~~Medusa~~

“So, what do you think?” Darian said. He posed for them, a brown cloak wrapped over his body, dirty edges and blotches of stains on it.

Chimera grunted, but Medusa smiled and slithered around him.

“You look charming.”

“I’m not supposed to look charming! I’m supposed to look forgettable.” He adjusted the horrible garb, but no matter how he wore it, his great smile and young face showed through.

“You’ll have to hide your face then.” She reached for his shoulders, and pulled the cloak over his head until it was all buried in shadow. “Besides, you’ll want to hide your mark.”

He nodded, and reached up to adjust the hood while scratching the V etched on his forehead.

“This will be tricky,” he said. “A bad breeze or if I trip or something, someone will see. They’ll recognize me.”

“The whole city will recognize you?”

“Yeah, yeah they would.”

Medusa tried to whistle, but failed horribly. A hundred years of trying, a hundred years of no whistling. She missed it.

She slithered up behind her man, hooked her arms over his shoulders, rested her chin on one of them, and looked out over the valley below them. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“No, but I have to save Pegasus. Besides, you don’t want to talk to Athena? To at least say something to her?”

“I… I don’t know what I would say.”

Darian reached up to hold her hands where they met on his sternum. “It’ll come to you when you meet her. And if I rub off on you at all before then, you’ll punch her too.”

She giggled into his ear, and rubbed their cheeks together while her hair snuggled into his. “You didn’t punch the merchant you stole this blanket from.”

“He seemed innocent enough, dumb enough. So you were watching, eh? Told you two to stay out of sight, or I’d have to kill him so he didn’t tell anyone you were on the mainland.”

“I stayed hidden!” She slithered around in front of him, keeping her hands on his chest throughout the motion. “I have hunted boar and other animals for a hundred years, I’ll have you know.” Silly man, always forgetting.

He sighed, and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” His hand around hers tightened, squeezed, and tugged on them to bring her closer. Just when she thought he might look a little guilty for underestimating her, he flashed his perfect hero’s smile, and kissed her.

She giggled again, wrapped her arms around him, and squeezed him all the tighter.

Below them, the valley spread out over the Argolic Gulf. The hill they stood upon let them see out over the thumb of the sea and to the harbors of Tiryns, Argos, and even as far as Eion, its docks specs on the horizon. To reach Tiryns, Darian would have to walk around Argos and make his way into Tiryns on foot. With whatever they were hunting being in Tiryns, they had to suspect someone knew he was coming. And that made her stomach want to hurl the deer she ate a day ago.

“Ok, your helmet is in your bag, and it’s the only thing in here. Make sure you get a moment to put it on if things go badly, and just throw the bag away.” She let go of him, slithered over to the bags, and picked his up. She opened it up, checked to see if his helmet was in there, checked again, and checked again, before handing it to her lover. “And some apples too! If you get hungry. And a little dried meat, if you get hungry again. And—”

“Medusa.”

“Make sure you keep your sword and shield hidden inside your cloak. You’ll have to hunch over when you walk to hide the shape of your armor — you are not taking off your armor! You can’t fit your spear, so Chimera will hold onto it, but—”

“Medusa.”

“Tiryns is still a good five or six miles from here. Pace yourself, it’ll be a while before you get there dressed like this, and you’ll need your energy for whatever they may—”

“Medusa.” He reached out for her hands, and grabbed them. She pulled away, but he didn’t let go. “Come on, look at me.”

She lowered her head and looked at the ground instead.

Darian raised a hand to touch her chin, and he lifted it to look at her. “I’m just an old man in a raggedy old cloak.” The small warrior put some gravel and cracks in his voice, and the impression made Medusa chuckle. “No theatrics, no heroics. I figure out what’s going on, and then I come back.”

“You better! You better come back. We haven’t spent a single night apart since we met! And I… I can’t… go back to….”

“Hey, hey.” He kissed her knuckles, and winked at her. “I’ll be back tomorrow night at the latest. And if I’m not, you and Chimera can march into the city and tear it down looking for me.”

“We will!” Images of Darian, dead by the sword in the streets of Tiryns sparked heat and bile in Medusa’s chest. She would do anything to get him back, anything! “Anything!” She squeezed his hands and brought them close.

He blinked, but after a moment he smiled, squeezed her fingers again, and let go. “Don’t worry. I’ve walked these streets for years. I know every inch of that city. And I got you waiting for me here. I’ll be back.”

When his fingers slipped from hers, she squeezed at the air where they were. Empty. She almost reached for him, fingers aching to grab him and pin him down and keep him away from the city. Coil around him, protect him, and keep him all for herself.

She lowered her hands. “Please be careful.”

“I will.”

With a long, heavy sigh, Darian took a deep breath, smiled at her, and walked down the hill toward the road.

Medusa opened her mouth, but blocked her lips with her fingers. She wanted to say something, something stupid, something silly and childish and… and she couldn’t even think it. So she watched the cloaked warrior walk down the hill.

He looked over his shoulder to her from a distance, and waved. She raised her hand high and waved back with far too much enthusiasm. But Darian blew her a kiss, and she almost squealed.

A minute later, he was a fading spec on the long road.

“You two reek of love.” Chimera snorted, cracked his neck, and stepped down the other side of the hill they were on. While the North East lead to Argos and Tiryns, the South West was a thick forest patch nested along a curved cliff face. There was no cave to hide in, but the trees would hide them well enough.

Medusa slithered after him. “Love?” She brought her hands up to her cheeks and held her blushing face. “We’ve only known each other for several weeks!”

Chimera looked over his shoulder at her. “How?”

“How?” Medusa blinked at him. The giant was asking her how they met? Was he into gossip too? She thought of Pinna, and smiled. “He was on a boat and being shipped to Athens to be sold as a slave. A giant sea creature attacked it, and he was marooned on my island. He saved me from some warriors trying to kill me, and… and we just….” Fell in love?

“That is a very large stroke of luck.”

With a loud groan, the hulking beast lowered himself to the ground, and sat cross-legged. He grabbed a branch from the ground, and chewed on it like a blade of grass. With the lion pelt dangling behind his neck, he looked like any human, except naked but for a loincloth, and fangs. Of course, once she got close to him, the difference in their sizes was obvious. She may have had a thirty-foot snake body, but her human half was human, and Chimera’s titanic frame dwarfed her considerably.

When she coiled next to him in the grass, she had to look up to talk to him.

“Stroke of luck? You… think he lied?”

“No. Bellerophontes is trustworthy. It is the Fates I fear have their hand in such luck.”

“The Fates? They said they hadn’t been following Darian for some time.”

“Do you believe them?”

“I….” She stared down at the grass and dirt. If they had been following Darian and manipulating his life, then maybe their meeting was their doing? “Maybe… maybe we met because they wanted us to?”

The beast nodded.

She frowned. “But, but… but I….” Gods damn them. She grabbed her head and shook it. “What if we love each other, but it’s only because the Fates make us?”

“I do not think the Fates have that power.” Chimera shrugged, leaned back, and hooked his fingers behind his head. “And if they do, would it matter? You are happy, are you not?”

“I… I am!” She giggled and slithered a little closer to Chimera. He wasn’t so bad, sometimes. “I am. He’s so… dangerous, and deadly, but when he’s alone with me, he’s kind, and sweet, and loving, and—”

“He feels the same way.” Chimera dismissed the weight of his statement with a wave of his hand before putting it behind his head again. “And from what I heard the night before, you both enjoy each other’s touch greatly.”

