tericus, you’re good with the weapons you carry. I’ve no doubt you’re brave men. But all the same, I’ll go no farther than three thousand feet from the shore on that island. I’ll stay the three days, but if on the third day you’ve not returned, I’ll give an offering at the next temple I see out of respect for your passing.

“Three thousand feet. Three days. When the sun breaks free of the sea on the third day, I hoist anchor—heroes aboard . . . or not,” Teredes said.

Gennadius’s normally hardened features grew pensive.

“Most helpful, good Captain. As you say, three days,” Gennadius said.

Teredes noticed that Gennadius returned to sit with the two other men, away from Tericus, where they conversed in low tones. Tericus, he saw, was still oblivious to the men, his eyes lost on the horizon.

They reached the island on the sixth day at sea. Teredes struck the sail, the ship coasting to a listless stop. Moments later he lowered the anchor, noting the depth was about fourteen fathoms. The sun was still new in the sky by about an hour. Tericus and his men slipped the launch quietly into the water, and before he boarded the smaller vessel, he turned back to Teredes.

“Three days, Captain, as promised.” And then he was in the launch, the small craft shrinking rapidly into the distance toward a forbidding shore.



THE LAUNCH SLID to a stop on the beach. Tericus leapt from the boat, his sandaled feet coming down onto wet sand. He heard the others splash down behind him. They wordlessly pulled the boat farther up onto the sand.

“You know why you’re here. Get to work. Remember, do not enter the temple,” Tericus said.

The three men nodded and disappeared into the forest. Tericus waited a few moments after they were gone, then pushed the boat back into the water. He turned it, tied a line to its stern, then attached the other end around a tree. A glance out to sea showed Teredes’s ship to still be where they left it, though it was hard to see Teredes himself. Tericus was unconcerned about the three-day deadline. If they hadn’t completed their task by the end of one day, they would all likely be dead. Tericus in retrospect was surprised that Teredes had agreed to such a long time. If the raiding party fell, then the creature, if it was as intelligent as Teredes said, would surely scout for the vessel that brought the men to its island. There was always the possibility that the man would hoist anchor and disappear as soon as Tericus entered the forest himself, but he thought it ultimately unlikely. The remaining gold should be more than enough of an enticement to keep the captain anchored where he was. He could only hope that things would go as planned where the men were concerned.



TEREDES SAT UNEASY in his ship. He’d seen Tericus’s men enter the forest while Tericus had remained behind. Then Tericus had done something odd with the boat. For a moment Teredes thought he was going to abandon the men and return to the ship,

but then Tericus returned to the beach, where he remained for another fifteen minutes before disappearing into the forest himself. It was odd and not at all what Teredes had expected. He was so focused on the beach and the island that he didn't notice a large, dark shape moving toward his ship under the water.

Far in the distance he could see the temple, which appeared unchanged from his memory. The structure looked to be made of white marble. The sides were plain, and the roof extended outward to where there was an open entry area with great columns at the very front. An empty courtyard lay beyond, a drop-off at its end, which he assumed fell to the sea below.

His mouth had gone dry, and he felt an urge to look away from the temple. Something evil had made the structure, which had likely once been a place of worship for one, perhaps many of the gods, its lair. Likely fouling it beyond repair. Were the others successful perhaps he would return, raze it to the ground, to remove the wicked taint it no doubt possessed, and construct a new temple in honor of Poseidon.

Looking away from the temple had made him feel immediately better. Water lapped at the side of his ship in a manner that always soothed him, and he relaxed back against the stores he was sitting near. He took a pull of wine from one of the many wineskins they had aboard. A warm flush spread through him, starting in his belly and moving outward. He relaxed further and felt even better.

The dark shape was now less than one hundred feet from his ship but had still gone unnoticed by the old sailor, who was now well into his wine. It moved in a sinuous fashion but traveled in a direct line toward the ship.

Teredes looked out to sea and felt a moment of supreme contentedness fill him. The sun was out, with not a cloud to be seen, its rays turning the ocean into a field of golden-glittering jewels. The smell of the sea surrounded him. It had a purifying effect whenever it touched him. It was not like the slightly rotting smell one experiences near the shore, where it has the feel of decay, but it was a clean and vibrant thing. The moment did not last, however, for a dread began to rise in him. It started like the prick of needle but then began to spread, to intensify. And a thought occurred to him.

No. I'll not break my word. I'll not abandon the men, not until I've stayed until the allotted time, he thought with a sigh. *But by the gods, it's going to be a long wait.*

His eyes were drawn back to the island, back to the temple, and a nearly frantic feeling arose in him at the sight of it. He took another pull on the wineskin and felt the blessed dullness begin to battle against the terror that was a tide rising within him. His

eyes flicked back to the temple once more, and that was when he finally saw it, the dark shadow moving toward him under the water.

“By the gods,” he breathed.

His hands frantically scrambled in search of a weapon, and after a few desperate moments closed on a harpoon shaft. He stood at the ready, the well-worn wood of the harpoon handle held within his rough, calloused hands. The point of the harpoon was a wicked thing, sharp with two backward-curving barbs. It was a weapon that would give anything pause, but its pointed tip quivered as Teredes watched the dark shape grow ever nearer. Then finally he saw it.

A cry of relief escaped him, along with a nervous laugh.

“Zeus take me, I’m becoming an old maid, fearful of shadows,” Teredes said. His hands were shaking worse now, and he fought to still them in irritation.

