Of Gods and Monsters

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SEPTEMBER 9, 1915

> ARGOS, GREECE — Work on the next phase of the Theatre of Argos excavation is set to begin Monday, officials announced. The project, which has already produced several archaeological discoveries, has been lauded by Mayor Efstathios Marinos, the Ministry of Culture, and the Argos Archaeological Museum for its contributions to the heritage of the region. Marinos noted that like much of Greece, Argos is "an underground museum." He added, "Heritage must be preserved," during a meeting with…

***

The soldiers bursting in, falling in twos and threes as my gaze turns on them. The warning hiss in my brain, someone behind me. Turning… my own face staring back at me. It takes me by surprise, causes me to pause just long enough. Movement, the sword falling toward me as if from nowhere…

***

Blessed darkness surrounds me.

My torture has ended.

The agony of being dead yet aware no longer torments me.

It takes a while—I don't know how long—to comprehend the lack of pain. In some ways, its absence is as excruciating as its presence. So accustomed am I to suffering that relief at first still feels like fire and acid.

But then I realize what has to have happened.

Athena, goddess-bitch and traitor, has finally succumbed to her guilty conscience. Either she or the others, the ones I can see but not name, have relented and buried my head, allowing me peace until such a time as Hades comes to drag me to the afterlife.

I have no idea how long she waited. Hours? Days? Weeks? It felt like eternity, an unending torture the likes of which even Prometheus did not endure. Time had no meaning, there was only the endless suffering of being an unwilling weapon and the cold emptiness of neither death nor life. And the madness of my memories whirling in angry circles, the details just out of reach. I see faces but I cannot place them. I see events but they are out of order. All I know is that they are the ones who did this to me. Betrayed me. Only Athena remains whole in my mind, the queen of my misery.

And now it is over.

I would thank her, if I did not hate her with all the fibers of my being. Nor will I ever forgive her for

what she put me through. Had I limbs, I would climb from this grave and hunt her, hunt all of them, to the ends of the Earth, to Mount Olympus and beyond. Force them to look into my eyes. And I would laugh as their flesh turned to stone, as their bodies became statues, with eyes wide in fear and knowing.

No matter how much pain using my power causes me.

Because *their* pain would be so much worse. And permanent.

Damn them, by the gods! No mercy for her. For them. For anyone who aided them or ever made my life the hell it was. They will all get exactly what they deserve.

Memory-pictures whirl past. A man, towering over me. Swords descending toward me. Hands on my body against my will. Insults cast in my direction. Athena laughing, laughing. Turning her back on me. People with hidden faces, using me for their own purposes. To gain power, to control enemies.

They cared not about the deep torment using my gaze brought. That each time I took a life it was like daggers in my brain.

No, I was merely a tool for them, no different than sword or hammer or shield, except made of flesh.

Now, though, the endless night of this grave will let me slumber until such a time that I truly pass across the veil. Why it has not yet happened, I do not know. Immortality is not among my powers. I should not even be able to think these things. But I

will wait, and at least I shall have, if not contentment, a kind of anesthesia, despite my mental turmoil and the constant ache of something lost.

Only when my true end comes I will finally know peace.

***

In my dream, I am young. So long ago, in a time before the gods hunted my kind, the semi-humans, and cast us as the monsters and they the heroes. My sisters and I played as children do. In fields, by the shores of the sea, among the rocky pastures. The sun burned bright, the night stars told stories. We are three; Euryale, Sthena, and I, innocent and happy. Where are they now, I wonder in a moment of lucidity within the dream that carries me along. What became of them when the goddess betrayed me? Did they suffer the same fate? Did they return to our home, beyond Oceanus, at the edge of night?

Did they try to avenge my death?

Sisters, I hope you—

"Your life is not over, Medusa."

A voice. In my head. Familiar. A goddess. Not Athena. Who—?

"Someone who hates the goddess of war and the god of the sea as much as you, girl. But now you shall be a girl no more. They wish you dead, do they? I will make sure that wish never comes true."

Do I still dream? Is this but more madness.

"Listen well, Medusa."

Images come to me. A woman, beautiful. Surrounded by young girls and women. Protecting them. Hera! Queen of Olympus, sister-wife of Zeus.

"Sleep, child. But should one day you return to the light

and your halves be rejoined, then you will be made whole again and immortal, both your beauty and deadly gaze returned. And when this happens, you shall be as vengeance personified. Not only against those who have harmed you, but for all women who have been wronged. And one day you will find those who did this to you and turn their bodies into stone as cold as Athena's heart.

No, please, do not do this! I long for release. I beg of you. I want to die! Allow me to—

She disappears and I am alone again, trapped between life and death, adrift in the sea of eternal madness once more. *Why—*

Sanity flees.

***

Awake or asleep? Mad or dreaming?

Perhaps at one time I knew the difference. Now I do not, and I care not.

I exist in darkness. With only mind-ghosts as company. A man, strong. Powerful. He frightens me. A woman, treacherous. Another man, boyish. Their faces… I hate them, but I cannot remember why. And there is a monster, a dark demoness with a head of green snakes, she pursues me, relentless. I cannot name them, yet I know them.

Pray, let the darkness return. Better that than the dreams, the insanity.

After a time, it does.

As it claims me, I understand that the cycle will never end, that darkness always follows madness, and madness always follows memories.

And it is those I fear the most.

***

Time has no meaning. The cycle continues, unchanged, until it does not.

Something…

Voices?

Yes!

Words.

Men. They speak oddly, as if from a far isle, but I understand them well enough.

The sounds recede and return, like waves on a beach. I strain to hear from within my otherworldly prison.

"Is that a head? Iēsous Khristos, call the police."

"Maybe we should just, I don't know, throw it in the trash. We tell anyone about this, they'll shut the whole project down and we don't get paid."

"Hey, there's something else down here. A hand."

"Ah, hell. We can't hide a whole damn body."

The voices fade and blessed darkness returns.

Like countless times before, I pray this is the final instance and that I might find peace.

***

SEPTEMBER 12, 1915

> ARGOS, GREECE – Excavations around the Theatre of Argosto came to an abrupt halt this week after workers uncovered mummified human remains at the site. Authorities immediately notified the Argos Archaeological Museum, which transferred the remains—a decapitated head and what is

> believed to be the corresponding body—for further study and preservation.
>
> "This is an astounding find," said Dr. Niko Galanis, head of the museum's anthropology department. "The body appears to have been naturally preserved, possibly by minerals in the soil, since mummification was not a practice in ancient Greece."
>
> City officials indicated that work on the theater project is scheduled to resume Monday, pending additional assessments by the museum's field team.

***

Voices again. I cannot hear them clearly. It is as if I listen from a distance, or through walls that separate me from those who speak.

"…found the head and body while excavating beneath Argos market. Wrapped in cloth at one time…"

"…remarkably preserved. Like leather. Mummification shouldn't be possible in the conditions of that time period…"

"…her features, not Greek. Possibly African. And what are these small bones in her hair…"

"…perhaps ornamental…

"…separated from the body. The marks… axe, or sword…"

"Definitely the same individual…see how the two pieces fit…"

Sudden agony inside me! Fire courses through

my body, my limbs, my skull. I cannot move, cannot scream. This is it, the final torture. Hades has tired of his games and now I will burn until I am ash for all eternity.

The darkness, turning gray. Night giving way to dawn. No, not dawn. Something else. A different shade. And my skin! I… feel! Not just the pain within, but without as well. Sensations of a physical nature. Pressure, or rather a lack of it. Air.

Impossible. I was cleaved in two. Buried. Unless someone...

Hera's words.

"…halves be rejoined…"

No! By all the gods in Olympus, no! Please don't let them—

Too late. The fire recedes. In its place, rivers of cold flow through me. I am numb, I am needles and nails, there is a pounding in my chest, in my head.

It is my heart, working again. Pumping blood. My lungs, like twin bellows, forcing air in and out in gasps.

My eyes open and there is light, brighter than a summer sun.

I sit up.

Someone screams.

It is me.

It is them.

Their screams come to an abrupt stop as their eyes meet mine. Athena's curse is still with me and the two men become stone, statues of purest gray marble. The familiar pain in my head accompanies their deaths. At the same time, my children awaken, writhing and hissing with confusion within my

matted curls.

Their fear is mine, my madness is theirs.

What is this place? I look around. I am on a table that shines like silver. The walls of the room are covered in light gray tiles. The floor is tile as well. There is a door.

Nothing looks the way it should. I am not in the city. I am not in a temple.

Is this yet another part of the Underworld, devised by Hades to torment me?

I rise. My limbs work as well as the day of my death. It is my mind that stumbles from weakness. I close my eyes, force myself to think. Must escape this place.

What lies beyond that door?

I approach it. The handle, like the table, is some form of unknown metal. Cold to the touch. I pull it open…

Madness waits on the other side. Memories rise up and collide with the things I see, like boys playing *episkyros*. Like swords against shields. *A giant of a man looming over me. Athena's betrayal, the first one. Running, running away.* The dreams I had while my body slept in its cursed repose. Not dreams, memories. My mind trying to put them in order. Running. From a man who wants to hurt me. Running from her. From all of them. As if escape were possible when the very gods pursue you.

Running, always running. Escape. Must get away from this place. Just like the other places. When he *came for me. Nowhere is safe—*

I come to a stop at the sound of a loud voice.

"Kleíse to stóma sou, pórni!"

"Shut your mouth, whore!" The harsh shout echoes up and down the empty street, followed by the sound of a hand striking flesh. I look around. There are buildings everywhere, but not the buildings I remember. These are taller. Different. Smooth, shiny metal mixed with stone. And the streets. Black, like hardened bitumen. Night lays over the world but it is summer-hot. There is no breeze, and the strange material beneath my bare feet radiates the warmth back into the air, intensifying it. Stars in the sky but they are not as bright as I remember. Poles with lights line the road, yet the glowing orbs have no flames.

What is this place? Hades? Have I been dragged from my madness only to suffer a different kind of torture?

Nothing makes sense. Everywhere I turn, things look the same. Wrong. I can't tell one direction from another. Damn Hera! Thanks to her machinations I haven't escaped my curse, I've merely stepped from one nightmare into another.

Those men. Standing over me. Athena's soldiers. No. No armor, no weapons. Men. Dead now. Turned to stone, of course. I am glad for it. They deserved it. They did this to me. Put me…

No. Not them. The ones they served. Pah! I wish all of them were dead.

Who were they? What did they—?

A woman cries out.

"áse me ísycho!" *Leave me alone!*

The words are not right. I understand them, but it is as if I've traveled from Thebes to Sparta, but even farther. I understand, but it is unpleasant to my

ears.

Another blow is struck and she gasps in pain.

Someone is in trouble.

My legs move and my body turns without conscious thought. A form appears before me and I jump back. It is a woman. Nude. I move and she copies my actions.

It is I!

I am looking into a gazing wall of some kind, a giant mirror. My body is covered in dirt, my hair in tangles. My children peer out, confused at the sight of themselves.

What kind of place is this that—?

Another cry. I remember what I was doing.

Running. No. Someone called out in fear. Me. Then not me, another.

The continued sounds of violence draw me onward. Around a corner. Into an alley. Two figures up ahead. A young woman, barely more than a girl. Face pressed against the wall. Behind her a hulking brute of a man. He is holding her there. Her skirt is raised, clenched in one of his fists.

This place is bewildering, the words and clothes of the people are strange, but I know what he is about to do. What men of a certain type have always done to women. Or boys.

The familiar ache awakens behind my eyes.

"Stop!" I shout. It hurts to speak. My voice is rough, my throat dry as sand.

"Mind your own business," the man says in his peculiar Greek. He doesn't even turn. With one hand, he undoes his pants and they fall to his knees.

A powerful rage fills me. I welcome it. The edges

of my vision turn red. My children urge me to attack, a score of voices in my skull. I march toward him.

"Bastardo!" I scream. "Enough!"

The fury in my voice causes him to turn. When he sees me, his lips curl up in a lecherous smile. I remember then my nudity but I am past all caring. I know he will never lay a hand on me.

"Well, this is my lucky night. Two for the price of one."

"I'm no whore," I reply, moving closer. It is still too dark for him to see my eyes.

"We'll see about that." He lunges forward and grabs for my hair.

I fix him with my gaze, excited by the power of it and at the same time surprised at the ferocity of my actions. Colored lights fill my vision and a volcano erupts in my head.

I welcome the pain.

His flesh turns gray and hardens, his fingers metamorphosing to stone inches from my face.

Just like all the others.

Battlefields. Men and horses. Turning to stone. Because of me. Because of her. Another enemy.

"Please don't hurt me," whispers the girl. "I'll do anything you ask." She is kneeling on the ground, her head bowed. Like the men, her words sound wrong. She is young, but not so young that she should be foolish enough to wander dark streets alone. Even a child would know better. Perhaps she really is a whore?

Her offer intrigues me. If I am truly in the Underworld, I have things to learn. I will need

someone familiar with this strange land. It seems my curse is not over.

"You are safe with me," I say. Slave or whore, her past makes no difference to me. "But your life is mine now. I require your services. You will teach me the ways of this place."