“You! You… you big oaf!” She put her hands against him and pushed him. Without her snake length anchored proper, all her pushing did was make her fall over and away from the giant. “That’s private!”

The Chimera managed the smallest smirk, but made no other movements. A wall of stone.

“So… do you think… Darian will be ok?” She laid herself along her inner coil and started to trace lines in the dirt and forest floor.

“Bellerophontes — Darian, is a great warrior, and blessed by the Fates with strong life. He will survive.”

“Yeah, but, it’s not just him surviving I’m worried about,” she said. The Chimera opened his eye closest to her and quirked his brow. She looked up to him, and nodded. “He… he just gets so angry. He thinks people are horrible, and… and sometimes I agree with him. That doesn’t mean they should all die though! And I’m worried if he has to deal with the king, and he probably will to find this mysterious thing, that he’ll… drown the city in blood.”

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~~Darian~~

He already missed her.

The thought made him laugh. How long had it been since he’d even seen Philonoe? Over a year. He didn’t miss her a bit. But Medusa? Only a mile between them and he was tempted to run back just so he could hear her laugh again.

He hugged the cloak tight around him. It smelled old, of dirt and animal shit. Perfect. Snug over his head and dragging on the ground, every bit of his armor, sword and shield, all of it was hidden. He wore his pack over his cloak; he’d have to throw off the entire ensemble if he got into a fight.

No fighting. No killing. Repeat it Darian. You’re not going to kill Proetus or his conniving bitch of a wife. That’s not what this is about.

“But then, I don’t even know what the fuck I’m looking for. The only recourse I have is to either ask Proetus by force about some mysterious ‘thing’ or ‘person’ he may or may not be holding, or stumble upon it by accident.” Not the best plan, but the only plan. He couldn’t bring Chimera with him into the city to sniff out whatever it was, not unless he wanted every guard on their ass.

He considered the possibility for a moment. It’d be a great battle, him and Chimera against waves of guards, many of whom were old friends. Would they sympathize with him? Or did they know what Proetus had done?

Bile rose in his throat, and he gritted his teeth. No fighting. No killing.

Another mile down the road and he started to walk past other people. They treated him about as well as expected, with a few feet of space from the smell, and avoiding looking directly at him. He looked like a homeless beggar after all, and in Greece, that made him good as dead. Perfect.

He went around Argos along one of the roads. That was simple enough; no one cared about a wandering beggar. It was when he started to approach the familiar roads of Tiryns that his heart started to beat faster in his chest. Wagons. Donkeys. Gates. Columns of white and homes of stone. The chatter of fishermen, farmers, butchers, bakers, dressmakers and guards started to get louder. He’d walked these streets in the colors of Tiryns armor before. Walked them, watched over them, guarded them, and fathered them.

He spit on the ground.

As the streets converged, winding paths and twisting ways between temples and buildings grew closer and closer. The smell of cooking food, manure, and people filled the air. All along the road between the old homes, young and old littered its pools of shade and went about their business. He looked to his left, where Argonar would be cooking fish. He was, and Darian smirked under his hood. Argonar still owed him some coin, but it wasn’t enough for the fat fellow to owe him a huge favor like assisting him now. Pamana, an elderly woman with crooked fingers and a long nose, was weaving clothes in dull whites. She owed him too, but not enough to risk her life.

He stepped further into the city. The well-tread ground lead under an archway, tall and thick between two flat buildings, before it opened up into the agora. In the middle of the day, the open space was filled with people. Dozens, hundreds of people. Men carried around racks of fish and buckets of food. Women carried bags of clothes, or children. Chitons of different colors — mostly white — were all he could see in any direction. Over their heads, the gold-colored roofs of nearby temples and archways circled them. They casted shade for the wandering people, many held chatting groups, some others held stalls where people sold the finer wares. Jewelry, of course, was visited only by the fanciest men and women, the ones with slaves following them around, wearing only loincloths.

Darian breathed the air deep. He recognized so many of the faces. When they approached, he was quick to hide his eyes under the hood of his cloak, but he took peaks at them as they walked by. Nalla, a woman he’d saved from thieves. Pallus, a man he’d taught to fire a bow so he could go hunting. Kargos, a young kid — well, young man now — he’d caught spying on a couple enjoying their private time.

And they’d all turned against him the moment Zeus shot him out of the sky.

Darian growled, a weird animal sound, and he brought a hand up to his mouth when he faked a cough. He shook his head a few times until the white blur in his vision was gone, and carried on.

Statues of the gods lined a wide stairway that lead onto a huge platform of stone floor and a great arch. Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Hestia and Demeter. The six children of Cronus and Rhea. Looking at them made Darian’s teeth grind, and he had to look away. Look at the ground, better to look at the ground.

Upon the platform, it was the rich who bathed in the daylight and the attentions of their servants. Some of them were even fat with the fruit of their money. Darian hadn’t liked them when he lived here, let alone now, but at least it wasn’t new hate. He walked past them like he belonged, which he didn’t of course. What was a beggar doing up with the rich? Nearby guards frowned at him as he came closer to them. He smiled under his cloak, and kept walking.

Another stairway between two of the greater temples. Columns of marble as thick as the greatest trees, dozens of them, holding up enough stone to hold hundreds of worshipers, workers, and the riches of their betters. Within the shadows of their roofs, men in fancy himations and chitons bargained over coins and baubles. Others argued over politics. Some even argued over food supplies, a step up from the typical garbage the rich argued over. Darian grinned, and stepped into the building through one of the open pathways between the humongous pillars.

And disappeared into the shadows.

One of the pathways behind the temples, untouched by guard or servant, and unknown by the rest, was easy enough to step into. No one cared about some beggar wandering the streets as long as he didn’t make a ruckus. The pathway lead nowhere, stopping at a wall of stone that blocked off a harsh fall into the agora he’d just left. But, with some sure footing, he braced against against the two walls beside him, and inched his way up like a spider.

He was light, even in his armor; climbing up the buildings with arms and legs out at his side was easy. And of course the Fates had blessed him with inhuman strength, so once he was up to the top of one of the temples, he only had to grip its edge with one hand to pull himself over and onto it. For a moment, he considered thanking them for his demi-god strength and healing, but then, none of this insanity would have happened if they had never found him in the first place. It was a bad deal.

Grumbling, he crouched low and crawled along the roofs. He was forty feet up, but that didn’t mean someone couldn’t see him if they got lucky, so he kept to a squatting crawl, and worked toward the acropolis.

Typical of kings, the palace was built upon the raised land, and a winding road with the occasional stairway and archway lead from the palace gate down to the city. While anyone could walk up the road, it stopped at the gates of the palace, and a beggar with no pass or business would not be allowed into its walls. But, the larger temples, the ones he was crossing over the rooftops of, drew near the cliff face of the small mountain the palace sat upon. It took time, and having to do it at a crawl made time slow to a crawl with him, but he grew closer to the mountain, and closer. One building, and another, and another. He peaked down to watch some of the traffic of people walk by, jars of water on the servant’s heads, and different colors of tunics among the rich walking between the greater temples.

For a moment, he thought he was on the walls of the palace again, and he was watching the people come and go. His citizens to protect, to guard. A lifetime ago.