The shark was almost at his ship, swimming lazily through the aquamarine water. It was a monster, to be sure, but not a kind he had ever feared in his life—as long as he was not in the water with the thing, of course. This one looked to be nearly fifteen feet in length, perhaps more. He estimated it likely weighed in excess of three thousand pounds, but he was unconcerned. Most of the really big sharks, like this one, were quite lazy and opportunists. He often saw them feeding on the carcasses of dead whales, which always had huge quantities of fat under their tough hides that the sharks liked to gorge themselves on. Even at those affairs, large beasts such as these always went about the affair in a lethargic kind of way, unlike their smaller cousins, which darted around fearfully.

He looked down, edging nearer to the transom, then placing his hands on the sun-warmed wood, the harpoon set aside. It was a beast. One of the larger ones he’d seen. Its back was a dark gray, and he had no doubt its belly was snow white. It swam back and forth near the ship in a lazy circular pattern, and even though he had seen many, Teredes was mesmerized by the creature and became engrossed in its study. A calm quiet had arisen as the breeze had fallen off, and even the lapping of water against his ship had grown almost imperceptible. Then the feeling of dread suddenly returned, stronger this time. His stomach twisted into a painful knot.

I can’t handle two more days of this. Damn me, and Tericus’s cursed gold. I don’t want to be here, and I was a fool to have come back, Teredes thought.

Suddenly, with a powerful flick of its tail, the shark shot off and disappeared. Teredes blinked, momentarily surprised. He had never witnessed one that large move

so quickly. Large creatures like that never did, for what did they have to fear?

Teredes heard it then: the sound of water droplets falling. It was soft at first, like just a few had fallen, but increased to the sound of many. It reminded him of the sound when he was pulling a large netful of fish from the water. *Or when something large was emerging from the water and coming into his boat*, he realized in horror.

He closed his eyes and felt a terrified breath escape him. He heard the sound of something large sliding smoothly over the transom and into his ship, felt the ship move beneath his feet. He didn't want to open his eyes, didn't want to turn, didn't want to see it, but could not do otherwise. He turned.

All coherent thought left him, and he scuttled backward but all too soon was brought to a stop by the stores in the center of his ship.

Poseidon save me, he thought as he looked upon the creature. He felt himself unable to move. His jaw worked, but no sound came out.

And then it spoke. "*You . . . should . . . not . . . have come back!*"

He wanted to plead, to beg forgiveness, but the words would not come forth. Then the creature's eyes began to glow green, a light that radiated down onto him. He then remembered his harpoon and reached for it, but his hand seemed to move slower and slower, and he realized that he would not reach it in time. The creature opened its mouth, and a song flowed forth. The green glow from its eyes intensified. He felt himself grow even stiller; then pain erupted within him, as if every part of him were being consumed by fire; then mercifully, the world went gray.

Once Teredes stopped moving, the creature hissed in rage and dove into the sea, now swimming toward the island at high speed under the water.



"DO YOU THINK we are far enough away from him yet?" Phaidros said.

"Indeed, we are. Not that I suspect it would have taken much distance with that one," Gennadius said.

Erastos spat.

"Remind me why we saddled ourselves with him," Erastos said.

Gennadius shrugged.

“He paid well. He financed the ship and the man who captains her,” Gennadius said.

“You’re not seriously considering aiding the cowardous ass, are you?” Phaidros said.

“Of course not. We are supposed to scout the forest and the area around the temple, then report our findings to him. Then we’re to move on the temple at tomorrow’s dawn.

“We *are* going to scout the forest. We *are* going to scout the area around the temple. But we’re *not* going back to the camp, but into the temple to take the beast out ourselves. We can always claim that the beast found us and attacked, and we were forced to defend ourselves. Our hero and fearless leader will look quite feckless at the telling of the tale, which is no less than he deserves for desiring to remain behind while men do the real work.

“Enough talk. We move. The usual routine: fifty-pace spread, alternating point. Weapons stay stowed unless danger is nigh, for their keen edge and an errant glint of sunlight would give away our position. Once at the temple it won’t matter. At that point we use our predetermined strategy. I estimate we should make it there in under an hour’s time. Now spread out. Erastos left, I’ll take center, and Phaidros, you’ve got right flank. Erastos, once we’re in position, you’ll start point. Move,” Gennadius said.

Both brothers departed instantly, moving fast and with little sound. A few moments later they were all in position. Gennadius nodded, and Erastos began to move forward, slow enough to take in the surroundings. When he was almost out of sight, he stopped for a moment, scanned the area once more, then gestured back to Gennadius, who began to move forward himself, and slowly the conquest of the island began.



TERICUS STROLLED THROUGH the forest at a leisurely pace. He estimated the “hounds” were far enough ahead that he was unconcerned of discovery. They would be far more preoccupied with what lay ahead than what lay behind. Nor was he worried about the creature, at least not yet. The scouts would likely come across it first, if it was out, which would give him ample time to react. He was just curious about how things were to play out. When they had been in the launch approaching the beach, he’d noticed

a tree rising far above the others. It was a tree, he decided, that would give him a great vantage point from which to do some scouting of his own. It was toward this tree that he now traveled.

His thoughts fell to the oddity Teredes had mentioned, that of the screams being suddenly cut off. With creatures such as the ones he'd hunted, there was always something unexpected, always some secret that revealed itself in the struggle. He felt that finding that particular peculiarity was the key to this creature's defeat and his triumph.