Averting my gaze lest she accidentally perish, I help the girl to her feet. My children, always in tune with my thoughts and emotions, retreat so as not to frighten her.

"Who… who are you?" she asks. Her voice trembles;

A name appears in my mind.

My name.

That single word unlocks the door and releases all the memories of what was done to me.

And by whom.

I close my eyes and see their faces. Hera. Poseidon. Athena.

Perseus.

The dreams, the madness, the memories, all of it was real!

Broken pieces align themselves and my confusion falls away like sand between fingers. My thoughts are clear, my sanity restored.

Their deceptions. I remember, for now. Truth returns like the sun each morning. All of them turning against me, for what?

A human king?

One so beneath them he should not even bear scrutiny?

And me, so foolish as to trust the goddess. My protector, ha!

What was her goal? To gain power? To control her enemies? Another tool for…wait.

My head on her shield. Held high. Armies turning to stone. A powerful weapon indeed.

Yet why should a goddess need such a thing?

It makes no sense.

Unless you remember the ways of the gods. The world of the humans is nothing but a game to them and the people in it their toys.

Or in this case, a game of chess and I just another pawn.

Something to be manipulated at whim, used and then discarded.

I know where I am. What I am. Who I am.

I am she who kills.

And this is no Underworld.

They thought me dead, and though I am eternally cursed—twice now, damned be Hera—I still live.

Tears run down my cheeks. Despair. Rage.

Where was my goddess, my protector, when Poseidon raped me and then tossed me aside? Did she come to my aid? No! Did she call upon Perseus, so-called slayer of monsters, for help then? No! Instead, she—they, all of them, all the gods—turned their backs on me. Cursed me. Abandoned me.

My throat constricts as I force myself to speak instead of screaming.

I am no toy.

"I am Medusa."

And I will have my revenge for what has been done to me.

***

September 18, 1915

> Argos, Greece — Police are investigating a string of mysterious disappearances that have taken place over the past 48 hours, including two scientists from the National Archaeological Museum. At each location where individuals were last seen, statues of solid stone resembling the missing persons have been discovered, leaving authorities uncertain whether the cases represent criminal activity or an elaborate publicity stunt by an unknown sculptor.
>
> "We are investigating all leads, including the possibility of foul play," said Officer Giorgios Kampros of the Hellenic Police.
>
> In addition to the museum, statues have been found on Solomou Street, in Stavros Niarchos Park, and near the Nafplio Pier, according to police.

***

In the markets of Maghreb, men and women dressed in colorful garb sell their wares to shoppers who move from stall to stall, filling their baskets. Some stop and acknowledge my sisters and I. Others avert their eyes, a caution brought about by our reputation. The golden sun warms the land and sea. Although we have errands to finish for Mother, we take our

time. We have a few coins for ourselves, and I spend mine on sweets. A boy my age smiles at me as we pass and then turns and runs when one of my children peeks out and flicks a curious tongue at him. I laugh about it all the way home but my laughter stops when we see the golden chariot outside our humble cottage.

***

Maghreb, how I miss thee. I remember as if yesterday the land of my youth. Mountains, deserts, shores. A fine life I had there, until I attracted the attention of the virgin goddess Athena and accompanied her to Cecropia. Lured by promises of a better life. "You will be like a princess," she said, "and want for nothing."

And it was so, for many months. I had my own quarters, my own bath. Servants. The finest clothes and foods. Athena—when present—treated me like one of her own children. And in return, all I had to do was pledge myself to her, become one of her virgin acolytes. Sometimes she would have me sit by her side when meeting with merchants or princes. On those occasions, I was told ahead of time to make sure my children were visible.

I became known as the favored Gorgon of Athena, her chaste consort and implied weapon. Word soon spread and that was usually threat enough for her to get her way in negotiations.

Most days, however, I was free to walk the streets. It was lonely at times, but not all that different than my life in Maghreb. When I asked the goddess if my sisters could join me, she told me they had refused to leave our homeland, that they intended to stay

there as guardians.

I believed her. It was exactly what they would do.

It wasn't until Athena's treachery that I began to doubt the truth of it.

***

The alarm's warning chime alerts me to someone at the entrance to my studio before they can even ring the bell.

A quick glance at the monitor next to my computer screen shows a single woman, late fifties, well-dressed, her dark hair expensively styled. There is a look about her that says she's not here to buy art. Haunted eyes. Lips pressed tightly together. Her hands open and clench as she waits. It all speaks of one thing.

She is in trouble.

My heart speeds up. There is a tingle in my scalp as my children wake.

Her presence on my doorstep indicates she's come looking for a solution.

The permanent kind.

Perhaps today will be an interesting day after all. I press the speaker button and unlock the door.

"Come in."

The woman checks the street in both directions, as if afraid she's been followed.

Definitely interesting.

I put on my mirrored sunglasses and tie a silk *kridemnon* over my hair so she won't notice anything amiss. A gentle command settles my children; they have become used to this over the decades. Then I go to the door and open it just before she knocks.

"Oh!" She takes a startled step back and her eyes narrow. "Are you, um, Miss Medusa?"

Her voice quavers but it is also cultured and matches her clothes. A woman of some power, and riches. But today she is out of her element and doesn't like it.

"Just Medusa. Please, enter." I step aside and the woman walks by. After only a few feet, she stops. I followed her gaze as she takes in the wide space that had once been a warehouse. I bought it five years ago, when I moved to San Francisco. One area holds my sculpting supplies, computer station, work desks, and stools. Near them are two simple brass chairs with plain blue cushions for when customers come by. The upstairs, accessed by an elevator in the back hall, has been converted from office space to my living quarters.

When she sees the statues, she gasps. Most people do.

More than thirty of them, a frozen audience arranged in rows at the far end of the room. All men, in various poses. Some standing, some sitting, some laying down. Not all of them are nude, but the ones who are have had their genitalia removed. A few are missing pieces of their faces. The rest of them show eyes wide and mouths open in fear.

Every artist has a style.

The press has a nickname for me. The Death Sculptor. One paper, back in Cyprus, had named me Thanatos, after the Greek god of death, but the name didn't stick. Pity. It would've been interesting to see what kind of attention that produced.

I point at the chairs. "Sit."

She does. When she faces me, her nervousness grows worse. People get uneasy when they can't see my eyes.

That is the reason I do it.

Well, that, and the obvious one.

Can't go around killing everyone who looks at you. Much as there are times I'd love to. At least the urge isn't as bad as it was when I returned to life. Those first few weeks… without Maddae, the young whore I'd saved that night, I might have ended up back in a grave very quickly. A permanent one. Although that was decades ago, in a much simpler time, the weapons of man even then would have been more than powerful enough to separate my head from my body again. In ways that would have prevented them from ever being rejoined.

At least, I believe that's so. It's a theory I've had no desire to test. In those first days, my madness was a palpable thing. Somehow Maddae was able to move me from the alley where we met to a ship leaving the island, with a minimum of lives lost along the way. That she avoided her own death was due in part to her fast thinking and the fact that my children did not feel threatened by her. She stole clothes and dressed me. She found me my first pair of sunglasses, taken right off the face of a blind man. Most importantly, she took us away from the place of my betrayal, the place of my death. Away from the temples of Poseidon and Athena.

And helped me start a new life as a deliverer of vengeance.

***

"Look at you." Poseidon's massive form fills the doorway of Athena's temple. He moves forward. There is no place to hide, no chance of escape. His intentions are obvious, even before he drops his cloak. I have seen the way he eyes me when Athena is not looking, and sometimes even when she is. Lust burns in his gaze. Perhaps others would feel flattered, but I, like my mistress the virgin goddess, have taken a vow of celibacy.

"Athena!" I cry. She sent me to place flowers on her altar. She knows I am here. She will hear me.

The god of the sea only laughs.

"Your bitch-goddess will not help you this time," he says. There is more, but it is lost in my screams as he grabs my arms.

He is still laughing when he forces me down and takes me.

***

I let the silence stretch for a few seconds before speaking. I have to give the woman credit; unlike many others, she doesn't break down in tears.

"What can I do for you?"

She takes a deep breath and regains some of her composure.

"A… friend… recommended you. Candy Rubin. She said… you could help me with a problem."

"Candy?" My surprise is real. Candy is both an ex-client and ex-lover from a few years back. A stripper. One of her regulars had turned stalker and then tried to rape her. The police did nothing, said that kind of thing came with the job. Like so many before her, she'd found out about my services.

Her stalker now occupies a place in a nearby park. I visit him sometimes to watch the birds shit on him while I sip a latte.

The idea that someone like this woman knows anyone like Candy is difficult to believe. I say as much to her.

"She and my daughter, Dawn. They both… well, she used to… she had a problem with drugs and she…" The woman's voice trails off and her hands begin to twist in her lap again.

"She danced and sold herself to men for money?"

The woman grimaces but nods. "Yes. They're both clean now, though. They see each other at meetings. Candy told Dawn you could help her. Us."

"So it's your daughter who has the problem? Ex-lover? Someone she works with?" My blood fever is already rising. This made sense. The daughter in trouble. The mother coming to her assistance. All because of a man.

Always a man.

"My husband."

I close my eyes. Father and daughter! *A face appears. A man. White hair. Beard. Poseidon. Entering the temple. Tearing away my tunic. His hands—*

A growl escapes my throat as I open my eyes. Beneath my scarf, my children twist and coil, whispering eagerly of carnage and death.

"Tell me everything."

***

Memory is a fickle thing.

I've learned much since my awakening, thanks to Maddae and the others, the ones who came after her. Science, politics, commerce. And especially

history.

Because I cannot trust what is inside my head.

My remembrance of my prior life is like being in a house filled with secret closets and storage spaces. For days, weeks, even years at a time, you wander through the rooms and everything is familiar. Then, out of the blue, a door opens when you least expect it, revealing something you didn't even know was missing. Most times those pieces of your past are tiny. Insignificant. A day spent on Mykonos, eating fresh-caught fish and enjoying the sun. Athena holding my hand as we walked through the streets of her city for the first time. Sitting with the other girls the goddess surrounded herself with, for she always had an eye for beauty.

The smallest of things can trigger these slumbering memories. A scent, a picture, the mention of a name or place in a book.

An insult.

There is a look on Heather Kruger's face as she speaks to me. Nothing obvious, most people would probably not notice it. But I do. I've learned much over the years. Not all of it pleasant. The world of today is both very similar and vastly different to the one I was born into. Violence. Hatred. Jealousy. Judging others by the color of their skin. Something I would bet my eyes that Mrs. Kruger does. I saw her reaction when I answered the door. I heard it in her voice when told her story. Disgust that her daughter would ever associate with someone like Candy. Even though they were both whores and drug addicts. Bitter repugnance that she has to come to one such as me—she clearly believes I am

Black—for help in this matter.

That was when another door inside me opened.

***

The first time I met Poseidon was at Athena's home on Earth. What by modern standards would be considered a grand palace, not far from her temple and what is known today as the Acropolis. We were eating fruit and watching the ships entering and leaving the port below when the god of the sea appeared without announcement, as was his custom.

Athena, of course, knew of his imminent arrival. The gods can always sense when one of their kind is nearby.

"Greetings, Poseidon," she said without turning, before he could utter a word. "To what do we owe this honor?"

She neither looked at him nor rose from her couch. I bowed, as required. In Athēnai, there were few that I, as a favorite of the goddess, was required to show this respect to. But the gods are the gods, and all must give obeisance. No matter what our personal feelings might be.

Poseidon was a pig.

None would dare say it to him, but all knew it. Sullen, selfish, prone to tantrums. A perpetual man-child who believed he was better than everyone, even the other gods, but instead of pouting when he didn't get his way, he had a habit of bringing about storms or earthquakes.

Most of those who served him spent their waking hours doing whatever was necessary to keep him

happy. Including supplying him with maidens of the fairest kind. And I do mean fairest. He had a type, did Poseidon, and all of them with skin of alabaster.

"Hello, Athena." He looked at me and I was careful to keep my eyes averted. Anything less than deference to him would be considered the same as an insult by Athena herself. "And who have we here?"

"Medusa. She is under my favor." There was an edge to Athena's voice I hadn't heard before. Of course, I knew of the animosity between Athena and Poseidon. He'd carried a grudge ever since the people of Attica chose her to be the patron god of their territory.

"Really? An Aithiopian?"

Athena frowned. Had it been anyone else, I surely would have approached him and let my children have their way. Not that they could harm a true god of Olympus. As it was, I could barely control their agitation. They, like I, were much younger then. Poseidon grinned, knowing he'd gotten exactly the reaction he'd hoped for. In ancient Greece, unlike modern times, color was usually not an important factor when it came to judging a man's worth.

Poseidon was a powerful exception to that rule, and he'd just made sure I knew it.

It was then I made my fatal mistake and sealed my fate.

I spoke. Something women of that time were not enjoyed to do outside of the kitchens.

"God of Sea and Horses, I am no Aithiopian." I allowed three of my children to peek through my

curls. "I am Medusa, of Cisthene, and Athena honors me by allowing me to join her in Athēnai."