An hour later, he was in the shadow of the cliff. He pressed his body against it, dug his fingers into the hard rock and random sprouts of bush, and started climbing. He knew the path, a path only he had ever found or used. He was a good guard captain, and an adventure-seeking fool. Climbing the cliffs around the palace in search of secret paths? Perfect way to spend a day off.

The climb moved him between a crevice in the mountain. Beneath him was a hard drop, and below the cliff was nothing but flat, smooth rock; the only way to get into the crevice was from the rooftops. He jammed his sandals into some grooves, cracked his knuckles, and started climbing upward.

He still didn’t know exactly what he was going to do. Talk to Proetus? He couldn’t talk to Stheneboea, she’d try to trick him and get him killed. Proetus though, maybe he could talk to him. Maybe.

It was a big maybe.

After a while, a long while, he found the ledge of the clifftop. He vaulted up, only to be greeted by the walls that surrounded the palace. There were no back doors or secret passageways through a palace wall, but there were unguarded areas, and he knew them all. With a snicker, he jumped up, and found a groove cut into the stone wall. A groove he’d made long ago, when he was guard captain.

How often people underestimated him. It wasn’t until he’d defeated the Chimera that people started taking the little warrior seriously. Their loss.

He had to go fast. Guards walked the walls, and it wouldn’t be long before someone did spot him by accident. But in less than a minute, he scaled the tall wall and poked his head up just enough to see the guards. They weren’t looking in his direction, they weren’t even patrolling. Two of them stood near with eyes cast out to gaze over the road down to the city, spears holding their weight, and they were chatting. Security had grown lax since he’d moved on.

He rolled over the wall, onto the stone balcony, and off. No time to consider. He knew where he was landing, and quiet as a feather, he fell to his sandals and rolled back. A second later, he was hidden in the shadow of a raised stairway that lead into the grand center of the palace. Above and beside him were its colossal pillars of marble, and they stood upon walls of thick stone, all more than enough to hide him from sight between them and the outer wall.

Breathing deep, he slid off his pack, took a bite of its dried meat, and set it aside in the corner. Next, he took his helmet from the bag, and set it aside, before taking off his cloak and jamming it into the bag. He reached for his helmet again, but before he put it on, he looked at it. A beautiful helmet, meant to stand out, meant to be a mark of a legend, a hero in the tides of battle and blood. The glorious white crest would stand out so well against the red of his conquests.

The thoughts sickened him. The fact they also exhilarated him enraged him

He put on the helmet. Just as he calculated, the sun was starting to set. Shadows were long, heavy, and everyone in the palace was starting to head home. The servants would remain to clean up the messes of the king, and the guards would remain, switching shifts and walking the palace halls by candlelight. He knew where the servants slept, he knew where the guards walked. He knew this place all too well.

Biting into the dried meat again, he thought of Medusa. The fact she’d packed him food made him chuckle. Her sweet smile, her snake eyes and their innocent gazes, her voice when she giggled. She was such a nice woman. Why wasn’t she like him? Why didn’t she want revenge? He thought maybe a hundred years of solitude had broken her, but she was anything but broken. She was just… stronger than him. The sooner he could get back to her, the better.

He stuck to the shadows, and they were there to guide him. He knew where they’d be, where they always were. He knew how they’d behave this time in the evening, this time of the year. With his back to the walls, he sneaked toward the back of the palace, and pulled himself up onto the raised platform of the outer hallways. Sticking between the columns and behind them, the candlelight did not reach him, and as long as he was careful, his sandals were silent.

“That Amazon woman is scary.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Every time she looks at me, I think she’s going to stab me.”

A couple of servants walked by, jars on their heads held up with one hand, a basket of clothes held to the hip with the other.

Amazon? What was an Amazon doing in Tiryns? After what King Iobates did, he couldn’t picture an Amazon working for Proetus. The memory of them sent a shiver up his spine. The servant’s wariness was not unfounded, but unless there was an army of Amazons, Darian could handle her. He didn’t want to, but if it came to it.

His journey took him between two great temples, and these he could not climb. The walls were smooth, the columns wide, dozens of feet tall, and the archway above them was a grand spectacle of solid mass. So he kept low, used the vast columns to block sight, and inched his way around them with painful slowness.

“The queen is in her private quarters again.”

“Again?”

“She took three guards and her new Amazon friend this time.”

“Weird.”

A couple of guards, Artus and Romal if he guessed their voices right, walked by the columns. The idiots weren’t supposed to be chatting when on night patrol. For a second, he considered punishing them, until he snapped back to reality, and stifled a chuckle. When they were gone, he ducked into the hallway, and through the first door on his left. The private wing of the king and queen consort.

Inside, the halls were simple, long hallways of smooth wall with the occasional single candle to light some of the darkness. He could see better than most in the dark, but now that the sun had fallen behind the walls of the palace, there was only the blackness of impending night. Candlelight and noise were all he had to go by, and his memory of the hallways.

Proetus would be coming to bed soon, with guards to stand watch, but not yet. Prowling, Darian worked his way down the dark hall, found the king’s room, and stepped into the large, luxurious chamber. Vases with epic stories, candles pre-lit by servants, and walls covered in drapes of Eastern silk. All a beautiful display of wealth and greed. How had he not noticed it before? Coming from a fisherman’s life, to this reckless spending on selfish and needless luxuries, it’d seemed like Elysium to him. Now it all made his insides churn.

He drifted around the room, and touched the various displays with his fingertips. He owed Proetus much. The king had given him a new life, away from humble beginnings. The king had betrayed him and tried to have his father-in-law kill him, because he’d sooner listen to his whore wife than his own guard captain. How much of that had been because of the Fates, or because humans were despicable creatures? Both?

Darian rolled his eyes, stepped aside, got behind one of the drapes, and waited. With any luck, he’d only have to stand there for the next twenty-four hours.

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~~Otrera~~

The small Amazon warrior leaned back against the wall, and waited.

The queen was making a lot of noise, and if Otrera wasn’t seeing her orgasms with her own eyes, she would be sure the queen was faking it. But the curvy creature of lies and deceit was trembling, mewling, and leaking all too real fluids. Her heavy breasts jiggled with her bouncing movements, and her hands gripped the cocks on either side of her. Despite her enthusiastic bucking, she not only continued to stroke the two men beside her, but she leaned over to each of them, and sucked on their lengths in perfect rhythm. For the queen, it was a dance, to control three men and bathe in the sexuality of it — and the sin and taboo of her affair — while bringing herself to orgasmic bliss.

She didn’t need to say any of it, Otrera could see it all on the bitch’s face.

The Amazon ignored the growing heat in her body. She was there to kill Bellerophontes, not indulge this queen her juvenile acts of defiance. But, there was no harm in watching the three handsome men and the beautiful, soft queen enjoying themselves, was there? Conflicted, definitely. Still, she let herself indulge just a little, and watched as Stheneboea leaned in, and sucked one of the men while groaning onto his member. Her hand on his length grew faster, earning moans from the guard, until the man reached out to hold the queen’s shoulders for balance while he came inside her mouth.