He brushed aside some foliage and froze. He'd nearly walked into a serpent that was sunning itself on some large leaves. The serpent hissed, revealing large glistening fangs mere inches away. It reared back as if to strike, and Tericus closed his eyes. He felt himself trembling shamefully but tried hard to remain still. Agonizing moments passed until finally he was able to force his eyes open once more. The creature was no longer there. He remained very still and looked around, a moment later seeing that it had moved up into a nearby tree. Tericus let out a shaky breath and resumed his walk toward the tree, albeit now with a much higher awareness of his surroundings.



GENNADIUS AND THE two brothers neared the temple, their trek through the forest uneventful. They paused on a slope below the level of the temple on an incline, not more than one hundred feet away.

"Are we still committed?" said Erastos.

"We are. Helmets on. Uncover your shields and use them well. Remember whatever this thing is, it wields a bow and is reputed to have some skill with it. We move in, spread out until we know what we're dealing with, then we can change our tactics as need be," Gennadius said, then smiled.

"And remember this: in a few short moments, glory awaits each of us, should the gods be smiling," Gennadius said.

All three donned their helmets. Gennadius pulled a double-bitted axe from a sling on his back. The brothers' swords came free of their sheaths. Each removed the covering from their shields, which now shone brightly in the sunlight. They spread out slightly,

still staying in a tight formation, and began to advance on the temple.



UNNERVED BY THE encounter with the serpent, Tericus slowed his progress, but before long he reached the tree and began to climb. It was difficult at first, but more branches presented themselves higher up, and after a few minutes of climbing he was at a suitable height. He settled in, leaning against the smooth trunk of the tree, and began to wait.

The view of the temple was much clearer, and he wondered about its interior and how it came to be. There were details in the tympanum, but at his current distance he was unable to make them out. From his angle, a red glow could be seen coming from the temple interior, and he wondered about its origin. It could not have been a fire, for no smoke emerged from the temple that he could see. The courtyard was devoid of any ornamentation, save its marble floor, which extended to a precipice.

A crack of thunder hit, coming from out to sea. Tericus could see that a large tempest was brewing offshore, the storm cloud dark and forbidding. *A bad day to be at sea*, he thought. And then instantly he wondered how Teredes fared, and also wondered if he would remain in his position while the storm raged or if he would relent and chance safe harbor near the shore.

The thought of the captain brought his story once more to mind, and he wondered what the creature's appearance would be like that would allow it to use a bow. And if it used a bow, it must be skilled enough to make replacement arrows . . . but such mundane musings were cut short by the arrival of his scouts.

Tericus watched them converse briefly, then ready their weapons before resuming travel once more toward the temple. He smiled at the behavior, and indeed, had predicted it.

"Fools," he said softly. "Brave fools, but fools nonetheless."

Still, this was not unexpected, and he anticipated gaining valuable knowledge from the encounter. He leaned forward, watching with keen interest for what was about to come.



THE THREE MEN stood at the mouth of the temple, just outside the columns. Each could see the anterior chamber of the temple. There was a wall at the back with openings high and low, but only blackness could be seen in them. A red glow lit the anterior chamber, coming from what looked to be a vein of lava running through a crack in the floor on the right side of the room. Numerous statues could be seen in the temple's interior that were horrific in pose. So intent were the men on the statues, they did not see a reptilian tail hanging down on the right side near the front silently pull upward and disappear into the shadows.

The men advanced past the columns into the anterior chamber. Gennadius looked to the darkened alcoves, with the forbidding blackness that lay beyond, and held up a hand for the men to stop.

"We know you're in here. Hiding won't do you any good. You might as well come out," Gennadius said.

The twang of a bowstring rang out from the shadows up high in the back, an arrow flashing by Gennadius's left to strike and skitter on the stone outside the temple.

Erastos began to laugh.

"It would seem our concerns about its aim were in excess," he said.

"Come now, little one—" Erastos began.

A scream of rage erupted, along with a hissing from the darkness above. A split second later, another arrow shot out with such force that it passed all the way through Erastos's left thigh just below his shield.

He immediately dropped to one knee. The action caused his head to tip forward, and his shield lowered slightly, which exposed an unprotected gap of no more than two inches on his neck. An arrow materialized from the spot an instant later, blood spraying from the wound, and Erastos fell facedown and went as still as the nearby statues.

"Retreat! We're too exposed in here—" Gennadius began.

Another twang and an arrow sprouted from in between the "T" of Phaidros's helm. He too crumpled to the floor, blood pooling out beneath him.

Gennadius had retreated enough that he was able to use a column for cover. He heard feminine laughter drift out from inside.

“You cannot remain inside forever, beast. Show yourself, and I promise your end will be merciful,” Gennadius said.

“Oh, *I am* coming out, and I promise you that yours won’t be,” she said and laughed once more.

Gennadius retreated ten steps to give himself room to maneuver. In a split-second decision, he dropped his shield in favor of pulling his other axe. Then he saw her emerge from the darkness. A nightmare born from the shadows. He gritted his teeth and readied himself for combat.



TERICUS SAW A flash of sparks on the stone, then saw an arrow skitter over the edge to fall into the sea. He heard someone call out something but was unable make out the words. Moments later, Gennadius came out, his guard up. He moved to use a pillar for cover. Tericus noted he was by himself now, the two brothers gone.

He then heard Gennadius call out to the monster within. And apparently, he got some sort of response, for he retreated slightly, dropped his shield, and pulled his second axe. And not too soon, for a second later the creature emerged, and Tericus felt the blood drain from his face.