My use of the new city name was purposeful. Poseidon scowled and the skies above us grew dark with storm clouds. But then they cleared and he smiled again, although it did not touch his eyes.

"So, this is the Gorgon I have heard so much about. The latest weapon in Athena's belt. A pleasure." He nodded like he was about to ask me to dance, and then turned his attention to Athena. "My apologies for disturbing you. We must speak more the next time you visit Olympus. Medusa, perhaps we shall meet again."

With that, he departed, taking a ripe apple with him and pausing just long enough to favor me with a lecherous wink. Athena watched him, a curious look on her face that I could not interpret. Annoyance? Confusion? Or perhaps just caution. For the rest of the afternoon, she was silent. I dared not ask if I had spoken out of turn and angered her, but by the evening she was her usual ebullient self and I forgot about the encounter.

Until she—and Poseidon—gave me reason to remember.

***

His hands on me. Thunder shakes the temple. I cry for help and he slaps my face hard enough to make me dizzy. My children strike but their fangs cannot penetrate his skin. He spins me around, pushes me down. I feel him behind me. I am helpless. Athena does not answer my calls for help.

"Doula," he says by my ear as he roughly defiles me. Slave. *"Your goddess cares not of your plight. You are her gift*

to me. Anything of Athena's can be mine. Remember that. I am your true master."

I scream. I cry. I fight.

I am helpless.

He has his way.

***

Bastardo.

Evan Kruger. CEO and majority owner of Kruger Trust & Finance, a multi-billion dollar global organization with its greedy fingers in every possible pie. Investments, manufacturing, defense contracts, entertainment.

The public knows him as a mogul, a philanthropist, and socialite.

Underneath his smiling, regal exterior he is a pervert, a pig. No different than Poseidon. Or Lucan. Or Hoffa. Or any of the other hundreds of despicable men I've encountered throughout the years.

Affairs. Secret trips to private islands for assignations with underage girls.

Forced incest.

Rape.

Gods. Men. They all deserved to die.

Kruger *needed* to die.

Die, die, die, my children murmur.

Heather Kruger's story has me dreaming of carnage, but I know I must control the urge. More than sixty years since I'd been released from my tomb, and still my deeds remain cloaked in secrecy. I learned quickly that this world is both Olympus and Hades in one. Such conveniences as I'd never

known in my past life. But many more dangers as well.

Even a one such as I needs to take care, lest my true nature be revealed.

A pox on you, Athena. And Hera. I am cursed to walk the Earth forever, without the opportunity for revenge against my own violators and enemies. So many decades have passed, and still I am no closer to finding a way to Olympus, or wherever the gods and demigods have gone. To finding my sisters. Although better cursed than powerless, like you. How does it feel to be reduced to nothing more than children's stories?

I learned quickly that in this new world, the old gods hold no power. There has been no sign of them, and little interest in them other than academic, for thousands of years. When exactly they disappeared for good is lost in the mists of time, as is the cause of their demise from this realm. Was it a diminishing of belief in them as science became more accepted? Did their own petty bickering doom them to eventual banishment from this realm by Zeus? Are they trapped in Olympus, or perhaps some other reality, or maybe even truly deceased?

It remains hard for me to imagine that gods and goddesses such as Athena, Poseidon, Ares, Aphrodite, and the others are no more. The lesser deities, yes. I can see the seven of Olympus growing tired of their machinations and inbreeding and doing away with them all. But the original gods? The creators of all things?

No, it seems more likely they've simply abandoned Earth and returned to Olympus, to live out eternity in splendor. Or perhaps it was us they

grew tired of, and fashioned a new world, a new reality, with more pliable subjects.

How ironic, though, that those who thought to sentence me to eternity between life and death would vanish while I continue.

No, not just continue. Thrive. I've adapted to this new world. With the help of Maddae and the other 'assistants' I've had over the years, I found my place in Earth by turning my fury into a calling: to rid the planet of people—mostly men—who abuse the powerless.

Along the way, I've developed a talent for art.

Or should I say, a talent for turning a smoking gun into easy cash.

My statues sell for tens of thousands of dollars. Often more. My work has a devoted following of collectors with deep pockets, and it's also created a thriving copy-cat industry, companies paying me royalties to recreate my works, even molding new statues in a way that supposedly mimics my style.

If only they knew the truth.

Years ago, some art critic coined the term 'nouveau neoclassical' to describe my pieces. I supposed that's better than Death Sculptor. Luckily, no one has connected the two. Men posed in various ways, from standing to walking to even sipping a coffee or shaking a fist. But with modern hairstyles, clothing, and accoutrements. All different body types, all different ages.

Men whose actual disappearances won't be noticed.

I'm always careful to age my statues. A nose chipped off here, a suit roughed up or a tennis

racquet broken off there, just enough to change the appearance so it can't be positively identified.

On the occasions where there's no disguising the person, or they're too well-known to hide their disappearance, there's always the sledge and wheelbarrow solution.

Tough to identify a pile of broken stone.

It's been a while since my last case.

Perhaps this one will end up in my private collection.

***

December 8, 1984

> Ankara, Turkey — A fire swept through a brothel in the city's Ulus district late last night, leaving five people dead, including the suspected arsonist. Authorities identified the victims as Eren Yilmaz, Hakan Agha, Emir Barak, Cem Sahin, and Deniz Celik, all of whom were reported to have ties to prostitution and smuggling networks in the capital.
>
> Witnesses told police that Celik deliberately set the blaze before perishing inside. Rescue teams have yet to recover the bodies but continue to search through the debris. No additional injuries were reported.
>
> Investigators also discovered

fragments resembling the remains of several statues at the scene. Police are investigating whether the pieces could be linked to stolen works of art.

***

Athena arrives shortly after the vile deed's completion. I still lay on the floor, Poseidon gloating over me as I cried. "See what have you done?" she says, her voice cold. Half-blinded by tears and pain, it takes me a moment to understand she is speaking to me, not my defiler.

"He forced himself upon me," I manage to say between my sobs. "And stole my womanhood."

The goddess looks at Poseidon, who shrugs, still smiling. "I thank you for your gift, Athena," he says, "Consider our matter settled." With that, he waves goodbye and exits the temple, leaving her to stare down at me.

After a long silence, she gestures for me to rise. I do so, on shaking, blood-stained legs.

"Go and bathe." She makes to leave and I call out to her.

"What about him? What he did to me?" Twice, I could have added, but I hold my tongue.

Athena stares again, her face impassive. Then she returns to her temple.

I do not see her again for several days.

And when I do, there is a new distance between us. I am no longer favored, and the one time I ask about what happened in the temple, she frowns at me and tells me I must be mistaken, a god would never force himself on one such as lowly as I without provocation.

"What did you do to entice him?" I have no answer. I know then that that no god or goddess can be trusted, we are

merely toys for them to use and discard.

It is at that moment that my hatred for all of them is born.

***

It only takes a few minutes of conversation with Heather Kruger to determine the best way to dispose of her husband. A gala has been planned at his home, which will take place in two days' time. That offers the perfect opportunity for me. I will simply wait until after the guests depart. According to Heather, by then Kruger will be heavily intoxicated, as is his custom at these parties. I'll entice him to follow me outside with a promise of sexual gratification.

I will be the last thing he ever sees.

Of course, I can't turn him to stone in his own garden. Too many visitors and help would be able to testify that a marble likeness of him hadn't been there hours earlier, that it just happened to show up around the time of his disappearance.

Instead, one of my children will deliver the tiniest of bites and incapacitate him. Then I will bring him to my studio, pose him, and wait for him to awaken. I already have an idea in mind. Something humiliating. On his knees. Pleading. When it is done, I will take my hammer to his genitals and remove them. A bit of chiseling for his face so he could not be recognized.

Eunuch Begging for Alms.

I've no doubt it will fetch six figures.

Perhaps Heather Kruger might even decide to buy it.

***

Betrayal.

It is the one constant in my life. Sooner or later, the people you trust turn out to be unreliable. Or worse.

I count Poseidon among them, even though I never actually trusted him. But I expected more from a god. Basic decency. Stupid of me.

Athena, though…

I still cannot think of her without teetering back on the edge of madness again. More than Poseidon, more than Hera, even more than Perseus, my hatred of the so-called goddess of wisdom burns hotter than any volcano. Nightmares of her, and her curse, still ruin my sleep several times a week.

When she called for me that morning, I was more excited than anything. For days she'd been ignoring me. I'd spent most of that time in my quarters, wondering what I should do next with my life. I didn't want to remain in Athens, or anywhere near the former friend and surrogate sister who'd turned her back on me. But I also didn't want to return home; I'd seen more of the world already than I'd ever expected to, and now I wanted more.

When I entered her sitting room, I expected that either she'd apologize and my life would return to what it was, or she'd release me from my service and I'd travel on my own.

Instead, she ordered me to sit.

"I've thought hard, and decided on your punishment, child."

"Punishment?" I jumped up. "For what? I've

done nothing to—"

"Silence!" she roared, and the building shook. "I will not stand for insolence! You defiled my temple with your wanton actions, thinking to steal the heart of a god."

"No! That's not what—"

"I've seen how you look at him when he visits. The sinful lust in your eyes. Now I will make sure you can never do that again with any man or woman."

Before I could protest further, she snapped her fingers and a pain like nothing I ever felt before filled my head. It burned, it cut, it froze all at once. My children screamed. The world disappeared, replaced by a light brighter than the sun. I thought she had blinded me but then the light faded, and I was on my back, staring up at her face.

"From this day forward and forever, your gaze shall mean death for any whose eyes meet yours."

And I knew it was true! I could feel it, the power within me. It woke the moment I looked into Athena's eyes, like someone gripping my brain and twisting it. Of course, the goddess remained unaffected; as I would come to learn, I could do no harm to any of the true gods.

She laughed and then ordered me to leave Athens forever.

I lost count of how many innocents died as I made my way out of the palace, out of the city. It wasn't until years later that I understood the true reason for Athena's anger and cruelty.

She was in love in Poseidon.

A love that was impossible to consummate, since

her powers were tied to her virginity.

Therefore, she became his rival. And when he stole my virginity from me, did the one thing to me that she longed for…

She hated me for it, even though she gave me to him as a sort of peace offering after besting him in the contest of Athens. Him, too, but his formidable powers, and her feelings, prevented her from taking action against him.

I, however, was the perfect target for her wrath because now I was sullied and forever a reminder that I'd enjoyed—in her mind—that which she could never have.

Betrayal.

I will never forget.

***

They came for me the night before the party, as I slept.

Had I been gifted with second sight instead of afflicted with the Gorgon's gaze, then I would not have been such a fool.

The sound of glass breaking, the alarms strident cries. I leapt from bed, my children and I prepared to fight. A strange odor assaulted me, harsh and burning.

And then I knew nothing.

***

"Revenge will be yours. Patience, child."

Hera's voice. Am I dreaming again? Oh, gods, am I back in the earth once more? The madness rises up, threatens to overwhelm me like before. No! I cannot go through that again.

I—

"Your time will come, Medusa. They cannot end you."

Who are they? And you lie, Hera! I am not immortal like you. Perseus already killed me once, remember?

"Did he? Think."

The madness retreats as her words force me down the road of logic.

Perseus and his sword. Death, but not exactly so. I was aware, aware of what he did. What Athena did, when she took me into battle. And then all that time in the ground. Aware, but not. Alive, but not. The second curse, Hera's. I'd always thought that was why I remained in that state between life and death.

But she'd come to me after my time as Athena's weapon, and I'd been aware even then.

Was there more to me than I knew?

I want to think about that, about the nature of curses, Athena's and Hera's, but it's becoming hard. With Hera no longer speaking to me, my thoughts grow weak and my old enemy madness is knocking at the door. I…

***

I wake.

Everything is dark. I'm seated, arms and legs bound to a chair. Heavy cloth, perhaps a sack, covers my head. So that I can't see where I am, or because my captors are aware of my powers?

Unfortunately, the second option seems more likely.

Tape covers my mouth. My children bite at the thick cloth but their teeth cannot tear through it. *"Calm yourselves,"* I think at them. *"Wait for the right opportunity."*

They reluctantly settle down. There is an ache in my head and I remember the smell of chemicals before unconsciousness claimed me. A gas of some kind, released into the air. Smart. They took no chances. That doesn't bode well for my near future.

"Hello, Medusa. It's an honor to make your acquaintance. I can't say I've ever met a goddess before."

The voice is male. Rich in timbre and overflowing with self-assurance.

I recognize it from videos I watched online.

Evan Kruger.

Betrayed!

Who had it been? His wife? His daughter?

Surely not Candy; she owed me her life. I'd rescued her from the streets, given her a job, a purpose. We'd even shared a bed for a time. She'd been the one to break that off, not me. Right around the same time she found a more traditional job.

"I've been told the legends about you are true. That you have a certain… ability, and that once you were quite the powerful weapon. Or, should I say, your head was. And I'm guessing it still could be."

Something touches the sack covering me and my children strike in response.