And then she repeated it for the other guard. A grin was on her face, and it only brightened when she opened her eyes to look at Otrera while she drank the second man’s cum. Then, the queen slipped herself off of the guard on the bed, and she reached down to line his member up to her mouth. Otrera could see the glistening wetness of the queen’s fluids on his cock and abdomen. The third man came in mere moments when Stheneboea eased her mouth down the whole of his shaft until her lips found the base of him. And she did not stop looking at Otrera while she drank the third man dry.

Otrera frowned and looked away. She had to give it to the queen, she had talent, and flair. A demon in the sheets.

With the three guards drained and panting with blissful exhaustion, Stheneboea got up off the bed, and put her chiton back on. Otrera caught glimpses of the trickling juices along the queen’s thighs, all her own; she probably drank the men to hide any evidence.

“And now my dear, I go to make sweet love to my loving husband. Be careful my darlings!” the queen consort said to her satisfied trio of men. “You’re supposed to be on duty after all.”

They chuckled. The queen chuckled. Otrera groaned.

With a deep breath that reeked of sexual afterglow, the queen needlessly dusted off her beautiful garb, and stepped back out into the hallway. Otrera followed.

“You realize that you’re risking your life here?”

“Silly girl, a few guards away from their posts for an hour is hardly an exploitable hole in our defense.” The queen gestured to the thick walls of stone in the hallway they walked down.

“I meant with Proetus. If he discovers what you’re doing, then—”

“Then he’ll forgive me, for I am his wife. And I am very, very good at what I do.” Stheneboea looked over shoulder, winked at the small Amazon, and made her way down the hall. “As you’ll see.”

“Gods, are you going to fuck your husband right in front of me?” Otrera said, and she grinded her teeth until her jaw clicked.

“I am.” The queen laughed, and glanced over her shoulder again as she put a hand out onto the door frame of the room. “You are welcome to join us. You are a delicious little thing! So muscular. I bet you could crush my poor husband’s cock into pulp with your insides.”

The Amazon rolled her eyes. “You’re not even a little worried about Bellerophontes? Andromeda said he’d be coming.”

“She was guessing, dear. Bellerophontes had ample opportunity to return when his fame rose and the land idolized him.”

“He hadn’t just escaped a year of prison quarry work then,” Otrera said.

Stheneboea shrugged, stepped into her room, and motioned for her to follow. She did of course, spear in hand, frown on her face. This was not the assignment she wanted; she could feel herself growing softer by the minute just being in the presence of these people and their palace.

“My lovely wife.”

Proetus was sitting on the bed facing them, legs off the side, and he was wearing a white chiton of similar fancy make to the queen’s. He was a handsome man, for an older fellow, with black and white hair and beard, and deep, resonating eyes. He looked like a king, and a wise one at that. Surely the man could see what his wife was up to with her frequent disappearances?

“Darling! Otrera has agreed to join us tonight.” Giggling like a silly girl, Stheneboea crawled onto the man’s lap. In no time at all, she as rubbing her body against his, and kissing his neck.

And when she did, Proetus’s eyes softened, his shoulders relaxed, and his hands found the woman’s hips. Like a young boy at the whim of a woman, Proetus held her tight, and kissed her when she kissed him.

So that was it then. Proetus was a slave to Stheneboea because of her sexual allure and prowess. For a moment she thought it absurd, but then, watching the queen do her dance, Otrera reconsidered. She was a demon in human skin, manipulating her king with her hips and her cunt. Loathsome.

“Has she now? You’ll have to forgive my wife, Otrera, she has no shame,” the king said, and he kissed his wife on the neck while looking at Otrera. The wife had no shame, and the husband was happy for it. And then the king winked at the Amazon when Stheneboea looked away.

He knew. Of course he knew. Proetus was a smart man, Otrera could see it. A smart king who was letting his queen indulge in her defiance? Why? What—

A soft white glow started to grow from Otrera’s neck. She didn’t notice it at first, eyes locked onto the grinding queen, but the subtle light from Otrera’s necklace started to fill the dark room. The necklace was just an innocent looking thing, a tiny white pebble looped with black string. But it glowed brighter, and after a while, Otrera looked down at it, and then around the room.

She ignored the giggling queen, her seduced husband, and scanned the walls. Her hand tightened on her spear until her knuckles cracked. Breathing deeply, slowly, she stepped a little further into the room, and looked around. Nothing but expensive luxury, draped silks, ornamental useless jars, and beautiful marble. One of the drapes was not as flat as the others though.

Gut instinct took over. She threw her spear, hard, hard as her body would let her. It went through the silk drape, collided against the stone with a loud crack, and stuck into wall; good, Andromeda’s strength was very real.

“Otrera! What in Tartarus are you doing?” Proetus said.

Stheneboea giggled. “Maybe she’s upset?”

Otrera growled, but did nothing. She waited, eyes on the spear. No movement, no blood.

“It was a good throw, Amazon, but if you were truly upset with our fun, you could have waited outside. Andromeda sent you here to guard us, not wait on us.” Proetus squinted at her, but with a shrug, he got up off the bed, and walked over to the spear. He got his hands on it, and tugged. Nothing. With a groan, he yanked on the spear, and after a few good tries, the strong old man managed to yank the weapon from the wall, and held it in hand.

“Here,” he said, “you can—”

The drape moved. One moment, Proetus was standing there, about to walk over to her, her spear in hand. The next, the spear was on the floor, rolling Otrera’s way, and a blade was against Proetus’s throat.

Stheneboea gasped, hand to her mouth. Otrera growled again, and reached for her sheathed sword.

“Ah-ah-ah, no touchy the sword,” the warrior said.

The king turned his head to get a glimpse of the small assassin in the corner of his eyes. “… Bellerophon.”

Stunned did not begin to describe Otrera’s reaction. She had expected a man in tatters, rags, and covered in the grime of a prisoner. This warrior was dressed like a myth, a legend, with the most beautiful armor of black and silver she’d ever seen. She couldn’t see his face well, not with his helmet on, but she recognized the cocky eyes of the bastard through the eye slots.

“You almost hit me. You have a good nose Amazon. Or is it that thing on your neck?”

“A bit of both,” she said, and considered drawing her sword despite his warning. Not yet though. She stood up straight instead, and waited.

“Proetus. Stheneboea,” he said, and he chuckled a little. “Who’s your friend?”

No one said a thing. Stheneboea was frozen, but Proetus was grimacing, and his hands were in fists at his side. If he saw an opportunity, the king would take it. Otrera weighed on the option. Not that the king could do much against a Fate’s Child.

“No one wants to talk? Fine.” Bellerophontes slid his blade — what a beautiful blade, like gleaming silver — against Proetus’s neck, until a drop of blood trickled down the king’s throat and into his tunic. “I’m looking for something.”

“You’re… not here… to kill us?” Proetus said.

“Oh, believe me, I want to.” Bellerophontes’s voice came out heavier, darker, and a white shimmer was starting to enter his eyes. “You deserve it. Your wife deserves it. Worthless pond scum.”

Otrera’s heart started to race. That face. Those eyes. Ice walked down her spine. Lightning danced on her fingertips. The pebble on her neck glowed, and its soft white light was a hilarious contrast to the fire in her veins. Revenge was just twenty feet away.

“Bellerophontes!” Stheneboea said. “You deserve death, after what you did to me!”

The assassin groaned. “You know very well I never even touched you, whore.” Bellerophontes kicked at the back of Proetus’s leg, and the old man feel to his knees with a painful thud of bone on stone. The assassin held his blade against his neck still, and used his shield hand to pull back on the king’s hair to point his head up. “You hear me, old friend? I never touched your wife.”