It was a woman, but only partially so, for she had a serpent’s body from the waist down. He noticed her hair was moving, then realized with horror that it wasn’t hair but snakes coming from her head. Her bow was now nowhere to be seen, and she appeared defenseless. Something in him told him to flee, but he had to see what happened, had to see her power.

Gennadius, almost faster than Tericus could follow, whipped his arm, and one of the axes flashed through the air toward the creature, whose reflexes were faster. She dodged to one side, and the axe passed harmlessly by, thrown hard enough to embed itself in one of the stone columns. And then it happened.

The creature reared back slightly, arms upraised. Her eyes began to glow green. She then lunged forward, and rays of green light shot out from her eyes in a wide path, illuminating Gennadius in an otherworldly glow. The light was accompanied by something that sounding like singing. All of Gennadius’s movements slowed until it

stopped, his axe in mid-swing. And then everything on him turned gray. The creature stopped singing, and her eyes went quiet. She turned and yanked his axe from the stone column, and a second later hurled it at Gennadius's chest. He shattered into pieces.

"Mother of Hades," Tericus said. He whispered the words more than spoke them, but the creature's head whipped toward him. Tericus didn't wait to see if she moved in his direction or not. He burst into motion, running along a large branch pointed in the direction of the beach. When the branch was close to becoming too thin, he leapt into the air, falling ten feet before catching hold of a sapling, which bent toward the forest floor. When it had enough tension to nearly come to a stop he let go, falling the remaining ten feet to the forest floor below. He went into a roll to prevent himself from being injured and burst back onto his feet into a dead run. The forest flew by him, and he crashed through, now mindless of any attempt at caution.

Lungs burning, Tericus neared the forest's edge. His sword came out, flashed in the sunlight, and cleaved the rope holding the launch in place. The blade thunked into the tree, but no thought of pausing to pull it free passed through his mind. He dove through the air, crashing into the launch. The impact set the boat into motion, and Tericus scrambled into place at the oars and began to row. The setup was such that the rower faced the direction of travel, so he was able to see Teredes's ship in the distance. He began to feel exhaustion set in, his breaths now ragged, but pushed on. Then a green glow rose up all around him, filling him with dread. He wanted to pray for aid but knew none of the gods would reward his cowardice for fleeing. Suddenly a desire rose in him to turn and look backward. The need to look back increased within him, and despair took hold. His head slowly began to turn, and he felt himself slowing, felt the launch slowing. It was then that a large drop of water struck him in the face, then another, and then more than could be counted. The storm had arrived, and its scouts shook Tericus's madness from him. The oars resumed their once frantic pace. Lightning struck in the distance, illuminating briefly a shadow-filled sky. Teredes's ship was finally drawing near.

"Teredes! Teredes, damn you—ready the ship, you fool! She comes! Are you mad?" Tericus said, but then he saw that Teredes was not mad. He saw that Teredes was no longer going to be doing much of anything anymore.

The launch smacked into the ship, and Tericus threw himself over the rail, crashing into unyielding wood of the craft. He ignored the pain. The storm was now raging, and the seas had grown dark, wicked. A few frenetic motions and the sail rose, causing the

ship to surge forward. Relief flooded through Tericus, then the ship lurched to a stop, sending Tericus tumbling forward. In the fall, his face smashed against a wooden cross brace. He heard a crack and felt blood begin to flow.

The anchor's still down, you fool! he thought.

Frantic fingers pried at the rain-soaked knot but could not loosen it. In his panicked mind, he simply could not think to pull the release strand. His dagger came out and sawed at the taut line. A strand popped as the tension released, increasing the load on the remaining strands. He resumed sawing; another strand popped, now with only one strand remaining. His dagger went through it and the ship surged forward once more, now free. He went to the tiller and took hold of it, preventing the ship from foundering. And in an unthinking moment he looked aft and saw her dark form, now at the launch.

A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the darkened sky, and for a brief moment he saw her clearly. The serpents that adorned her head writhed about in agitation. Her hands rested on the transom of the launch, and she rose and fell with it in the waves. She was naked and had the breasts of a human female. Hands, shoulders all looked human. Then he looked upon her face. And it was as though time slowed, and in the world there only remained her and himself. He felt himself laid bare, his soul shaken as he looked into her eyes. The flash dimmed and darkness swallowed her. He turned away, back toward the storm, now sailing into the black teeth of it.



KRYLIOS FELL SILENT. The only sound now in the tavern was the crackle of the fire. He took a sip of wine. The spellbound crowd was silent for a moment longer, careful not to interrupt lest more story be forthcoming, even though it was now later in the night and the fire was a shell of its former self.

“What was the creature’s name?” a boy said. It was the same one who had excitedly yelled “It’s Tericus” the former evening.

“Her name was unknown to me,” Krylios said, his eyes distant and voice uncharacteristically somber.

“Her kind are called the gorgons. So named for their grim and terrible appearance. They have serpents for hair. Their bodies from the waist down are of the serpent. And

their gaze has the capability to turn men to stone. As for the bow, do all the gorgons wield bows? This is uncertain.

“And now we come to our two heroes. What say you of the gorgons? Will you travel forth to rid the world of this evil?” Krylios said.

“I shall slay at least one,” Phaeton said without hesitation.

“If friend Phaeton shall claim one, then I shall claim two,” Timenious said.

“Heroes indeed,” Krylios said, his smile uncharacteristically subdued.

“Well, that is the story of the gorgons and their discovery, and I shall tell no more tales this evening,” Krylios said.