"Be careful," a second voice warns. Heather. Now I know my traitor. And why she'd been so nervous in my studio. Fear, yes. But not of discovery by her husband.

By me.

"Make sure the bag doesn't fall off when you do it."

"It won't."

Thrice damn them! History was about to repeat itself in the worst possible way. I rock myself in the chair but it barely moves. I curse them. I curse Athena and Perseus. I curse Hera; why couldn't she have given me true immortality instead of whatever pale version I held? Made me an equal to the gods of Olympus, like Dionysus? Then I would show these humans—

A powerful blow to my face snaps my neck back. Stars fill my vision. My head lolls forward. Cold metal touches my neck.

No! Zeus, hear me! Do not let this happen—

There is a *crack* of bones shattering. Agony explodes in my neck. My children's screams drown out all other noise. I cannot shout, cannot move, my body is as immobile as one of my statues.

Another strike, this one accompanied by a sensation of falling. The world spins around me. The pain vanishes, but now I'm cold, so cold. Like ice.

I hear laughter from somewhere nearby. Then an electronic beeping. Heather's voice, far above me.

"The guests are arriving."

Footsteps. Evan Kruger speaking, as if from a distance.

"I'll come back for her later. I think the general will pay handsomely for her. And if he doesn't, there are others I can call."

A door closes.

Silence.

Seconds become minutes. Minutes become… I cannot tell. Time ceases to have meaning. I feel nothing but numb. Cold.

Thoughts of my future torment me.

A sentient weapon of destruction for all eternity. Doomed to ensure endless suffering.

Not again, no not again not again again again—

The door in my brain opens and madness returns.

***

The soldiers bursting in, dying in twos and threes as my gaze turns on them. The warning hiss in my head, someone behind me. Turning… my own face staring back at me. It takes me by surprise, just long enough. Movement, the sword falling toward me as if from nowhere…

Without the weapons given to him by Athena and Hermes, he would have stood no chance. Even the mirrored shield would not have been a factor; Athena should have known that my cursed gaze did not apply to my own face.

But winged shoes that give the ability to fly?

A magic sword that can cut through flesh as if through water?

Perseus' quest ends in victory. My time of hiding from the world ends in death.

Or so I thought. And perhaps even hoped for, in a way. My life was already in ruins; spending my days and nights in a cave, leaving only in fullest dark to steal food from nearby villages or gardens. An outcast forever.

More than once I wished for death. Only my innate stubbornness and my burning hatred of both Athena and Poseidon kept me from taking my own life.

That, and the child growing in my womb, the product of Poseidon's violation.

So in the moment where Perseus' sword cleaved head from neck, I almost feel… free.

Only to discover the Fates have something far worse in mind for me.

Immune to my children's venom, Perseus holds my head up in victory. Two more of his soldiers become stone. The constant ache in my head from being forced to use my power is nothing compared to the gaping wound in my soul as I think about my unborn child, now as dead as my body. Did tears run down my cheeks then? I do not know.

"I shall put your gaze to good use, Medusa," Perseus says.

And he does.

Good for him, not so much for me.

As one history book so bluntly put it, he used 'the vile Gorgon' to petrify the treacherous King Polydectes right on his throne, thus becoming twice the hero. First for defeating me and then for rescuing his mother.

As a sign of gratitude for her help, the young god then gave me to Athena, who turned me into a weapon of war.

Oh, the battles! Reunited against my will with my goddess, mounted on her shield as she rode forth. Soldiers fell by the thousands, victims of a most dishonorable death. The tides of battles turning. Me, silently screaming all the while. My life nothing but endless pain followed by interminable darkness when not needed.

And now history will repeat itself.

***

A door closing. People speaking. Reality slowly asserts itself on me again.

"There. Hurry, before they come back. Remember the snakes.

"They look dead."

"I don't believe it. Use the gloves."

That voice. Familiar. Hard to hear. Hard to

think. Images. Woman. Hair like sunshine.

Movement. Me. Floating. Up, up.

Down.

"Put the two pieces together. Hold it there."

"Ew. Gross." A second speaker. *"There's blood everywhere."*

"Just do it!"

"Okay. Now what?"

"I don't know."

Sudden needles in my neck. Pressure.

Numbness recedes. Hot, feverish. Prickling in my arms, my legs—

I can feel again!

My chest heaves and I choke against the tape sealing my mouth. Breathe deep through my nose. Blinding terror. My body convulses. I thrash back and forth. Must escape! Must—

"Shit! She's alive!"

"I told you."

That voice. Her.

Candy.

My bonds loosen, fall away. A semblance of sanity returns, and with it control. With my arms free, I reach under the sack and rip the tape from my lips. Suck in air in giant gasps. Finally, I am able to speak.

I retain enough sense to keep the sack over my face, lest I petrify my rescuers.

"Candy, I thank you. Who is with you?"

"I'm Dawn. Dawn Kruger. My mother—"

"I know of her treason. Where are they?"

"Upstairs. They… they're gonna sell your head."

"How did they know?" I don't try to hide my

fury. My children hiss and writhe, eager for someone to smite.

"I'm sorry, Medusa." Candy? My betrayer? How could she? Other than Maddae and one other, she is the only human I've ever trusted enough to reveal my real self. The rest only knew me only as the artist Medusa, a rich recluse with a penchant for helping victimized women by making their problems disappear and sometimes using those men as inspiration.

With Candy, I shared everything. Even, for a while, my bed.

I reach up to remove the sack. If she'd truly revealed my secret…

"Wait! It wasn't on purpose. I was high. I didn't know what I was doing. And I only told Dawn, not them."

"It's true. We were wasted as fuck. I didn't believe her until she showed me the statue."

I pause. "Statue?"

"In the park," Candy says. "The one you and I put there."

"I remember." Sam Marketti. The man Candy asked me to take care of for her.

"I recognized him." Dawn takes up the story. "I used to work at the same club."

"A statue means nothing," I say.

"Well, there, um, was more. Candy and I used to meet there to, uh, get high. And one day you dropped her off and…"

She clears her throat before continuing.

"Your, um… your hair. I saw them peeking out. The snakes."

Kakka! My children. They react to my emotions. I must have been upset that day. Or perhaps they sensed Dawn watching us.

What a fool I've been. That's why I try to avoid any relationships.

"So how did I end up here?"

"Heather" Candy says. "She must've heard us talking about you. I swear we never told her."

"I don't even speak to the bitch," Dawn is quick to add.

The madness in me insists I kill them. They know my secrets. Their carelessness had nearly destroyed what had taken me centuries to obtain. A life. Wealth. Sanity.

It is as much your fault as Candy's. No, more. Drug addicts relapse. You should know that. And it was your own carelessness that opened the door for theirs.

True, but that didn't change the fact that simply by being alive they present a great danger to me. How do I know they won't let my secret slip to someone else?

They also just saved you.

Gods be damned.

"Go," I said. "Hide yourselves."

I wait until I hear the door close again before removing the sack. On the floor next to the chair are my clothes and glasses. My children thrash with impatience, one that I share. I dress quickly, aware that Kruger or his men could return at any moment. I exit the room and find myself in a basement. Stairs lead up to the main floor of the house. Half-empty glasses and plates litter tables and other surfaces. No sign of guests nor servants; I

assume the latter have been sent home to prevent prying eyes.

From down the hall come the murmured sound of voices.

I consider removing my glasses, but the results of that would bring on a lengthy police investigation that might eventually involve me. Instead, I approach the room and peer inside. Three people. The Krugers on a sofa and a massive giant of a man seated across from them in a large chair. He wears a dark business suit with medals on the lapels. His gray hair is sheared to just stubble.

"I believe the general will pay handsomely for her."

This is the man they would sell my head to!

Images of battlefields. Generals astride their horses, shouting commands to their soldiers. Athena, my so-called sister, laughing, her deadly shield held aloft while I scream silently from the never-ending pain.

Gods and generals, playing their games of war without a care for the innocents.

Never again. Now I choose who lives and dies.

I storm into the room and go straight for the general. He jumps up, his eyes wide but already assessing the situation. I scream and throw myself at him. He is fast, as fast as I, and he pushes me away. But it's already too late for him. My children are faster. They strike at his neck and cheek.

Nothing happens.

I remove my glasses.

He returns my gaze, a smile forming on his lips.

"Hello, Mother."

***

NOVEMBER 28, 1973

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK — No Clues in Case of Missing Girl

The search for 11-year-old Michelle Maenza, missing since Monday afternoon, stretched into the night with no new leads, police said. Maenza was last seen around 3:30 p.m. near Webster Avenue while walking home from school.

Her disappearance has drawn chilling comparisons to two earlier cases in the Rochester area. On November 16, 1971, 10-year-old Carmen Colón was abducted after being spotted entering a parked car near a pharmacy. In April of this year, 11-year-old Wanda Walkowicz vanished on her way home from a grocery store in east Rochester. Both were found within three days of being taken, their bodies abandoned in isolated locations and bearing evidence of sexual assault.

Investigators now fear Maenza may be the third victim of what they believe is an emerging serial killer, one who…

***

He wore a man's face, but he was nonetheless a monster. It wasn't easy to find him, even though I saw the pattern right away. Not just the first and last names beginning with the same letter, but also the suburbs where the bodies were found —Churchville, Webster and Macedon—matching the first letter of the last names. And more than that. Southwest of Rochester. Then northeast. Then southeast.

Which meant it was likely the next victim would be left in one of the small towns to the northwest of the city proper. I'd been living in Rochester for just over two years at that point, my first time in a cold climate. I'd already decided it wasn't for me; had it not been for the family of Carmen Colón coming to me for help, I'd have been gone already. They wanted justice for their little girl, and I… well, I wanted whoever was killing and raping children to die a thousand deaths.

The bastardo *had so far spaced out his murders, which gave me some time. I put together a list of children ages ten and eleven who matched the killer's requirements. All children from rather poor neighborhoods. All from fatherless homes. When I finished, I had seven strong possibilities for a next victim. One of them was handicapped; two of the dead girls had been described as having mental deficiencies.*

That made Hillary Hopkins the most likely target. Age 10. Lived in a third-floor apartment in the Nineteenth Ward. I watched her every day, from the time she left school until nine o'clock at night. On the weekends, I had my current acolyte do it.

On March twenty-seventh, I saw it happen. A young white man in a blue car. Hillary was coming out of a grocery store when he called her over. Offered her donuts and a ride home. She never hesitated. I followed them west, to—of course—the town of Hilton. He turned onto a small road

between two cornfields. I reached them just as he laid the unconscious girl on the ground and removed her shirt.

My children struck before he could unbutton his pants.

I never did find out his name. I burned the car right there in the field and dropped the girl off in front of the first hospital I came to.

As for the man, he ended up at the bottom of Lake Ontario. No sculpture for him.

The next morning I called the Colóns and told them justice had been served. Then I closed up shop and by the evening I was on a plane to London.

One monster had been dispatched, but there are always more waiting.

***

The general's words stop me in my tracks. I am more stunned by them than his immunity to my children's venom. Kruger takes the opportunity to leap from his chair and escape through another door. Leaving me to stare at the man who shouldn't be alive.

The man who called me mother.

Through the long, long years of my life since resurrection, I've learned that I am barren. I know not if it is part of Athena's curse, but I cannot bear children. And despite what the legends say, I bore none before my first death. The babe in my womb, Poseidon's child, when Perseus found me was no longer there when I awoke thousands of years later.

"Who are you, and why would you call me that?" I am prepared to fight if need be, but the small blade I carry with me at all times would not be much protection should he decide to attack. He is

easily twice my size and a head taller.

He is relaxed, but alert. Like a lion, ready to spring at a moment's notice.

"The fabled Medusa. I've wanted to meet you for so long. But I had to be sure of my own safety first. You truly cannot recognize me?"

"First you call me mother, and now you insinuate we've met."

"Met? No." He shakes his head. "But blood is supposed to recognize blood. Children and parents recognize each other even if separated at birth. Isn't that what people say? I guess it's not true. But then, I have an advantage. Your likeness is known throughout the world. Although I will say history hasn't done you justice. Neither green nor monster."

I am getting annoyed with him now.

"Enough with the guessing games."

He shrugs and moves over to a dry bar, pours himself a glass of something brown from a decanter.

"Fine. Does the name Chrysaor mean anything to you?"

I take an involuntary step backward.

Chrysaor? Of course it does. I've read every possible text and book about the legends relating to me, and to all the gods of ancient Greece. For the longest time, it was my desire to find Athena, find Perseus, and kill them both for what they'd done to me. But as time went on, I realized this new Earth was devoid of gods, or anything else.

Only me, a holdover from a time long past. Doomed to walk the Earth alone.

Among the tales were those of my death, how when Perseus decapitated me, two children sprang

forth from my neck: Pegasus, the winged horse, and Chrysaor, the golden sword.

Fables. Stories. Make believe. Even the historians speak of these as examples of symbolism, not true events, and they interpret them as they see fit. Depending on who you read, Chrysaor could be a symbol of war, of power, or even farming.

I never believed he was real.