“I… I know.”

Hades would have been uncomfortable with the silence that followed. Stheneboea stopped breathing, Proetus looked up at his old guard captain with a sad frown, and the assassin’s blade lowered. Not enough for the king to get away, but enough that its brilliant edge no longer drew red lines along the king’s throat.

“You knew?” he said.

“Of course I knew. Stheneboea is no saint. She revels in dark delights and thinks she hides it from me.” The king sighed, and his fists relaxed.

Otrera clicked her teeth. What great weight had you just lifted from your shoulders, old king? Confessions of a dead man?

“Then why? Why did you send me to her father to be killed? Why did you lie to me?” Bellerophontes’s voice teetered on yelling, but even as his eyes glowed white like a demon from the underworld, he managed to keep his voice from escaping the room.

“Because… I love my wife. I’d do anything to make her happy, old friend.”

Everyone waited. Otrera was sure the king had sealed his fate with his words. What a sad, sorry reason to betray a friend. But it didn’t happen. Bellerophontes lowered his sword, let go of the king’s hair, and stared at him. The glowing white of his eyes vanished, doused like fire under water. His stance relaxed, faltered, and he blinked several times.

“You… you betrayed me because… you love your wife? That’s it? That’s—”

Enough of this sad display of ridiculous delusions and flaws.

Otrera walked over to Stheneboea. The queen consort was staring at her husband with the widest eyes. It was probably the first time the woman had ever experienced shock. She thought herself so smart, so brilliant in her deceptions and manipulations, all to indulge in her sexual appetite and need for rebelliousness.

All gone in a moment when Otrera reached out, took the queen’s head, and twisted.

The snap of her neck was sickening in the silence of the men’s reunion. Stheneboea managed to look at Otrera with parted mouth for only a moment, before she went limp and fell to the floor with the crunch of skull against stone. She would be dead in moments.

“Stheneboea!” the king cried out. Perfect. Someone must have heard that.

Otrera rolled forward, grabbed the spear, and halfway into a second roll, threw it at Proetus. It slammed into the king’s chest with such force, it launched him backward and sent both he and the assassin onto their asses. Otrera got up with a jump, drew her sword, and walked forward.

Bellerophontes was already up though. The man was a small creature like her, quick, agile, and had no trouble jumping up onto his feet with a hard push of his hands, feet into the air, before landing on his sandals with grace. Otrera took a step back, window gone, but she smiled, and pointed her blade at the man.

Proetus reached up with one hand to clutch the wood sticking out of his chest. The spear’s tip had been blunted by the stone wall. Only sheer force of impact had managed to drive it through his bones and into his organs. He groaned, coughed blood up, and used his other hand to reach for Bellerophontes’s leg.

The black and silver warrior looked down at his ‘old friend,’ and went still. Otrera couldn’t see his expression anymore with his head turned and helmet blocking his features, but the weight of hate on his shoulders was palpable.

“Bell… ero….” He coughed another splatter of blood, and another. His weak grip clawed at the warrior’s greaves, and the warrior got down on a knee to grab his hand.

She had the opportunity to attack there. Her target wouldn’t be able to defend himself as easily when on a knee. But she didn’t. She wanted to, every voice in her head and every ounce of warrior training she had told her to take advantage and kill the man right there. But everyone deserved to say goodbye.

Bellerophontes squeezed the king’s hand with his shield hand. “I… I….”

And then the king died. His hand went limp, his coughing and sputtering stopped, and his presence faded like a snuffed candle. The assassin went silent. He let go of the dead man’s hand, and placed it on his chest. Sighing, he raised his hand to Proetus’s face to slide his eyes closed with his fingertips.

Slowly, Bellerophontes stood back up, and turned to face her. The white glow returned to his eyes, like death staring her down.

“Why did you do that?”

“This way, even if you escape, you’ll be labeled a murderer. You think you have trouble now, Bellerophontes, wait until every city and state know you’re out there, killing kings and queens in their beds.”

The black and silver warrior growled, and started to circle her. She returned in kind, and the two of them watched each other in the king’s room, with two corpses on the stone floor. It was so poetic, Otrera could not have hoped for better.

“You don’t even remember me, do you, Bellerophontes?”

“Amazon. I assume one of the Amazons I defeated who were assaulting Lycia.”

“Assaulting? We were defending our lands from Iobates’ advances!” She growled much like him, and pointed her sword at the dead queen next to her. “Her father was a greedy fool, like his daughter. Shame they didn’t recognize me either, or they’d have never let me be their guard, even with Andromeda’s word.”

“Who’s Andromeda?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Bellerophontes snarled. He sounded like an angry lion. It made her blood run fast and her fingers clench her sword grip with anticipation. This was it. This was the feeling.

“And who are you to me, Otrera?”

“You want to know?” she said.

“I do.”

She chuckled, and pointed her sword at his face. “Queen of the Amazon tribe you wiped out.”

Her eyes started to glow white too.

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~~Darian~~

Oh shit.

Otrera grinned at him. “Guards! Guards!”

Damn it. Darian made a dash for the door, but the Amazon got between him and the exit. She slammed her shield forward, and he blocked it with his own. Were it a typical man — or woman — his shield would have bashed theirs aside and sent them toppling. But this Amazon, a small and beautiful, if angry and steel-looking woman, pushed him back instead. Her strength was inhuman, like his own.

There were no women Fate’s Children. The Fates didn’t care about human women, tales and epic legends would never be told about women, according to them. But, the reality before him disagreed.

“You weren’t a Fate’s Child when I defeated your clan.” Darian gritted his teeth, squeezed on his sword grip, and paced left and right. He had to get past her before the guards arrived, or he’d be painting the palace in red just to survive.

“You’re right, I wasn’t.”

“But you survived I see. Funny, I remember killing every one of you.” The memory of the slaughter was not a fond one; he really didn’t want to kill those women. But he wasn’t going to tell her that. Angry foes were defeated foes. Just make sure to practice what you preach, Darian.

“You did defeat me, but I lived. Barely.” She growled, her stance mimicking his. Her steps were light, her eyes were locked onto him with their white glow, and her sword hand was clenched tight. She wanted to kill him; she dripped of murderous intent. This was what it was like to stare into the eyes of a Fate’s Child. Scary.

Normally, one-on-one combat would be no problem. Duels were never a fair fight for his enemies, he always had the advantage. But not this time.

She bolted for him, sword stabbing straight toward his chest. He brought his shield up from the inside to knock her sword to her outside, and he returned her forward thrust with his own. And like him, she blocked from the inside, and knocked his sword to the outside, but she followed it with a hard kick into his chest. The armor caught the kick, but that didn’t stop the inhuman power of it from sending him back against the wall. Otrera was also sent back by her own kick, and she rolled backward before standing up. She wasn’t used to the inhuman strength of a Fate’s Child then. Good to know.

Darian stepped in toward her, shield in front of him. When she stepped back, he quick stepped in with the right foot to stab forward; a feint. When she raised her shield to block him, he stepped in with the other foot, and reversed the momentum of his stab. He spun around, bringing the sword around behind him while his shield slammed forward into Otrera’s. Her shield was pushed down toward her gut, and it brought her head down to the right level for his sword when it came around him in the full spin.