The crowd groaned, yet eager for more. Questions were shouted out, but Krylios rebuffed them all until the crowd relented and showered his storytelling with applause. He bowed and made for the door and the night beyond, but paused as he passed by Phaeton and Timenious.

“If you’re truly of the mold of a hero, then meet me on the morrow at Caledon pass,” Krylios whispered, then disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER SIX

Hephaestus stared at the lava fall; the stream mirrored in his eyes, lending them a sinister quality. He came to the falls often, though always at night, for the soft roar of the lava and the golden red glow it cast out soothed him. It was also a quiet place to consider or dwell on his various projects without interruption or distraction. After all, who would venture into the heart of a volcano? He had to hole up in his shop every once in a while, when it would erupt, but this hadn't happened for several centuries now, particularly since the falls' creation. He watched the molten rock fall, with small bits separating from the main stream here and there, hovering as they fell, like fiery, golden guardians of the main flow. The lava fall was his muse, and his most creative endeavors had always come from its careful study. The falls had been created by boring a relief tunnel to a reservoir that had built up in pressure, threatening to blow out half the mountain. Before drilling it, he bored another tunnel lower in the caldera to ensure that the level of lava would not rise too high, lest it become a disturbance to his workshop. At present, the lava fell a little over two hundred feet, and the level of the pool was fifty feet down were he to walk to the edge of the pool.

He hadn't emerged from his workshop to study the falls, though; it was more to ensure no prying eyes were present, as he often had visitors, both gods and lesser forms. There *was* a way into the volcano that would protect the lesser visitor from the intense heat, but that path was empty. His eyes returned to the golden glow of the molten rock for a moment longer, but he needed no inspiration for today, so he turned and went back

into his workshop.

Once inside, he activated the Watchers in the anteroom, three in total, which acted as guardians. Any who knew the location of his workshop knew not to enter uninvited, so the Watchers were there really for the more determined souls, or worse, thieves or spies. He had caught one thief, a mortal, in his workshop two centuries ago. Once he'd made certain nothing had been taken, he then "questioned" the mortal about why he'd decided to enter. When the little thief had been less than forthcoming, Hephaestus had tossed him into the lava pool. The scream had been irritating but only lasted a moment or so. Doubtless he'd been sent by one of the other gods to pilfer some trinket they'd seen upon visiting his shop. He'd actually set those trinkets on display to entice just such behavior. At best, if an intruder were caught there was always the chance of discovering the mastermind. At worst, some useless bauble would be stolen and alert him to improve his security. Though everything in his shop looked valuable or magical in some way, it was all useless junk. The things of *real* value were carefully hidden, with devious locks and other brutal (but more often lethal, at least for mortals, who he'd found to be particularly squishy) protective measures put in place. Still, there were times when he did not want to be interrupted or have anyone see what he was about to do. This was one such time, but more so than ever before for what he was about to create. His hand passed over a round green crystal, which began to glow. The eyes of the three Watchers began to glow in kind.

"Guard—sentry mode, lethal action only inside the shop, threat display for those outside. No visitors, no exceptions. Activate," Hephaestus said, then left the anteroom for his workshop proper, the door closing of its own accord behind him.

It was warm inside his workshop, even more so today because he'd left the forge on. Lava flowed through the forge, which was practical in more ways than one, providing heat for the workings of metal, warmth for the workshop itself, and light. The red glow was a soothing one, for he was often bothered by the light of the orange sun above, which was far too brilliant for his tastes.

Hephaestus began to gather the reagents needed for his work for the day. The first came from the seabed, from a place so deep that even Poseidon would not go. Its acquisition had required the invention of two new devices. The reagent was unremarkable in appearance, looking to be a jar filled with sand, albeit a sand that was dark blue, almost violet. In truth, it was the dust of a special stone only found in the deepest parts of the sea. He'd experimented with the stone over the years and found it

had magical resonant properties. He set the jar on the left side of his table.

Next, he gathered a pot with a small plant in it. The plant was beautiful, exquisitely so, and had been given the name the Turian Bellanissa, though he called it Bella for short. He'd learned not to look upon it for too long, for it created such a strong desire in him that he wept that he could not become a plant himself, that his roots might intertwine with it and be at one with such beauty. He dared not let Aphrodite see it, who would likely destroy it instantly. Before he realized how strong the plant's pull was, he'd made the regrettable decision to allow a mortal in his workshop to see it. The mortal became useless for any task, constantly begging him to only care for the plant and do nothing else. It reached a point where Hephaestus finally banished the mortal back to the surface.

Bella's coloring was different, depending on her mood. Today's coloring was special, for today was a special day. It is said that once the Turian Bellanissa had been created, Gaia wept at its beauty, showering the plants with her tears. Fearing they would face destruction by wars that would be fought over them, she scattered them to the most inhospitable places in the world to lessen the chance of their discovery. Today was a special day because once, every hundred years, the Turian Bellanissa would shed a tear of Gaia, giving it back to the world. Did Bella affect him and others so because of the tears they possessed? He was uncertain. All he knew was that not even he could bear to look upon the plant when it wept. The one time he had, he'd been inconsolable for a decade, and none of the other gods had been able to comfort him, much less understand the reason for his sorrow. Today the flower was a myriad of dark blue and violet with small white spots ringed with pink laid over its petals in a mosaic pattern. Its stem and leaves were a lush emerald green. Hephaestus hurriedly placed a small, enchanted glass apparatus beneath Bella's blossom to catch the tear. The glass was specially tuned to sing when one of the tears hit and would continue to sing until he touched it. Handy, so that he would not have to risk looking upon Bella at the tear's creation. Bella and the glass receptacle were placed well to the right side of his worktable lest the plant ruin his concentration. He placed a vial with a gold stopper next to the first jar. The vial held Bella's tears, which had been collected over several millennia. Today's collection would be the last he needed for this project. He went to gather his next reagent.