As I stand before him, I become very aware of my own stupidity. I, the person who lived among the gods, who walked with them, who watched as they formed Athens, fought their wars, slew their monsters, built their temples. I, who was cursed by one of them and gained a sort of immortality. Who for more than seventy years has believed I am the only one from that time still walking the Earth. Who decades ago learned that my blood gave birth to two children—and laughed it off as a silly tale!

A child inside me when I died, the offspring of a god. An empty womb when I woke.

I have no reason not to believe. The man before me has shown he's immune to my children's venom, unaffected by my gaze.

Only for a god, or the child of one, is that possible.

"Truly, it is you? I have a son?" I want to reach out to him, but my limbs are frozen by shock; I am as immobile as if I am the one made of stone.

"The legends are true, if that's what you're wondering. The first thing I saw upon my birth was the dead body of my mother on the ground. Perseus and his men were gone by then. My brother Pegasus emerged right after me and together we flew to

Athens."

I have no words. All these years… I try to recall the stories I'd read. In most of them, Chrysaor was considered a hero. With his golden sword, he dispatched many a—

Then I remember. My hand goes to my mouth.

Chrysaor was known as The Monster Hunter. Which means…

His smile grows wider as he sees the horror dawning on my face.

"Yes, Mother. I was trained well by my father and his siblings. And now, after all the centuries of waiting, of watching, I can honor them by returning the head of the beast that seduced the great Poseidon and tried to murder the goddess Athena."

What? No! It takes me a moment to get the words out, so surprised am I by them.

"You're wrong. I was always loyal to Athena, until she turned on me. And your father, I had no eyes for him, or any man. I was celibate and he took me against my will."

"You lie, Gorgon!" Chrysaor's eyes flash yellow as the sun, and a golden sword appears in his hand, gleaming under the ceiling lights. "All know your kind are monsters, inhuman beings who should not exist. And you worse than the others, parading about in human form whilst deadly serpents hide in your curls, ready to do your bidding."

"You call me monster, but you are of my blood. What does that make you?" I must keep him talking. I need time to figure out an escape. The odds are stacked heavily against me. He is larger, stronger, and, if the legends are true, a warrior trained for

battle. I know how to fight, but my strength is that of a human. Plus, he has a weapon and is immune to my powers. Any moment he might attack and separate my head from my body. For a third time!

"A half-breed, another reason I hate you so!" He finishes his drink and slams the glass down on the bar. "A demi-god among true gods. That is why when there were no more monsters to fight, when the gods retired to Olympus, I remained on Earth and became the greatest military leader the world has ever known. I've had many names over the centuries. Can you guess them?"

I study him, this man who is my son. His classic good looks, his skin fairer than mine, quite the son of his father. His eyes a piercing blue. No, green. And now brown. His hair longer. Shorter. Blond. Dark. I shake my head, confused by what I am seeing.

Oh! He can change his appearance to a degree. Another gift from the god's loins.

Knowing that, it isn't hard to imagine him as some of history's most famous soldiers. Alexander. Caesar. His lips twist in a cruel sneer, and I add some other names to the list of possibilities. Rommel. Leopold. Lee.

His life, the life of an immortal on Earth. Moving from country to country, taking on new identities, advancing through the ranks of one army after another until he was in charge, leading campaigns that took the lives of millions.

How many innocents had he caused to die?

I know my own hands are not clean of innocent blood, but for the most part those were mistakes,

accidents or episodes of madness in the early days of my wakening.

But to seek out positions of power just to murder on an epic scale…?

It comes to me that this man, my son, the mythical Chrysaor of legend, is nothing more than another male who uses their power to hurt those who cannot stand up for themselves. Some do it through politics or economics. Others on a more individual scale. The wife beater, the rapist, the child molester.

Chrysaor has probably ruined more families, brought more pain and grief, than all of my victims throughout time.

I come to a simple conclusion.

He must die.

But not today. Today I must escape and survive, so I can plan his demise.

The question is, how?

I realize he's waiting for me to answer his question. For the first time in decades, I'm at a loss for words. His eyes narrow and his body tenses. Is this it? Is he about to come at me? My only options are run for the door or run for the window and hope my momentum will shatter it. I may be somewhat immortal, but my flesh is not impervious to injury. Or pain.

Indecision freezes me in place.

He cocks his head. Sniffs the air.

Just as I wonder why, it hits me.

Smoke.

Something is burning!

A second later alarms go off all over the house.

Chrysaor looks toward the door, as if expecting someone to enter. That's my chance. I sprint for the wide windows, grabbing a heavy vase along the way. He shouts something but I don't hear it over strident electronic shrieking. As I near the window I throw the vase. Glass shatters and I leap forward, arms over my face, shoulder first.

Then I'm flying.

It's a good seven or eight feet to the ground. My flight is brief and when I land on my side it is like getting struck by Haphaestus' hammer. I roll over, gasping for breath. From my vantage point on the ground, I see orange flames flickering in several first-floor rooms. Chrysaor is silhouetted at the broken window, sword in hand, and the sight of him spurs me to move. I get up and stumble toward the hedges at the back of the property. With each step, I expect to feel Chrysaor's sword piercing my back. But it doesn't happen.

I fight my way through the bushes, branches gouging my arms and tearing my clothes. On the other side is a long stretch of new growth woods that eventually takes me to a road. The two security guards I meet along the way apparently have no idea who I am, because they look me right in the eyes with no fear.

I can only assume the Krugers and my wretched son have kept my secret to themselves, for obvious reasons. Greed being the primary one, although in Chrysaor's case I believe it's more of the desire to use my power for something far worse than personal gain. As I make my way west—my direction chosen strictly because it means I don't have to go back past

the Kruger's estate—I run through those possibilities in my mind. A takeover at the Pentagon? Or perhaps something worse, for me. My head in some top-secret laboratory, as Chrysaor and his scientists try to duplicate my magical gaze and create a weapon thousands of soldiers can carry at once.

Global domination.

I know I can't let that happen. Which means I have to find a way to kill my own son. Before he finds me again.

Because next time, I won't be so lucky.

***

August 11, 2026

> San Francisco, California — Authorities are investigating a suspicious fire that tore through part of billionaire Evan Kruger's Palo Alto estate on Sunday, just hours after a high-profile fundraising event. The blaze, which began in one of the mansion's two kitchens, quickly engulfed an entire wing before firefighters brought it under control nearly two hours later.
>
> "It's a miracle no one was hurt," said Fire Captain Saul Bellamy. "All the guests had departed, and aside from the Krugers, only a small cleaning crew remained."
>
> Though officials have not released an

> official cause, an arson squad was on site throughout the day. A fire department source who spoke on the condition of anonymity said flames spread with unusual speed from the kitchen into multiple hallways…

***

Stumbling through the forest, my body cut and bruised. Exhaustion fights to claim me. Every muscle aches, my limbs feel as heavy as stone. But I keep moving. There is a cave not far from here. A place I've sheltered in when the weather is bad or hunters from the village get too close.

Today is different.

Today the hunters are after a special prey. Me.

Someone in the little village of Anno Chora spotted me taking fruit and bread from the market. I've been doing that more and more, in preparation for leaving the island. My plan was to steal a boat and make my way back to Maghreb. There, to reunite with Euryale and Sthena, who can hide me until we find someone to reverse Athena's curse.

Now, though, returning to my home will have to wait. This is a race, and if they catch me the penalty for theft is twenty lashes. However, I know all too well that won't happen.

No, the outcome of my capture can only be one thing. Death to those innocent men. And I don't want that to happen. I just need to reach my hidden sanctuary.

Then I'll be safe.

***

By the time I reach my safe house, I'm so exhausted I can hardly take another step. The sun has risen

and descended again. I spent the daylight hours hiding behind dumpsters or beneath overpasses. As dusk descended, I stole a car and drove most of the way to Alameda. After abandoning it in a parking lot, I used the cover of darkness to walk the last few miles.

The safe house is my emergency sanctuary. I've kept one in every city I've ever lived in. Only twice before have I ever been forced to abandon my actual home, but in both instances having a secret hideaway saved my life.

This marks the third.

My mind is whirling from everything that happened. Betrayals, decapitation, a son I never knew existed who wants to kill me. Which is why I continue my string of careless acts and never notice the alarm is set for 'Stay" rather than 'Away' as I deactivate it on my phone.

I am halfway down the hall when voices from the kitchen and the odor of pizza alert me to my stupidity.

"Skata!" I swear, as I recognize the intruders. Candy and Dawn. I'm still not sure I want them anywhere around me, even though there'd been no malicious intent on their part and they'd risked their lives to save me. There was no mystery as to how they'd gotten in. As my so-called assistant, Candy helped me set up the *anáthemá* safe house in the first place. And the alarm code was the same as at the warehouse back in San Francisco.

Two more mistakes I won't repeat in the future.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" I say, storming into the kitchen.

Candy's eyes grow wide. I imagine I'm quite a sight, my clothes torn and filthy, my hair a tangled mess, my children squirming nervously. Lucky for them my glasses are on; that's a habit I don't break even under the most chaotic conditions.

"We knew you escaped and I figured you'd come here because that's what a safe house is for and that you'd probably be hungry so we got pizza we've been waiting all day." Her words come out so fast they blend together. As she pauses for breath, Dawn chimes in.

"We set the fire. Just in case. Good thing, right?"

They take turns explaining, like two halves of a single brain. After setting me free, they'd planned on sneaking out through the kitchen but when they found it empty, they got the idea of creating a distraction for me. So they found some lighter fluid, matches, and a bottle of cooking vodka and splashed it all over the kitchen and one of the hallways.

"Then we came right here," Candy says.

"Well, not right here. We stopped for clothes and the pizza."

"No delivery. We were careful, right?" Candy seems proud of such ingenuity.

I don't know whether to strangle them or thank them. Instead, I tell them I'm going to take a shower.

Then it will be time for pizza.

And planning.

***

Her name is Melissa August. Twenty-two, red hair, pretty in that no-makeup-needed, girl-next-door kind of way. If I were a Hollywood director, I'd be handing her my card and saying she's perfect to play the hometown girlfriend in a Lifetime movie.

Instead, I'm watching her wipe back tears as she comes out of the diner's kitchen, a plate of food in her trembling hands, and thinking this is someone who might just need my special kind of help.

She has that look. I've learned to spot it over the years. It's a different kind of woe than when you get bad news. The eyes are glazed and there's a healthy dose of fear mixed with sadness. Sure, maybe she just found out she has cancer, or that the rent got raised and she can't afford it. But I trust my instincts.

It's man trouble. The serious kind. Not 'I don't want to see you anymore.' More like 'I'm gonna blacken your eye later' or 'Either you sleep with me or you're fired.'

Turns out it's the latter. I didn't even need three guesses.

I eat my dinner slowly, biding my time until I see her step into the bathroom. Then I follow. She denies any problems when I confront her, but after a minute she breaks down crying.

It's the cook, who also happens to own the place. Snuffy's Diner, on the outskirts of Houston, Texas. I've only just moved to town, still setting up my studio in an old warehouse. Clinton is president, the economy is booming, and it's been almost a week since my last nightmare about Athena. Life is good.

Now I'm feeling some of that old fury return.

It feels good.

Bradley Nelson. He's been pushing her to have sex with him for two weeks, ever since the last waitress he was taking advantage of took off without giving notice. And today the *bastardo* told her it was either give in or find a new job.

Some girls might've done it if they were in Melissa's place. An orphan, going to school at night to get a business degree, barely making enough money to keep her cheap apartment in a bad section of town. Took a job as a waitress not only for the tips and adjustable schedule, but because she gets to eat for free.

But she's not the type to whore herself out.

"If I lose this job, I'm screwed. No apartment, no school." Having to drop out seems to upset her more than the thought of being homeless.

"I'll talk to him," I say, and it's not a lie. I fully intend to talk to him.

First.

She doesn't believe me, but what choice does she have? I tell her it's my job, and she doesn't ask a lot of questions. Thinks I'm a private detective or something. The plan is that she'll meet Nelson in the back office after the diner closes. Except I'll be there, too.

Nelson is in his late fifties, with the kind of fat belly that comes from too much beer and too much greasy food off his own grill. A real *choiros,* pig. He smells like his kitchen, oily and meaty, with a healthy dose of sweat. It's not pleasant. His eyes grow wide and he frowns when I walk in. He looks past me at Melissa, and then kind of half-smiles.

"What's this? You bring a friend?" You can tell the thought excites him. All these pigs are the same.

"I'm her friend, but not yours," I say. "Here's how this goes. I'm giving you one chance. You apologize to Miss August and agree to never bother her again. She keeps her job. You find someone else to threaten."

He laughs. I kind of expect it. In a way, I'm glad. A part of me—a big part—wants it to go this way.

Under my over-sized, tie-dyed bonnet, my children tense for action.

"Lady, you got some nerve comin' in here and tellin' me what to do. Now walk your ass outta here. And August, you can go with her. I don't wanna see your face again."

"Well, I tried. Melissa, go wait for me out front." She scurries away. I lean over the desk and pull off my bonnet. Faster than the eye can follow, three of my children strike.

He manages one shout before his muscles freeze up.