The Amazon ducked. She was fast, dropped to the ground to land her shield arm against the stone floor, and brought her sword up in a large slice. He had to jump away to avoid it.

She was after him the moment he did, jumping at him. Her sword came out in a forward thrust with a downward angle, her being above him, and he had to sidestep to avoid it. He came up on her shield side, only for her to swing the shield at him and force him away again. It left an opening though, and he stepped into it with shield in front of him, while stabbing over its edge. She spun with her shield to bring her sword in front of her and knock his sword aside, but it left her chest open, and he slammed his shield forward. A loud thud of aspis shield to her body made him smile. She fell back with a roll, and was back up on her feet a second later.

“Tell me how,” he said.

“How?” The Amazon growled at him and started to pace around him again. She kept the exit behind her though.

“How you got those eyes.”

“No.”

He was really starting to hate this woman. No sense for banter at all.

He leapt toward her with all his weight burrowing down into the shield, and again she raised hers to block it. He swung his sword down against her, and the power of his swing pushed her back while making his whole body vibrate with the force of the impact of sword on shield. Before she could adjust to swing at him in return, he swung his sword down again. And again. And again. She had to block each one, and each one was like ringing a giant bell with a hammer. The hallway echoed with the sound; if the guards didn’t hear Otrera call for help earlier, they’d be joining them soon enough.

The sword, resilient, sharp, something no human could craft, clanked and smashed down against the small woman’s shield, until it lodged itself into the upper curve of her aspis, through the bronze sheet and into its wooden body. By then, Darian’s relentless assault had pushed them out into the hall. He yanked his sword away, but the blade was stuck, and the motion threw Otrera to the ground as it yanked the shield off her arm.

Darian didn’t waste the advantage, and slammed his sandal down against her sword hand. No broken fingers, but he heard the grind of bones along with the smack of his foot against stone. The Amazon grunted, and nothing else. She glared up at him, eyes screaming at him. Rage, fire, fury that burned away and left nothing. She was consumed by it.

He put the tip of his blade to her neck. She didn’t blink, didn’t look away, and didn’t squirm despite the weight of his foot grinding her fingers into her sword grip.

“Otrera, I….”

She’d killed Proetus. She’d killed Stheneboea, so she could frame him for their murders, in case he escaped and she needed more eyes looking for him. Ruthless. He should kill her, she was dangerous. She was a Fate’s Child! Somehow, this Amazon, a woman covered in scars, was a Fate’s Child. Fate’s Children were never women, and they never scarred. What was going on?

She squirmed, but he pressed down on her sword hand harder, and pressed the tip of his blade to her throat. The few inches of movement made her necklace roll over onto the stone of the hallway floor. It was glowing the same white as their eyes.

“There! There he is!”

Shit. He looked down the hall, and caught the glimmer of hoplite armor at the corner, light brought by a servant carrying a torch.

He looked down at Otrera, back at the room with the two dead, and then down the hallway to the guards. They were running at him, spears and shields at the ready. Only a single moment, a single second to make a decision. And he had no idea what decision to make.

What would Medusa do?

He looked back at Otrera, and the white glow faded from his eyes. “… I’m sorry. For everything.” He leaned down, yanked her necklace off her head, and ran.

No time to see how she reacted, and he imagined his apology probably only made her angrier. He knew he’d only be angrier if Proetus had apologized to him. Don’t think about him now, don’t think about Stheneboea, just get out.

Around the next turn of the hallway. More guards greeted him; he slammed through them with his shield up before they had time to react. A moment later, he was out into the center plaza of the palace, surrounded by giant pillars, and sky open to show the intense stars. Not a cloud in sight, the moon shown overhead; dark, but not dark enough to hide in plain sight.

He threw himself into the shadows of the columns, and behind one of their wide widths. Crouching down, he kept to the edge of the outer plaza, and made his way for the side entrance. If he could get out of the plaza through the side, he could — no good. Guards stood there, three of them, one with a torch in hand and another with a bow at the ready. He could break through them, but then they’d know where he was.

“Find him! Bellerophontes has killed the king and queen!”

Otrera’s voice. She ran out of the hallway into the plaza, a dozen guards around her, torches lit and bows in hand. When he caught a glimpse of her face in the fire, his blood ran cold. Her glowing white eyes were like firestorms. She did indeed look angrier, like someone had just slaughtered her family and friends and apologized to her about it.

He really shouldn’t have said anything.

Torches started to dot the palace walls. Everywhere, along the columns and hallways and platforms of his old home, fires started to move, looking for him, wanting him dead. Guards called out for each other, started making spot checks and patrol checks, and servants joined them with their own torches raised. He’d stirred the hornets nest.

The side entrance to the palace plaza was blocked. The other side entrance? He looked back to the walls he’d have to hug and columns he’d have to hide behind to make it to the other side of the open area. Torches and movement filled their shadows. He’d be spotted. And even if he got out of the palace, what then, back over the wall the way he came in? He’d have to climb the stairs up onto the wall’s walkway and then throw himself over. Liable to be spotted, liable to fall and die from several hundred feet of falling and a sudden stop at the bottom.

He slipped deep into a corner of the plaza, where no torches or candles were lit, and no doors were to be found. No way out, but they wouldn’t find him unless they came looking.

One of the guards did come looking after a few minutes, torch and sword at the ready. Darian kept the marble column between them, ears peeled for the sound of his sandals walking soft on the stone. Closer. Closer. When the man reached the corner and stuck his torch out to light the depths of the turn, Darian sneaked around the column’s base to get behind him.

“Wha—”

One hand around the throat, the other around his sword hand. Darian squeezed hard enough to block his breathing, but not hard enough to kill him. He wanted to, but every time the thought entered his mind, he reminded himself Medusa was waiting for him. Instead, he brought the guard’s own sword to his throat, still in his own hand, and held it there.

“Patrius. Nice to see you again.” He relaxed his grip on the man’s neck enough for him to be able to breathe — barely.

“… Bellerophon.”

He knew this guard well, an old friend of his from early in his career. A father, a husband, and a good swordsman. Memories on the edges of his mind called to him, of him and Patrius sitting around a fire while hunting deer. Another friend who betrayed him and left him to rot in a quarry.

He breathed deep. “No use in trying to explain myself is there?”

“No.”

Blunt as always, Patrius.

“Well, I’ll tell you anyway. I didn’t kill Proetus or Stheneboea, the Amazon did. I didn’t try and rape Stheneboea either, she lied.”

“You cannot—”

Darian tightened his grip again. “Not looking to chat, Patrius. I need a way out. Front gate still got that side exit?” Patrius couldn’t breathe, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t nod if he had to.

But of course his old friend only managed to glare at him. Good thing for Patrius that Darian could read his eyes, always could. The side exit was still there.

Horns. Loud, blasting waves of sound poured from the palace and out. The whole city would be up. Wonderful.

“I know you don’t believe me Patrius. But think about it when you wake up.” And before Patrius could realize what he meant, Darian let go of his sword hand, only to punch the man in the side of the helmet hard enough to send him into the wall. He collapsed like a bag of wheat, and didn’t make a sound other than the clink of his sword against the floor. His torch rolled out from the corner and into the open plaza.