This one he kept in one of his secret locked vaults, for its acquisition required a bit of thievery from one of the other gods—Dionysus, to be specific—though admittedly stealing from Dionysus was never all that difficult, since his senses were often addled

from wine. Still, no one likes a thief, particularly a thief that steals from the gods, which was why Hephaestus had used a hero intermediary that had been rewarded handsomely. Gold, jewels, women . . . all the usual stuff they seemed to like, though for the life of him he couldn't figure out why they all wanted women. He was married to Aphrodite, whom he supposed was the most beautiful woman of all, if she could be called a woman, and it had never brought him anything but anguish.

He shook his head to clear such thoughts because getting into the vault was dangerous, even to him, and required complete concentration. He placed his hand against the vault door in the correct place to begin the unlocking. The instructions for opening it appeared in midair, written in letters of glittering flame. This was a trick, for anyone following the instructions would have a most unpleasant end were they mortal and an embarrassing transmogrification were they otherwise. They were a trick, for the order was not correct in the specific steps to be taken. He took a moment to study the list, carefully reassigning the correct numbers to the order, then began the unlocking process.

When he placed his hand on the vault door to begin the process, four pins had raised out from the vault door. He depressed the correct one and a vertical seam appeared in the middle of the vault door, splitting it into two. Panels then slid away to reveal circular recessed areas on the left side, each with a ring in the center, the ring attached by passing through a thin rod at the ring's top. Hephaestus lifted the middle ring and turned it counterclockwise three full rotations. He heard a click a moment after he had stopped and could hear the whirring of internal gears spinning. He waited until the sound stopped, then lifted and turned the bottom ring once, counterclockwise. After a moment's pause, the sounds of machinery working began again. He waited once more until the sounds stopped. He then lifted the third and final ring, careful not to turn it to one side or the other, and pulled the ring directly outward. Another click occurred, and then he used the ring to pull the door open.

A less than competent thief would think the job halfway done, for once the door was open, more vaults could be seen inside. These were smaller and numbered six. The inner vault was open and inviting, but to reach in now would be a grievous mistake. Hephaestus looked at the inside of the now open door. A map of the surrounding lands could be seen, with diamonds glittering in various locations. The correct one to touch depended on the current season. He pressed one that was on the upper left part of the map, and a now visible webbing screen began to lower out of the way. Any unfortunate

soul touching the webbing would require the skin to be cut off to get free. Hephaestus was still missing a small spot on his right index finger due to an unfortunate moment of unrestrained inquisitiveness.

Now came the most delicate part. The inner vaults were all unlocked save one, but they were recessed so far that it was almost necessary to remove the right hand from its place on the outer vault to do so. If one removed their hand, it would trigger the release of keenly sharpened blades, an acid bath afterward, *and* the vault door would close. It would be terminal for any mortal thief, and certainly quite troublesome for any of his fellow gods, being that the acid was magical to his kind and would trigger a form change. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he reached inward, his arm outstretched. The third vault down from the top opened, and he removed a jar filled with a dark liquid, carefully lifting it out of the vault.

Once free of the vault threshold, he reset the webbing, then closed the outer vault door. He stuck a finger into the dark liquid, then put it into his mouth, unable to help himself. After all, his restraint had been used up by Bella. It was delicious as always. Dionysus kept Olympian bees in his vineyard and harvested their honey to use in his winemaking. But even Dionysus was unaware that his bees produced this variety. It was not the usual golden color but was quite dark, with a purple hue. It was a special variety, held deep within the hive, used only to feed their queen. After the initial supply had been brought in by the thief, the trick had been creating small robotic bees that smelled just like the real thing to their counterparts to create a steady supply. Once successful, he had a steady stream of the stuff being flown in by his little robotic horde. The honey was not only tasty but also made a good glue and binder for special projects such as this one.

The final ingredient was the remains of an asteroid that had survived entry into the atmosphere. It had taken off the top of his mountain, then thudded into the field nearby, the soft earth keeping what remained intact. Once he had managed to dig it out, he discovered that all that remained of the asteroid was a diamond four feet across. He had been measuring and removing excess from it for centuries, refining it down to a pleasing shape. He added the container that held the removed excess to the table. The container was labeled "Stardust."

A few more mundane ingredients were added to the table, and Hephaestus was ready to finally begin. Creation was always a special time for him, and he was suddenly filled with the nervous energy performers experience when in front of an audience for

the first time. He was always able to harness the nervous energy somehow and imbue it into his creations. He began by combining the material harvested from the ocean floor along with one of his mundane reagents, the combination forming a clay, which he then began to mold to shape. After two hours it was in close to a rough estimation of the correct shape.

The clay needed to set up a bit, so he went to his library of journals. All were neatly organized, with spines labeled in silver script on black bindings. The information for this particular project was far too dangerous to have a book of its own, even if he were to hide it in one of his vaults. So he'd hidden the information for its execution in five different books. At the moment, he remembered everything that was needed except for the measurements for one aspect of the design, measurements that were quite specific and detailed, more so than even he could remember. He pulled the appropriate volume and returned to the table. Pages flipped by until he saw the correct schematic. Shaping tools came out and began to work the clay, smoothing the inside and adding texture to the outside. Calipers routinely took measurements and then adjustments were made. After some time, the shape of it was nearly perfect. The clay-like substance had now hardened, and he switched to small hammers and chisels, refining further, slowly zeroing in on the measurements detailed in the schematic. Another careful check with the calipers showed phase one of his work to be complete.