I figure he's got about ten minutes before his heart stops. I push his chair back and take off my sunglasses. Look him right in the eyes.

"Adio, choiros."

The usual stabbing pain goes through my head like a bolt of lightning and then it's gone.

Someone gasps behind me.

Curse the gods. Melissa. She came back.

I put my glasses back on and turn. What's done is done.

"You've got some choices to make, now," I say to the terrified girl. I outline them for her. She's a

smart girl, she makes the right decision.

An hour later, she's still alive and following me to my warehouse. Nelson is nothing but a pile of rubble, Snuffy's is on fire, Melissa has a little more than three thousand dollars in her pocket from the safe, and I have a new assistant.

Sometimes, plans work perfectly.

Sometimes.

***

The biggest decision I have to make is whether to trust Dawn and Candy. I ponder this while I'm scrubbing the dirt from my body. Their story about it being an accident that they revealed my secret seems logical enough. And obviously I've gotten careless about hiding certain aspects of my true nature. But they're both drug addicts. Maybe they're clean now, but users relapse. It's already happened once with them. And when they do, they can hurt the people around them.

Problem is, I'll need their help. Especially knowing both Chrysaor and the Krugers are looking for me. It won't take people who are rich and powerful like that very long to find my current hideaway.

Desperation makes my decision easier, if not pleasant.

Dried and dressed, I tell them both they have a choice. Get drug kits from the local pharmacy and prove they're clean or spend the rest of eternity as garden statues.

They protest, but make the right choice.

I accompany them to the store and back. You

don't threaten someone's life and let them leave the house alone. Sure enough, they're drug-free and we get down to business.

The first thing to figure out is how to stay hidden from Chrysaor. Having Dawn there is a big help, because she's able to tell me a lot about her father's security team. As for my *bastardo* of a son, he's got the entire military at his disposal. Which means my phone, my bank accounts, my ID, all of it is no good. Hell, he can probably tap into any traffic cam that he wants. So I'll have to be very careful. Only go out at night, and in disguise.

Luckily for me, I have a bit of a network set up in the bay area. I've been here for several years, long enough to take care of some problems for a few well-to-do people and develop a reputation. Since I can't count on using my regular real estate agent—or my credit cards—I make some calls to past clients. Before too long, I've called in my favors and I've arranged to rent three new safe houses under fictitious names. I've got cash stashed all through the city and here in my backup apartment, so they're all paid for without any paper trail.

I send Candy to one, Dawn drops me off at another, and then she goes to a third. Along the way, we pick up a few items, including burner phones and laptops.

Their orders are to wait and watch. If they see anything suspicious—a car or delivery truck that parks but no one gets out, people who walk by more than once, people who glance too long at the house—they're to stay put and not leave until I say so.

If a full day and night go by without anything

happening, they can join me at my location.

I'll be doing the same thing, but also using the new computer to research Chrysaor. Following my rebirth, and after recovering from my near-insanity, I studied as much ancient Greek history as I could. Especially anything that pertained to me or the gods of Olympus. The myth of Chrysaor's and Pegasus' emergence fully formed from my neck was well-documented, but compared to other demi-gods, Chrysaor remained a bit of a mystery. More than a few books labelled him an unimportant figure in mythology. Other than his prowess for battle and his golden sword, not much was ever written about him. Pegasus was definitely the more well-known of my children.

So I'd put it out of my mind.

Now, the more I thought about it, the surer I became that his lack of popularity had more to do with a determined strategy of obscurity rather than being devoid of powers. Why?

I needed to dig deeper. Much deeper. I had to figure out what, if any, weaknesses he had. As I searched the web, I mentally reviewed what I already knew.

I'd already learned from personal experience that his golden sword was no myth, and it was more magical than the fables gave credit. No ordinary metal, not the fabled Excaliber. He was able to conjure it when needed. And there's no doubt it's as deadly as it looks, capable of slicing through human and monster flesh with ease.

His immunity to my gaze and the venom of my children was a bit of bad luck. The powers of the

demigods vary wildly. Perseus, for example, would turn to stone the same as a mortal should I meet his eyes. But it would seem Chrysaor got an extra gift from his sire. That would make things far more difficult for me.

Like all demigods, Chrysaor is also going to age far more slowly than a human and be immune to illnesses. And they heal faster than humans from injury. In those respects, Athena's curse appears to have made us equal. Although he is far more muscular and faster.

On the other hand, demigods are not invulnerable like true gods. Some can be hurt by ordinary weapons, such as swords, if wielded by a strong enough attacker. While there's no way to know if firearms can kill a demigod, or damage one, since they all disappeared before modern weapons were invented, it stands to reason that a powerful gun might do the trick. Or a grenade. Or missile.

But that's all conjecture. I have no way of knowing for sure if putting a couple of bullets into Chrysaor's chest will do the trick. He might have impervious skin. Or a magical shield. There has to be a reason he's survived innumerable battles as a soldier.

Research, research.

I divide my attention between the screen and looking out the window at the street. Every hour or so I take a break and wander through the house, check all the other windows and doors. Nothing.

Just after midnight, Candy texts me.

There is a city power truck parked down the block but no one doing any work. I tell her to follow

the plan and stay put.

It is down to two of us. And time is running out.

***

"Every god has a weakness." Athena lounges on a couch near one of her bathing pools. We are alone, the servants having brought us fruit, bread, and wine earlier. "Take Poseidon, for example. His strength is second only to Zeus. But his pride, that is the split in his armor. Anger him, insult him, and his reactions, like so many men, become predictable."

Her contempt of the ocean god always confuses me. They are constantly waging these miniature campaigns against each other. Wars of words. Veiled insults and innuendos. Sniffing around the edges of each other's territories.

Had I any experience in the ways of the flesh, I would have seen it for what it was. But my naivete regarding sex is only overshadowed by my naivete regarding my goddess.

"This is how I shall win King Kekropia's contest," she continues, nibbling on a ripe apple. Juice runs down her chin but magically disappears before it can stain her tunic. "Not through battle. Not through brute strength. But through cunning. And Poseidon will walk right into the trap I set."

A week later, she succeeds with her plan. The people of Kekropia fall in love with her gift, an eternal olive tree that would forever give them food, oil, and wood. Poseidon's feat, thrusting his great trident into the ground and producing a giant saltwater fountain, impressed them but ultimately gave them nothing they could use. Pretty, yes, but what good was salt water for a city already located by the sea?

Her strategy was simplicity itself. Telling all who would listen that Poseidon doesn't care for them, doesn't understand what his charges need. How if Kekropia were hers, she would always have their best interests at heart. And in return, all she

would require is a temple in her name.

"The way to win the adoration of humans is through love. The way to rule them is through fear."

On the day she was named victor, Athena stood next to King Kekropia as he announced the new name of the city: Athēnai. While Poseidon glowered next to her, she caught my eye and winked.

***

March 13, 2018

> New York, New York — Disgraced financier Jarrold Feinstein was found dead in his home early Monday. Feinstein was under house arrest while awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges. A person close to the case, who requested anonymity due to the ongoing status of the investigation, stated that it was most likely suicide.
>
> "There were obvious signs of poison," said the unnamed source. "The autopsy will determine the exact cause of death."
>
> Feinstein, who was convicted last year on 14 counts of sex trafficking and engaging in illegal sex acts with minors, was discovered unresponsive in an upstairs bathroom of his Manhattan penthouse.
>
> According to the official police

> statement, his personal secretary, Nicola Stavros, found him when she came to work in the morning. Feinstein was not under suicide watch following his release from Sing Sing prison last month.
>
> An autopsy is scheduled later this week. Feinstein's body was taken to…

***

Every god has a weakness. But finding out that weakness isn't always easy.

Or safe.

Hours and hours of research about Chrysaor turned up nothing. Apparently his status as a demigod was so insignificant that other than a few stories about his exploits as a warrior, historians have ignored him. Much like myself, he's managed to hide in plain sight throughout the ages, although his ability to change his physical appearance no doubt made it far easier for him to do so.

On the second day of my self-confinement, Dawn came to me. Even with two of us working on the problem—and Candy joining us over the phone—we had no luck. Neither of them had ever met 'the general' before and while his current military history was easy to look up, at least the public part, nothing in those articles helped us. With centuries of practice, he's perfected creating new personas.

On day three, I decide it's best to go back to the beginning, start all over. So I lock myself in my room with a six-pack of beer and a loaf of bread.

What do I know about the strengths and weaknesses of the players in this game?

Poseidon, god of sea and war. An arrogant, temperamental, conceited *órrhos*. Athena always said his downfall was his own pride, and she proved it.

Athena, the she-bitch. Vanity was her Achilles heel. She used cunning and her feminine wiles to get what she wanted, and if that didn't work, she would wage war. Using me as unknowing bait to attract Poseidon's eye and make him forget his feud with her was a perfect example. Arranging for him to find me alone. Did she ever actually intend to protect me? Even now, I'm not sure about that. I only know that once plan became reality and I lay violated on her altar, she hated me because of her jealousy. That Poseidon would choose me rather than her. It made no difference that she was the one who'd spurned all his advances in order to retain her virginity.

Perseus, may his name forever be damned. Brash and rather insecure when I knew him as a lad, as a man he gained a reputation as a hero. However, I did locate some facts about him, mainly that without the magical weapons supplied to him by the gods, he was susceptible to both magical and physical weapons. That explains why he needed to avoid my gaze, unlike Chrysaor.

The more I thought about that, the more it seemed like something important. Athena's curse was that of a true Olympian. According to legend, only the true gods—Zeus, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Apollo, the others—should be immune to my gaze. Any demigod would fall victim to it. And most

would be susceptible to the bite of my children.

Why is Chrysaor different? Is it that Poseidon fathered him? Or something else?

Try as I might, the solution eludes me. I go to the kitchen for more food and drink. The alcohol barely effects me, another unwelcome side effect of my curse. At least the gods can get drunk. Perhaps I need to find a source of ambrosia.

Cursing, I pile fruit and cheese on a plate, grab a bottle of wine.

"It must be hard," Dawn says, looking up from her laptop.

"What?" I ask.

"Having to kill your own child."

I am about to say she is no different, wanting her own father dead, when it strikes me.

My child.

That's what sets him apart!

Forgetting my meal, I rush back to my makeshift desk. How could I be so blind? Chrysaor was born of my blood, that is what makes him immune to my powers.

And he's not my only child.

"Dawn, you may have just saved us all."

Ignoring her questions, I begin another search, this time focused on Pegasus. The winged horse of legend. If I can discover his weaknesses, then perhaps the same ones will apply to Chrysaor.

Luckily for me, there is a lot more information about Pegasus. He was ridden by the demigod Bellerophon, one of Poseidon's numerous sons, and performed many heroic deeds before his eventual ascent to Olympus. But that's where things get

interesting.

The only reason Bellerophon was able to capture Pegasus was because of the golden bridle given to him by Athena.

Athena and Poseidon again! Their twisted relationship continues to involve me.

Much of this I already know from past research over the decades. And my readings bring back the rest, such as the fact that Bellerophon was an outcast, due to having murdered someone. His quest to kill the Chimera was actually a trap designed to end his life without Poseidon being suspicious.

But this time, I turn up something new, a single entry in a scholarly text.

Only another demigod could ride Pegasus, because no mortal human could ever control him—or survive flying on him—*and the touch of an immortal was deadly to him.*

I search for more information about this, but find nothing to verify it. There is one other entry, though, that hints at the truth of this fact. After Bellerophon is killed trying to fly Pegasus to Olympus and become a true god, Pegasus is put to work as a pack horse for Zeus. The idea of Zeus using one of Poseidon's grandchildren for menial labor makes sense, as there was never any love lost between those two. But never to ride the winged stallion, even if just to humiliate Poseidon?

It is only logical if Zeus's touch, or the touch of any god, would be fatal to Pegasus.

Could it be that Chrysaor has the same weakness?

Even so, how does that help me? There are no

gods or goddesses I can call on for help. None ever showed me any favor after Athena turned her back on me.

No, that is not exactly true, is it?

Hera.

Her gift has caused me more pain than Athena, Poseidon, and Perseus combined, but in her eyes it *was* a gift.

Her words at the time of my death return to me.

"You will be made whole again and immortal, both your beauty and deadly gaze returned. And when this happens, I pray you find the one who did this to you and turn their body into stone as cold as Athena's heart."

Whole again. And immortal.

Immortal like a demigod, in that I barely age and never take ill? That much is true; I look the same now as the day Perseus cleaved my head from my body, and I've never suffered any kind of illness. I feel pain when injured, but I heal in hours from even grievous wounds.

Or immortal like a god?

For truth, have I not proven impossible to kill? Dead, decapitated, little more than a skeleton, and yet I revive within seconds of head and body being joined.

How is that different than Dionysus or Pollux, who gained immortality and became like the gods?

If what I think, what I now pray, is true, then it means the only way for me to kill Chrysaor is with my own hands. I cannot use a weapon. Yet, how can I possibly accomplish this? He possesses his magical golden sword. Even without it, he is far stronger than I, and undoubtably a master of hand-to-hand

combat.