Darian ran. His steps were silent, and without a light source on him, the wandering guards would head toward Patrius and his fallen torch. It gave him time, like leaving behind bait to lure away wandering predators.

Around the next corner, he found a guard yet again, but the guard was already facing him, and a moment of realization on the man’s face was all he had time for before Darian smashed his head to the side with his obsidian shield. He fell with a loud clank of armor, shield, and spear to the stone. Darian ran over him. The noise would draw more of them. Killing them all would have been safer than this madness, but he didn’t want to. He wanted to be able to look Medusa in the eyes when he got back to her.

Half of his mind was focused on working his way through the shadows between the titanic columns of the palace plaza, and the other half of his mind was on Proetus. He knew. He knew all along. He knew and he still sent him off to die. Just because it would make his wife happy? Gods, such a shallow reason, and yet he could understand it. Maybe that was why he felt different? Proetus having not believed him ate him from the inside out, but if the man had knowingly betrayed him for his wife, that was… better.

The front wall. It stood tall and proud, with a glorious archway in its center that loomed over the center gate. Past it would be the grand stairway that would lead to the city, and if he could reach it, he’d have a chance of getting out through the many alleys between the buildings. The city went silent come the night, and its winding passages in the black would be his only way out. But the gate was closed. Tall doors, wood with gold gods adoring their faces, thick and heavy. He’d never be able to break them down.

That was why he was going to take the side door. The grand arch and its massive doors were meant for display and for moving crowds. A small door, big enough only for a single person, lined its left side. He moved toward it, body low to the stone floor. This near the front wall, the plaza’s raised platform fell away to the stone pathway that circled between the palace and the walls, and he crouched, shoulder against it, while he moved toward the archway.

Guards were running the palace up and down. The hallways, the columns along the plaza outskirts, the walls outside the palace, all of it was lit up with torches of moving people. Horns were blowing. Cries and screams of shocked servants were starting to join the noise. The people down in the city were probably wondering what all the noise was about. In another fifteen minutes, the whole city would be crawling with people and torches. He had to get moving.

Up ahead, along the wall, the protrusion of the giant gate had enough width for the small extra door. And five guards stood in front of it, two with torches, all with swords. They knew he knew about the side entrance, it was the only entrance in or out of the acropolis with the gate was closed. Darian crept closer, closer, until he knew he’d be just a blur of shadow on the edge of their vision. Another step and he’d be leaving the shadows the moon casted from the palace.

On the edge of the shadow, he grinned. Five men, all ready to kill him, and he was doing his damnedest to not kill any of them. They were making it tough.

But then, they were stupid enough to think five men could stop him.

He charged. At a full sprint and erupting from the night in his black and silver armor, he must have looked like a ghost. Perfect. The men looked his way at the sound of his sandals smacking the stone, and they gasped. One of them had time to start hollering, but the moment noise came out of his mouth, Darian drove his shield down into the man’s face. The poor bastard wasn’t wearing a helmet, and Darian felt the crunch of nose and teeth through his shield into his arm. The guard would live, but he’d never look the same again.

“Here! To here!” one of them said, the one in the back. Smart.

The two guards on his left and right screamed and swung their swords at him, and he blocked both of them by getting down to a knee and holding the shield up. He spun around, leg out, and drove the back of his heel into the first man’s ankles, and then under him to collide with the second man’s ankles. They toppled hard, one on the other.

“Stop him!”

On the spin, Darian jumped back up to a stand and swung out with his shield upon the approaching man. The sound of his Fates’ shield smashing into the poor man’s chest was deafening, bronze against whatever magical metal the Fates have given him. The force knocked Darian’s arm away, hard, enough that he had to step away from the hit a few feet to keep from toppling over onto the fallen guards. The man he hit flew back and slammed against the wall.

Only one left. The loud mouth. He started to panic, shield up, sword raised, hands shaking, feet shuffling back.

Darian ran him down, shield in front of him. He pressed his sandals into the bodies of the men beneath him to drive himself forward, and he threw his small body against the large guard shield first. With the speed and force of his jump pushing his body straight forward, his light weight was more than enough to send the big fellow — Barnabus, a slow and muscle-bound funny guy — onto his ass.

Running forward, Darian jumped off the man’s chest with one leg, used the other to stop his weight against the corner of the tiny door hallway, and pushed himself into a dash from its turn. A second later, he was on the steps leading down to the city. A few torch bearers were walking down its path, more guards looking for him. But he was out now, in the moonlight. They’d be able to see him, but he’d be a blur. He’d run right past them and—

“Fire!”

The sound of strings snapping at tension. He knew that sound well. Like a chorus of birds, loud snaps of arrowheads on stone and the sting of cracked air danced around him. He turned around with a jump, and came to a dead stop, shield raised. When he looked down, he could see a line of red oozing down his ankle where an arrow had nicked his calf, and the same on his neck. A few more arrows came raining down, and he walked backward down the stairway as they crashed into his shield and bounced off with a resounding crack of metal on metal.

When they stopped, he managed to turn around again to raise his sword, and block the swing of one of the guards. One of them had run up the stairway, arrows stuck out of his shield, and he was panting; he’d risked the arrows for a chance to stab Darian in the back. A hard kick to the chest sent him backward down the wide stone steps, and he slid down a few of them with some groans and yelps.

Darian couldn’t stop. If he got stuck, he’d be surrounded. He broke into a run again, but running down stairs is less running, and more jumping down them like a leaping deer. The second guard he approached, he jumped over his head, managed to hear the gasp of the man, and landed with bounce before he kept running. Got to keep moving.

He glanced over his shoulder again. There were a couple of white dots at the top of the grand stairway.

And then there was an arrow sticking through his sword arm.

Pain took its time to show up, thank the gods, but he was still thrown to the side from the brutal, sudden impact. He spun out of control into the air, turned around several times in a complete spin, crashed down to the stairway’s edge, before rolling off onto the cliff side. A harsh slope of hard rocks greeted him, and he rolled down the mess of earth with all the grace of a boulder. The arrow sticking through his arm bent and snapped at the shaft. Blood gushed out of the wound like flowing water.

He’d heard the snap of a string, but it was no ordinary bow. It was loud. And when the arrow struck him, it was like a horse had kicked him in the arm. And rolling down the hill wasn’t helping. His arms and thighs were unprotected against the stone, and his armor didn’t help when he bounced and bounced hard. But, after several painful moments, he landed on the grass below. The soft green did little to cushion his fall, and he fell against the ground shoulder first. A loud crunch announced his landing.

But, there was only darkness to greet him, so at least he had that going for him. They knew where he fell, but they didn’t know where he landed. That wouldn’t last once they got down the stairs and started scouting around the hill base of the acropolis.

Lying on his back, he took a deep breath, and sat up. His sword was still in the hand of his punctured arm. He squeezed the grip, and grimaced when pain filled the muscles. Still working. He rolled toward his sword hand to push himself off the ground.

He fell over onto his face. Then the pain kicked in. Cold fire shot up his arm, from the stick lodged all the way through his bicep and out through his tricep, into his shoulder, where the pain overwhelmed him and knocked the air out of his lungs. His arm was hanging out of its socket.

Groaning, he rolled onto his shield arm, pushed himself off the ground with his shield, and stood up with his arm dangling. He couldn’t see it well in the shadows of the hill, city buildings, and tall grass, but he could see the strange gap where his upper arm was hanging lower than it should have been. Only flesh, muscle, and skin connected it to the shoulder, and each motion he made, each muscle he squeezed, shot only more pain up into the dislocated joint.