He then brushed the honey onto the object, laying down an even coating on all surfaces, including the interior ones. Diamond dust was then sprinkled onto the project. Magical tongs lifted the object without touching it, and he took it over to the forge, then plunged it into the lava. Several minutes passed, and then he lifted it free of the pool. Lava slid free from the object, as though its surface were now infinitely slick, and revealed that it now had been completely blackened.

The object was returned to the workbench and placed into a special holder that would immobilize it without touching it, like the tongs before. The only difference now was that he could rotate it as well. He retrieved the vial that held Bella's tears, pulled its stopper, and set it aside. A dropper was then filled with tears, and he dropped one onto his blackened work. Where the tear hit, it was absorbed and the black exterior changed. It was as though the blackness were just a coating, one that the tear had turned clear, to reveal the beauty beneath. Another tear fell, and another until the vial had been emptied and only one small black spot remained. It was then that his collection vial began to sing. A glance showed that the final tear needed sat in the collection crystal.

Now came the step that was the reason for the extra security, the extra secrecy. For a moment he hesitated, unsure if he could do it, but a glance to his almost completed work seduced him. He pricked his finger, and a single drop of his blood fell to mingle with that of the final tear. The solution swirled red, then scarlet, then suddenly went clear. A moment later, the final drop fell and the last of his work was revealed. It sat in its holder, slowly rotating so that he could view every facet of it. It had the appearance of a seashell, a conch with ridges and horns protruding from it. Its color was multihued, with a pearlescent quality. Varying shades of blue in a mosaic pattern covered the shell, with hints of sandstone or almost bronze interlaid. It hummed with energy for a moment, then went silent. Pride flooded through him, as it always did when he completed one of his creations, and he marveled at his work. While it had the appearance of a seashell, in truth it was a horn. A horn with but one use.

“Exquisite,” he breathed. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever made. He looked down at his roughened hands and was struck by the contrast.

He looked back to the horn and frowned. The implications of the existence of the object, his newest creation, hit him then. He’d known the consequences before he’d started, but they’d been a far-off thing. The work always drove him. Today had been no different. His stomach suddenly twisted into knots at the *thing’s* existence. He was now nervous just being near it. Then a realization struck him.

No other god can ever be allowed to touch this. Not even me, he thought.

He rushed to a cabinet and pulled a box he’d been compelled to make, though at the time he couldn’t think of any reason why. It was just another example, one of many, of his curious compulsions. He stared briefly at the box, and once more his insides twisted. He knew that once he placed his creation inside, he would never see it again, for only a mortal would be able to open the box once it was closed.

He set the box on the table. Its black obsidian exterior was covered with ornate scrollwork. The interior was lined with black velvet. He laid a black silk cloth inside. He carefully picked up his creation with tongs that held it without touching, then placed it into the box. He paused for a brief moment, loath to relinquish it from his now possessive gaze. Then he watched as roughened fingers pulled black silk over it, and it was lost to view. More silk was stuffed into the box to keep it from being damaged. Then the lids were shut, lightning flashing around its edges at the moment of closure. The box went into a sack, and he departed his workshop in a flurry, headed for the one person he trusted to help him. The person that had fixed his leg. She would know what

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to do with it, for it could not fall into the hands of just any mortal. For now, within the box, lay something that would give a mortal the power of the gods.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Drip . . .

She gazed into the darkness with sightless eyes. She could feel the weight of them coming from her crown, and even though she couldn't see them, she knew that they were jet black like the locks of hair she had once possessed so long ago.

Drip . . .

"Ssssssss . . ." she heard.

How long had it been since they had spoken? She couldn't recall.

Drip . . .

They were quiet, brooding, though not still. Never still.

Drip . . .

She felt a tear trace down her cheek. A moment later, she heard it hit the stone she cradled in what had once been a lap.

Drip . . .

How long had it been? How long had she been here? She couldn't remember. Not that it mattered. Not that anything mattered. Time stood still here.

Drip . . .

Take ussss outssside, they said suddenly, the words long and drawn out, cutting the darkness. They spoke as one, not something they did often. Echoes of it whispered back to her.

"No," she said.

We will punish you, one said.

Bite you, said another.

She dimly realized that she could tell one voice was different from the other. Had she ever noticed this before? She was unsure.

Drip . . .

“It is nothing that I have not endured in the past. I am now in a place where you cannot reach,” she said.

We need the sun! another cried.

They were now more ambulatory and writhed about restlessly. The feeling of their movement was revolting to her. Almost as revolting as her own, which was why she never moved. Or, at least, rarely did. She had arrived here long ago and simply went dormant.

Drip . . .

“You shall never see the sun again,” she said.

Nooooooooooooo! they said, a macabre chorus.

She ignored their cries, and it wasn’t long before they relented, going silent once more. Her thoughts returned to her movement, or lack thereof. She could still feel them . . . her legs. Imprisoned within reptilian flesh. She thought to wiggle her toes, but instead felt her tail twitch back and forth.

Drip . . .

She became aware, once more, of the stone within her hands. Not that they needed to because of the darkness, but her eyes closed so that she could focus more carefully on it. Her fingers traced over it with the lightest touch, the smooth roughness of it alive under her fingers, the feeling of it creating in her mind a picture of what it had once looked like. Suddenly it was there, warm and vibrant—alive. The power of it broke her, and she wept.