My only hope is to take him by surprise. Even then, the odds are not in my favor.

***

"Now you know."

We stand in the warehouse, Candy and I. Before us is the statue of the man who'd been stalking her. Sam Marketti. Our plan had been simple. She texted him and said she wanted to meet, that she really needed money and was willing to do anything. Anything. He said it couldn't be at his house, and she said she knew a place. Gave him my address.

I was waiting.

Candy saw everything.

Now there's a choice to make. For her, for me. I've been in this position before. Depending on what she says, I either have a second statue or a new assistant.

"Medusa," she says. "It's really you. Not a fake name."

She's trembling. I fear what her answer will be.

"Yes. No one can ever know."

Her eyes grow a little wider. She understands what I mean. She's lived on the streets for a long time; people like her tend to catch on fast.

She takes a step. Toward me, not the exit.

"I'll do whatever you want." The second part of the sentence, 'to save my life,' goes unsaid.

"You work for me, now," I say. "No more drugs. No more dancing."

The next morning, she shows up at nine. Sober. Showered.

Two weeks later, she is in my bed.

***

It's Candy who comes up with the plan. She's always been good at that. How many *khoirinos*, pigs, has she helped me dispose of over the past three years?

What surprises me is that I didn't think of it first. The plan harkens back to our first kill together, Sam Marketti.

"It's pretty much the same idea," she says, after reminding me of that night. "Chrysaor is after you. All you need to do is be the bait and lure him in. It won't matter than he'll know it's a trap. He already thinks you can't harm him. Your eyes, your snakes, they don't work. He's got nothing to be afraid of."

Dawn points at the laptop, where Candy is smiling from the screen. "She's right. And he won't be scared of us, either. You said bullets and stuff won't hurt him, at least not much. Once he's inside, then you jump him."

It sounds simple, but there's a lot of work to do. Find a place. Get in touch with him somehow. And the part where I jump him. How will I do that without losing my head—again!—in the process?

First things first. The place. There's an abandoned warehouse I know. I almost bought when I first arrived in town, because of its location at the harbor. But the neighborhood is so bad that I figured none of my 'customers' would ever come near it. A quick search reveals it's still there and still empty. It's exactly what I need because it has offices upstairs and a catwalk that goes around the interior perimeter.

Perfect for someone with a good dose of immortality to leap from.

That just leaves getting him there.

"Leave that to me," Dawn says, and I have to admit her idea is as good as we're going to get. She'll simply go home, tell her parents that I'm hiding out at the warehouse until it's safe to leave town, and let them take care of the rest. "I'll say you kicked me out 'cause you don't trust me, and that I'd rather be rich than hide out in a dump with Candy anyhow."

Since we already know Candy's location is being watched, I tell her to stay put and I go to the warehouse to set the trap. I'll call her to join me when I'm in place. That way whoever's watching her will pass the word to Chrysaor, who will think we're getting ready to make our escape. I figure an hour for Dawn to get home and then anywhere from three to six hours for the Krugers to contact Chrysaor and him to show up.

That leaves me plenty of time to stop on the way and pick up a couple of things.

I arrive at the warehouse and scout the area. It's in the worst section of the docks, the kind of place where the only shipments going in or out are the illegal variety. Black market stuff. Drugs, stolen goods, weapons, even exotic animals.

I've utilized similar places in the past.

Everything seems deserted so I go inside. No lock on the door, which is not surprising. Criminals and the homeless don't let vacant buildings go to waste.

The smell that greets me is harsh, salty, and familiar. Stale sea water, aged body odor, and the sharp tang of old motor oil and crack. Although it's mid-afternoon, the inside of the building is sunset

dark, the only light coming through the dirt-crusted windows on the second floor. Deep shadows cover most of the main level, but the wide space is empty. No machines, no tables, no broken crates. Nothing to hide behind, which is good. When Chrysaor enters, he'll be fully exposed.

There are only three ways in and out. The door I came through, the big rollup bay doors where the trucks used to back in, and a single oversized bay door in the back that opens right to the water. If he decides to use anything but the front, I'll have plenty of warning and I'll adjust my position upstairs accordingly.

The only other doors downstairs lead to a couple of offices and bathrooms. I consider hiding in one of them instead, but then I decide to stick to my original plan. Attack from above. I have to kill him with my hands, and the only way I'll get that close is by completely surprising him. Land on his back. Then I can gouge his eyes, tear his throat out. Choke him. Whatever I have to do, I'll do it.

Funny. For more years than I can count, I wished for death. First when Athena's curse turned me into a weapon of war and then when Hera forced my revival.

Now I want to live. This strange world I've been thrown into has become home.

The staircase is on the other side of the warehouse, in a dim alcove. I shut the door behind me. Candy won't arrive for another hour or so. I'm halfway across the floor when one of the office doors opens and a voice speaks from the darkness.

"That's far enough, Mother."

***

Sirens blare. Another German airstrike is imminent.

Out in the streets, people stop what they're doing and run for the nearest shelter. Men, women, children, all of them know the drill by now. London has been under siege for months. Entire neighborhoods reduced to rubble. Thousands dead. But the Allies are giving as good as they're getting, and the politicians keep telling their citizens that the tide is turning, we will be victorious.

For me, the attacks have been a bit of a godsend. It's become part of my strategy to make sure I lure my victims to one of the disaster areas, where no one will notice a little more broken stone amidst the debris of buildings.

Tonight is such a night. My assistant, Rosalind, gave me the address. Told me Zachary Johnson would arrive at nine o'clock sharp, rain or shine, bombs or not. He is expecting to meet a man who will have a large sum of money with him, for the purchase of some rare—and illegally obtained—artwork. A service Johnson has provided for many of London's elite. Not something I would ordinarily care about, but Johnson also has a second habit, involving very young boys and girls, which has been brought to my attention by an associate, a certain Metropolitan Police officer from Westminster. He'd discovered what Johnson was up to and reported it, only to be told that he should turn a blind eye. It seemed that Johnson had some very important friends high up in the government. Very high.

So he'd come to me, having heard the rumors of how I was someone who could make bad people disappear.

Rosalind has been serving as my go-between with Johnson. It was she who uncovered his other vice, collecting stolen paintings and artifacts. He believed he was buying an

ancient Greek statue, but in reality she'd simply shown him a photograph of one of my previous victims, posed sans clothing.

I check my watch. It is three minutes after nine. I wonder if Johnson has been spooked by the location, or perhaps by the air raid sirens.

The sound of footsteps alerts me to someone approaching. I duck behind the ruins of a wall. I've set up two electric torches in the center of what used to be a hotel lobby. Because of the dim light, I need him to be close to me when his gaze meets mine.

"Medusa?" A woman's voice, whispering. Rosalind. Why is she here?

I stand up.

Johnson is with her, a long-barreled pistol in his hand. My children hiss and mentally shout a warning. I turn to run but his bullets are faster.

The gun's report is as loud as an explosion. Something like a hammer strikes me in the side. I start to fall and a second deafening blast is followed immediately by a blow to my back. I hit the ground hard and the agony in my body is momentarily overwhelmed by the pain in my face and head as they strike hard, jagged cement.

The ground shudders, or perhaps it's my body convulsing. Rosalind says they need to hurry and get to the shelter before the bombs fall.

Another shot.

All my pain stops.

Everything goes black.

This time, there are no voices in my head, no sensation of flying, no wakening on a battlefield. Just emptiness. Yet somehow I understand I'm not dead. It's like being suspended in space, and I wonder if perhaps this is what some religions call purgatory, the place between life and death.

Then there is light.

For the briefest moment, my heart soars! Could this be the end of my curse? Might I actually be free of my earthly body, ascending to the heavens?

Then I realize my eyes are open and I'm staring at the early morning sky through a hole in the building's roof.

I sit up. I remember everything from the previous night. The gunshots. Johnson.

Rosalind.

That skýla*!*

I stand and check myself. There are holes in my blouse but my flesh is intact. Not even scarred. I make my way back to my flat, where I shower and change. I have no idea why Rosalind would betray me, but I intend to find out.

I find her at her apartment, stuffing clothes into a valise. Next to it on the bed is a leather satchel filled with pound notes. She screams and falls to her knees when I burst into the room.

"Why?" I ask. I'm wearing my sunglasses but she keeps her face averted anyhow.

She points at the bag of money, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You see that? It's more than I could make in a bloody lifetime, working for you or anyone."

The rest of the story comes out between sobs. Somewhere between their second and third meeting, Johnson had discovered she wasn't actually a go-between for a smuggler. He'd threatened to kill her unless she spilled the beans. Which she did. Then he'd offered her all the money he'd been prepared to spend for the statue if she'd set me up.

Classic double-cross. And it worked.

Or at least it would have. She hadn't counted on Hera's magic. And frankly, neither had I. I'd never been injured like

that before; my recovery is as much a surprise to me as anyone.

Of course, I can't let her go unpunished. But she's not deserving of a statue. My children make sure to bite her arm, so the venom works slowly.

I wait until she stops breathing before I leave with the money.

There's still one more detail to take care of. This time I send the telegram myself, telling Johnson there really is stolen art and he can find it at the warehouse.

I'm halfway there when the Germans destroy the entire block and do my job for me.

***

I turn and see Chrysaor standing there, smiling like he's already won the war.

And maybe he has. But I won't go down without a fight.

"Who was it?" I ask. "Candy or Dawn?"

He shrugs. "The daughter, of course. Or maybe both. I don't know. She decided immortality was more important than loyalty."

I shake my head. "Immortality? You can't grant that." Was Dawn really that stupid?

His smile grows wider. "She seems to believe I can. I wonder where she got that idea?"

That answers my question.

"So now what?"

"Now I take your head. You'll spend the rest of eternity turning my enemies into stone. Help me build an empire the likes of which no one has ever seen. I hear you feel everything that happens, even after your body is dead. That's too bad. Wouldn't want to be you." He bursts into laughter and then

lifts his arm.

His golden sword flashes to life in his hand.

I run for the exit. What else can I do?

Five very large men with guns are blocking the door. Chrysaor came prepared. No problem. As I get closer, the familiar migraine starts. In the blink of an eye, his soldiers are nothing but man-shaped stone pillars.

Pillars that prevent my escape!

Damn my son, the brilliant military strategist. He sacrificed his men specifically for this reason. I can't get past them, so I try to climb. A powerful hand grips my jacket and pulls me back. Then I'm flying through the air. I land hard and roll, my children hissing and striking in a confused frenzy.

Chrysaor points at me.

"I'm going to enjoy this. The man who finally defeated Medusa. Did what Perseus and Athena couldn't. And you know why?"

He kicks me and something snaps inside with a sound like ice cracking. Agony explodes in my chest and for a moment I can't breathe. He raises his foot again and through multi-colored stars I see he's wearing heavy black combat boots.

His foot comes down and the bones in my left wrist shatter. I can't stop the scream that tears from my throat. The world goes dark and then returns. He steps away, still talking.

"Because I'm smarter than they are. That's why I was chosen."

"Chosen?" The word escapes before I know I'm going to speak.

"To be one of the guardians. Bellerophon,

Atalanta, and myself. When the gods decided they were through with Earth, they chose us."

He grabs the front of my shirt, lifts me off the floor as if I weigh nothing. I try to ask, but all that comes out is a gasp. He understands.

"To kill all the monsters, the tainted ones. The things like you."

I'm flying again. This time I have no control, I hit and slide.

"You'd be surprised how many of them there are. Or were. Most are gone now. I've lost count of how many I've dispatched."

He's right there hovering over me. There's a flash of golden light.

No, not—

My left hand is no longer crushed. It's gone.

What I thought earlier was agony was a mere tickle compared to losing my hand. My screams echo off the dusty walls. The roasting meat smell of burnt flesh fills my nose. His sword is like fire and steel in one, cauterizing skin and bone as it passes through.

I sense him moving behind me. This will be it. I can't go out this way. Even though I know I have no chance of surviving, I will not give in. Summoning the last of my strength, I roll to the side, get to my feet, and run for the only possible escape. The office he had hidden in. I'm sure he has more men in the back guarding the bay doors that lead to the water, but the office will have a window. If I can get through…

Laughter behind me spurs me on. I caught him by surprise, but he's faster than me. I hear his

footsteps pound the cement as he closes the gap. I'm through the door and there's the window. Small, but I can fit through. Of course, it's closed. I don't care. Cuts will heal.

There's a sense of déjà vu as I throw myself at it, arms first like I'm diving into a pool. Windows have become my common mode of escape. Glass shatters and I see the cracked and potholed parking lot outside. My head follows my arms and—

I stop.

Strong fingers grip my ankle, pull me back. Glass slices through cloth and flesh. Jagged shards spear my breasts, my stomach. I scream. I'm being flayed alive.

I'm on the floor again. Chrysaor stands over me, his sword illuminating the small room.

"Son defeats mother. A classic Greek tale for modern times. I can't wait to tell them. This will surely earn me a place in Olympus."

Them? Olympus?

He lowers the sword so the point touches my chest. Smoke rises up and the fiery pain overwhelms that of my wounds.