Drip . . .

Sshe cries again! said one.

She weepsss! said another.

Tearsss for her! Always tears—but no sssun for us! said the third.

No sun? No sssun?! No food either! When last have we eaten? said the fourth.

Never! Never have we eaten! We freeze! We starve! Wretched woman! said the fifth.

Still, she wept, ignoring their words. She heard them before many times. But then the sixth one spoke, and it was always his voice that found its way into her. She noticed

that of all of them, only he had not the sibilant bent to his speech that the others did.

Drip . . .

III know why you cry, he said, his voice deeper than the others. *I know why you hold the stone still to this day*. He laughed.

Tell ussss! they said.

Sssecrets! said the seventh.

Hidden plotsss! said the eighth.

No. I won't speak of it, but I would like to ask a question. Did it feel good? said the sixth.

Her fingers went still, stopped their tracing. She wanted to set the stone down but didn't. It rarely left her hands since she had picked it up. It was her one connection to the life in which she had once had hope.

Drip . . .

Did it feel goooood when you used your power? It did to me. I loved it. I could feel the terr—

"Shut up," she said, now perfectly still once more. Statuesque, save for her restless undulating crown.

Why? Why not speak of it? It was magnificent when you released it, when we did. Take us from this cave. Bring us to the sun. We could do it again . . . you and I. We could do it to them all, the sixth said.

The others were quiet now, but this often happened when the sixth one spoke.

Drip . . .

She could feel it now, buried deep within her—the power. After its one use, she had pushed it deep down and walled it off. But always could she feel it pushing at her, like some malevolent creature struggling to break free. She looked within herself and saw the black wall she had made of stone to seal it away. Here and there, thin slivers of sinister red light had burst through the cracks in the stone.

Then there was the sound of a large impact. Dust fell from the wall, pluming out into a cloud at its base. It made the light easier to see. There was another impact. More dust fell, and the rays of light widened in places. She stacked more stones around it, cutting off the red glow, and whatever was inside it went still.

Drip . . .

Her focus withdrew from inside, back to the blackness that was her home.

They grew unusually still, and suddenly she was no longer in the blackness, but

sitting in the bow of her father's boat, the spray of sea misting her face. Her hair stirred and danced about in the wind. She turned and saw him standing in the back, his hand on the tiller. He smiled at her then, but there was something wrong about the smile. It was his eyes, which sat dead and lifeless above what she realized was not a smile but a rictus grin. He spoke, his lips moving, but she could not hear the words. Still, she understood them.

It's your fault.

A large swell began to rise behind the boat. She saw it as though time had slowed. *Something is in that swell*, she realized. She could feel its malevolent presence increasing as it neared. She tried to speak, to scream, to warn him, but she was frozen. Giant soulless eyes neared, now just under the water's surface, about to break through, but all her father could do was stare at her with condemning eyes. The sea creature burst from the waves, but time was still slowed—she was still frozen and could do nothing. Its jaws, filled with dagger-like teeth, closed on him, but his gaze never left her. He spoke once more, now with blood-stained lips, and this time she heard his voice clearly.

It's your fault. You did this.

His hair hung limply as the creature held him sideways in its mouth. Glass-like eyes fixated on her, the grin still present. Slowly he was pulled below the waves, his eyes never blinking, never leaving her, until finally he disappeared beneath the black seas. She looked down to see why she couldn't move and saw that she was within the mouth of a giant black serpent, its mouth closed around her hips. It stared at her with unblinking black eyes for a moment, then began to work its way upward, pulling her deeper in—

She screamed.

She screamsss! cried the first.

She sssuffers! said the second.

What were you thinking of just now? I wonder. Tell me of it. Let me ease your pain.
You would feel sooo much better if you just took us outside, said the sixth.

Drip . . .

"No," she said.

She wanted to say her father's name, wanted to say she was sorry. Wanted to say these things out loud, for that is when things have true life—words, when they are spoken. But she remained quiet. *They* could not be allowed to hear such things.

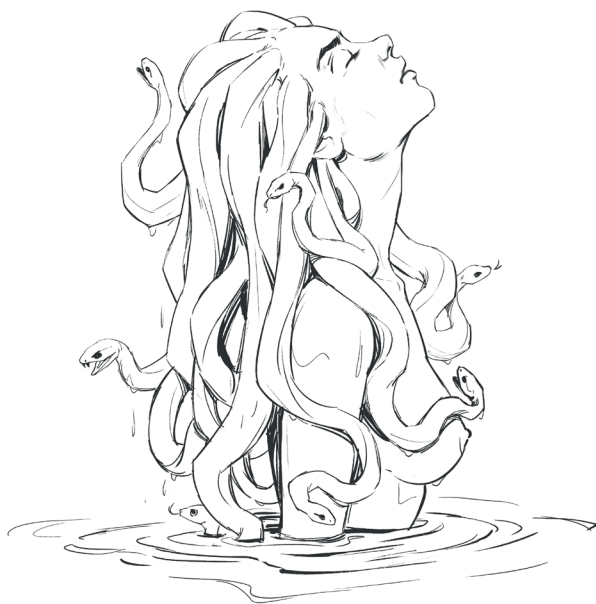
Their writhing resumed, but they were now quiet as well, waiting.

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Her hands traced the stone beneath her fingertips once more. Her lips voiced a name but there was no sound, and only the darkness bore witness.

Drip . . .

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