"First I will remove your head. Then I will burn your body so the two can never join again and—"

He stops as the glow around his sword flickers, then fades.

The sword vanishes.

"What—?" He lifts his hand as if his weapon might merely be invisible. Lines of black are spreading from his fingers, like black vines advancing up his hand.

In that moment, everything becomes crystal clear

for me.

The legends were right, but not complete. The touch of an immortal can block his power, but this is something more. It happened when his sword touched my blood.

The blood of his mother.

His *immortal* mother.

He was birthed from me, my body, my blood. And that is his weakness!

I don't even bother to sit up. With my remaining hand, I scoop warm liquid from my wounds and throw it at him. I'm so weak that most of it doesn't reach. A few drops land, though, and wherever they touch his flesh, more of those black lines begin to form under his skin. It's like poison, spreading outward, carried by his own veins.

Chrysaor shakes his head and steps back.

"What's happening? What have you done?"

I somehow manage to get to my knees. I feel like I'm seconds away from losing consciousness, but I fight it off.

"Born of my blood, die of my blood," I say, and I grab his arm. Before he can shake me off, I pull myself up his body. I wrap my injured arm around his neck and press myself against him. I kiss his cheek with my bloody lips.

He falls over, bringing me with him.

The dark lines cover most of his exposed skin now, and he's having trouble breathing.

He's dying.

Now I'm the one smiling, but my triumph is short-lived as I remember his words.

"I can't wait to tell the others. This will surely earn me a

place in Olympus."

"Who are them?" I ask, shaking him. "The other guardians? Someone else? Tell me! Who sent you? Where are they?"

"They hate you," he whispers. "But they were afraid. I wasn't. They should've warned me. Should've…"

Black liquid bubbles over his lips. His eyes close and he falls sideways onto the floor.

I curse the gods. If only he'd—

My thought fades as the room spins around me. My own blood loss has gotten too great.

Once again, I sink into darkness.

***

There is a dead man on the ground before me.

I want to cry.

He's dead because of me. Although that is not exactly true. It was my babies. They bit him when he tried to touch me in my bad place. It happened while I was picking flowers in the field behind our house. He said he was on his way to see my mother. At first he was nice.

Then he wasn't.

After it happened, I ran home and told my sisters. They got my mother. I took them to where the body was.

Mother recognized him from town. She told me I did nothing wrong, but she looked worried. Then she said the three of us should wait there while she went to speak with the local authority, the demarch.

"Do not cry, sister," says Stheno. Euryale echoes her. They remind me he was a bad man and bad men deserve to die. I want to listen, because they are older and wiser than I. But my heart still feels pain. I took a life.

In that moment, I realize I've become what the townspeople call us, although not to our faces. Teras.

Monsters.

When my mother returns with the demarch, an elder man with white hair and matching beard, he looks at us, at the man I've killed, and then to my mother.

"I find it difficult to understand. Portos was always an outstanding citizen."

"He often made lewd comments to me when I was alone," Mother says.

"He followed me all through town one day," Stheno says, an angry cast to her eyes. Her children coil and hiss.

"He touched my arm once," says Euryale. "And asked me if I wanted to go with him to get sweets. I ran away."

I glance from one family member to another. I am young, but not so young to realize they are lying for me. Why?

The demarch nods slowly. "Well, then justice has been served. I will arrange for his return to town, so that his family can mourn him." He looks directly at mother. "It would be best if for the next while, you and your girls keep to yourselves. I will have supplies sent to you."

Mother agrees, and takes us home. When we are safe inside, I ask her.

"Why did you all do that?"

"We know you did not lie, Medusa. Why should you be punished for defending yourself? As you get older, you will learn that sometimes life does not seem fair, but you must trust yourself and always do what is right and just. We are not monsters. The gods created us to serve a purpose, even if we do not always like it. If you had not killed him, he would have hurt you. And other children. Remember that."

I went to my room, where my sisters hugged me. But although we spoke, my mind kept repeating the same things

over and over.

I am not a monster.

I have a purpose.

Bad people should die.

***

I wake to dim light seeping in through the dirty windows and holes in the ceiling. The cement floor is cold beneath me. I sit up with a groan.

Returning from death is beginning to be a more common occurrence than I'd like.

My body is achy and stiff, but my wounds are almost completely healed. I cannot say the same for Chrysaor. There is little left of him except his bones, which lie in a puddle of black ooze. My car is still outside where I left it, and I wonder if Candy ever showed or if she was part of Dawn's double-cross.

I'll find out soon enough.

I stop at the safe house. It's empty. So are the ones Candy and Dawn had been staying at.

As my mother, Ceto, was fond of saying whenever the gods made a public announcement, the air stinks of deceit.

***

Things at the Kruger's house are very different from the last time I was here.

There are men with guns at the security gate. I assume there are more at a security station somewhere within the house, but I don't intend to interact with them. I don't need to.

A funny thing about the power Athena gifted me with.

It works fine through cameras. Like the ones at the gate. All I have to do is look up.

The two men in the booth are already taken care of.

I encounter a few more on my way up the drive. The first pair I solidify in their tracks.

The next group emerges from behind some hedges, guns trained on me. I raise my arms in surrender and allow them to approach close enough to grab me.

More than close enough for my children to strike.

By the time I reach the main house, there are at least seven dead. Probably more. Either Evan Kruger has been woefully incompetent about warning his men about my abilities or he purposely didn't tell them.

I'm guessing the latter is the truth, and that they have orders not to harm me.

Can't ruin the merchandise, after all. Much like Chrysaor, he's obviously happy to sacrifice how ever many people it takes in order to obtain his prize.

I wonder what my head will go for on the open market?

I wonder how much more than that Kruger is willing to pay for his life?

Three more die on the steps. One of them manages to put a bullet in me. It hurts, but compared having your hand cut off or your belly sliced open, it's not enough to stop me. I continue on through the house. The place is huge, but I don't worry about the rooms on the first floor. The smell of burnt wood and cloth still lingers in the air.

If the Krugers are here—and I'm betting they

are, else the guards wouldn't be—they're going to be upstairs. Hiding or preparing to leave. Hopefully not in some kind of safe room, which would prevent me from witnessing their deaths.

Four more guards end up as statues in a wide hallway. After that, no one bothers me. I go from room to room, throwing open doors. Bedrooms, bathrooms. Studies. An office with a desk the size of a small car. Several of the drawers are open and empty. A miniature library with old-fashioned leather wing-back chairs, so similar to the ones I sat in during my time in London before the great war that I'm momentarily taken back in time.

That's when I hear it.

A solitary bump somewhere above me. I run for the stairs. Something I never thought to ask Dawn or Candy when we planned the original escape from the mansion was the layout of the upper levels. I should have guessed the main bedroom would be on the third floor.

I burst into a bedroom expansive enough to fit some of the apartments I've lived in. Evan Kruger and his wife are standing by the bed. They each have a large briefcase. Behind them is an open wall safe. I smile to myself. My hunch was correct. Evan thought like every rich and powerful person I've ever met. I'd wager my own considerable savings that those briefcases hold spare cash, maybe some gold, and handfuls of important—and possibly incriminating—papers, along with passports and jewelry.

Evan also has a pistol in his other hand, but he has to know by now it won't stop me. Maybe he

hopes it will slow me enough that they can get past me.

I don't intend to let that happen.

"Don't do it," I say, as Kruger raises the gun. My own hand is at my face, ready to remove my sunglasses. "You've got a chance to live."

Kruger pauses. His hand is shaking. I can almost hear him debating whether or not to believe me.

"Your guards are dead. So is your friend the general. My son. I don't need to spill more blood."

"What do you want?"

What I want is to see them in pieces. My children are coiled and trembling, their fury fueling the red rage that threatens to overwhelm me. But I control it.

"Those." I point to the briefcases. "Give them both to me and we're even. It will make up for the trouble you've caused me. The pain. I'll use it to leave the city, start over somewhere new." I don't need his money, but he doesn't know that. Besides, he owes me.

He looks at his wife. She shakes her head, probably thinking about all the collector jewelry she's holding. His eyes narrow and he whispers something to her, his words a sharp hiss that reminds me of my own children.

"Fine," she says, and throws the suitcase on the floor about halfway between us. Kruger does the same.

"Don't move." I approach the cases slowly, keeping my eyes on the gun. At this short distance, a well-placed shot could put me down long enough for them to escape. With one foot, I kick the

attachés back closer to me. They're heavy enough that it takes two tries for each.

I stare at them and my children emerge from my curls, weaving and hissing, a living crown of death. The Krugers shrink back but the oversized bed blocks further retreat.

"You thought to sell me." My voice is hard, cold. "Sentence me to an eternity of pain. Just like Perseus. Just like Athena. And yet here I am. You, weak mortals, thought to succeed where the very gods failed. Turning you to stone is too good for you. I want you to feel the pain you intended for me."

With a scream, I throw myself at them. I grab their clothes. Evan forgets the gun and tries to push me away, but my children are faster. They lash out, delivering deadly bites to necks, faces, arms. I step away. Now Kruger tries to raise the pistol but it's too late. His arm is already too weak. The muscles spasming as their racing hearts carry venom through their bodies.

Their deaths will be agonizing.

I laugh when the convulsions begin. Watch as the blood runs from their eyes and noses. Their breathing speeds up until they are hyperventilating, and then slows as nerves cease to function.

When it is over, I carry the cases to my car. There will be no statues of the Krugers for my collection. A shame. They would have looked so nice out in the garden.

But I don't leave. I have a hunch. And I've learned to listen to them.

I go down into the basement, down to the room

where I was held prisoner. Where Evan Kruger removed my head from my body.

Where Candy and Dawn restored me, gave me back my life.

They are there, both of them. Arms wrapped around each other. Shaking with fear.

"You're alive," Candy says. "I… I thought you were dead. I saw you, your body was…"

Her voice trails off. I nod.

"You left me there."

"We didn't know what to do. With you gone, we had nothing. We hid here, we were going to run away tonight."

"With my money." I indicate the bags on the floor, cash and valuables taken from my apartment, from the safe houses. All the places Candy knew about.

"If I thought there was any chance you were alive, we would've helped."

I wonder if she actually believes herself.

She cannot help me with what comes next. Thanks to Chrysaor—and Hera, whom I no longer despise—I have a new goal now.

Vengeance.

Not for others, but for myself.

But in the meantime, small victories can be almost as satisfying.

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AUGUST 17, 2026

> SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA — Police continue the search for two women wanted in connection with

> the murders of billionaire philanthropists Evan and Heather Kruger, whose bodies were discovered last week in the bedroom of their Palo Alto home. Authorities said the couple died from multiple snakebites, although the species has not yet been identified and no reptiles were recovered at the scene.
>
> The suspects, identified as Candy Rubin and Dawn Kruger, the Krugers' daughter, have been missing since a suspicious fire broke out at the estate several days prior to the killings. Law enforcement officials said a nationwide search is underway and warned the women are believed to be armed and…

***

The park is beautiful in the morning. Candy's and Dawn's statues look right at home among the rose bushes and laurel trees. I doubt Candy would appreciate the irony of them spending the next hundred years or so staring at each other, but I do. Despite their notoriety, no one will ever recognize them. I've made sure of that with some hammer and chisel adjustments.

As for all the stone figures at the Kruger's mansion, I'll let that be a mystery for the police. They can spend their days trying to figure out where all the rubble came from, rather than looking for me.

Today is my last day in San Francisco. It's time to move on again. I'm thinking a return to Europe might be in order. Italy, perhaps. Or maybe Spain. Something closer to Greece than North America.

Chrysaor said there were other demigods on Earth. Bellerophon and Atalanta. Charged with killing any inhumans. Monsters like me. And that eliminating me would enable him to reach Olympus and become a true god.

Which means I can do it. Like Dionysus.

Apotheosis.

"They hate you. But they were afraid."

His last words hinted at someone more powerful than he being responsible for putting a price on my head. One of the gods? Athena, perhaps? It would be her style to not only have someone do her dirty work for her, but use my own offspring. Or perhaps it was Perseus, afraid that a second encounter with me would not end well for him.

I have a lot of research to do. There were, or are, more gods and demigods than the ancient chroniclers knew, each with their own special talents. And more than a few of them who probably want me dead. But now I know the secret.

I'm just as powerful as they are.

I will find them. And I will get the answers I need before I add them to my statuary.

Then I will be the one who ascends to Olympus, as Hera intended. And my enemies there will get no mercy from me. To Hades with them! They shall receive exactly what they deserve. Not just for taking my life. For what came before. And after.

Do you hear me, Perseus? Athena? Poseidon?

The monster you created is coming home.

About the Author



JG Faherty is the author of 25 books, 4 collections, and more than 85 short stories. Born and raised in New York's haunted Hudson Valley and now a resident of North Carolina's equally haunted Cape Fear region, he writes adult and YA horror, science fiction, dark fantasy, and paranormal romance, and his works range from quiet, dark suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He's been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award (twice) and ITW Thriller Award, and is proud to be a relative of Mary Shelley. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, www.instagram.com/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

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