He let go of his sword, leaned forward, grabbed his sword hand’s wrist with his shield hand, and yanked down. A loud pop, and the upper arm tensed with the shock of another wave of pain. Then, relief; the arm was back in its socket. Then he grabbed the arrowhead of the shaft lodged through his arm, and yanked it through. It was no ordinary arrowhead, but something large and polished to a sheen. He only had time to admire it for a moment before the pain brought him to his knees, and he gritted his teeth until his jaw ached while the pain faded. After a minute, it settled into a harsh, sickening throb that came in waves; a vast improvement over the minute before.

He got up, picked his sword up, and started moving through the city. The stables, he had to get to the stables. There should be at least a few horses.

Another snap of string and the crack of an arrowhead, this time against the dirt beside him. He jumped around and put up his shield, and blinked up at the stairway above. Two glowing white dots sat above him, Otrera, and were firing down at him. No one else, only her.

He held still, and the arrows stopped. She was scanning for movement, couldn’t see him in the dark if he held still, and kept his anger from forcing his eyes to glow.

What a tenacious bitch. He’d have done the same.

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~~Medusa~~

She didn’t think she’d be able to sleep. She was right.

Medusa slithered over to the tree line where Chimera stood, and watched the road. Every time she looked down the valley to the path Darian had walked down, she clutched at her heart. In the stars and moonlight, she could see everything better than she could as a human. And there was no Darian. He said tomorrow night by latest. In another twenty-four hours, she’d slither into Tiryns with Chimera as her bodyguard, and tear it apart looking for him. If it came to it, she’d kill to find him.

“Sleep,” Chimera said.

“I can’t. I want to, but I… I haven’t slept a night alone since I met him. Even when we barely knew each other, we slept only feet from each other. He mumbles in his sleep.”

“What does he say?”

Medusa blinked up at the giant next to her. “Nothing coherent. A lot of anger though, and something about… out of the sky? And someone named Philonoe?”

Chimera shrugged, and looked back to the road.

“Sssso, Chimera, tell me. You’ve been drifting around Greece for hundreds of years?”

“I have.”

“Did you have a family?”

“I did.”

Like getting blood from a stone, this one.

“What happened to them?”

“Killed by the gods and their worshipers.”

She gasped, and pulled her human half away from him a few feet. Her fingers were on her lips again.

“I… had no idea.”

Chimera grunted, shrugged, and looked out to the road. “It was a thousand winters ago.”

“A… a… thousand.” This man, this giant before her was ancient in a way she could not understand. She moved in front of him, and raised her height to look him in the eye. His gaze was the same cold, stone gaze it always was. “That’s why Darian said you wanted a ‘crack’ at Athena. You want to kill her.”

Chimera nodded. His thick arms were folded across his chest where the lion arms of his pelt were tied, and his fangs showed over his lips.

“But it was so long ago!” She reached out and took him by his colossal shoulders to shake him; he was so wide, she had to reach her arms far out to the sides to grab both shoulders. The stone wall of muscle did not budge. “Do you hold hate for so long?”

Chimera growled at her, a deep rumbling sound she felt through her body. “I remember it as if it were yesterday. And you, snake woman? Bellerophontes — Darian — told me of your trials, of Poseidon and Athena. You have must reason to scorn, where is your hate? Lost to weakness?”

Like lightning, rage overwhelmed her, dotted her vision, and took over. She braced her snake length against earth and tree, and pushed him. The giant fell over, and shook the ground when he landed. He reached out with both hands to brace himself, but the trees snapped and cracked right along with him.

“I hated! I hated until I felt my inssssides boil!” She snapped her tail against a nearby tree; the whip crack of its tip tore through bark and cut through depths. It hurt, but the pain was white noise. “I hated, and hated, but you and Darian, both of you ssslaughter and kill and then you forget. You forget! I’ve sssstared into the faces of my kills for decadesss! They ssstand there, statues in my garden of death, and they scream or sneer or glare at me for years, and years, and years. Ssso you’ll have to forgive me, oh ancient giant, if I’ve learned to let go of my hate, because I had to face what hate did every day. I had to look into their eyesss for a century!” She twisted her body again, and snapped out a large portion of her snake tail so it collided against the trunk of a tree, and cracked the thick trunk before sending the tree toppling.

“… I believe you still have some hate in you, snake woman.”

“I am not a sssssnake!” She slammed her tail into the ground next to him. Brush and twigs and pebbles cracked underneath the impact. Any animals that were still within earshot went silent. Not a bird or cricket remained in the night.

Chimera looked up at her, sitting up with his palms against the forest floor. His lion head had fallen backward off his crown, leaving his long, dark hair exposed. And without the upper jaw of the unusual lion’s mouth over his forehead, she could see his dark eyes in the clear moonlight. He was smiling.

“Why are you smiling?” she said, and she slithered over next to him. Big as her snake tail was, she was still just human sized from the waist up, and the giant’s massive height made her seem to small.

Chimera looked down, chuckled, and pushed himself back up. “I believe you will feel differently, Medusa, when we stand before the gods.”

“I….” Images of Poseidon resurfaced. Tall, handsome, a beautiful beard of white, long hair, strong eyes of blue. She’d been so humbled, so terrified and overjoyed a god had literally come to visit her. So destroyed when he’d… taken her. How long had she struggled to let that memory go?

“I see it in your eyes,” Chimera said, and he cracked his neck with a head tilt before he turned to look back out onto the road in the valley below. “When the time comes, you will take your revenge.”

“I….” With a groan, she slithered back over to hover beside the giant. “I may.” She couldn’t lie to herself, she was still angry. But every time she got angry, she remembered the dead statues and their hateful, terrified gazes. It made her insides run cold.

Gods, please be ok Darian.

“I see light.”

“Oh!” Her whole body started to vibrate, and she broke into a fast slither along the forest tree line. Light, this late? It may have been Darian. Maybe.

She got twenty feet before she fell flat onto her chest and palms in the grass. When she looked behind her, Chimera was frowning, and he had the tip of her tail in one of his hands. But before she could start yelling at him, he put a finger up to his lips. Shhh.

Frowning, but understanding, she slithered back over to him, and crouched low as he was. He nodded to her, and then pointed down the valley, further down the road to where the rolling hills swallowed the path.

There was light! It was so far it didn’t look like it was moving, but sure enough, the tiny spec of fire was on the horizon against the starlight. And after a minute, it started to get larger. And then more lights joined it. A dozen other dots of fire joined the first, and they bobbed up and down while flickering in the wind.

Soldiers on horses, with torches. And they were chasing something.

It was hard to see in the dark, but another rider was ahead of them. No torch, and as they grew closer, Medusa could see they were slouched forward on their horse. The horse was galloping fast, despite the night, and the rider was barely holding on. They were hard to see in the moonlight, as if they wore black, but Medusa could see the shimmer of a white crest on their helmet.

“Darian….”

Chimera tapped her shoulder and shook his head. “I can see… thirteen pursuing him… and Darian is very injured.”

“Then… then we have to do something!” Keeping her voice low in the deathly quiet of the night was making her whole body tense with frustration. “But I can’t turn them to stone, Darian’s too near, and if I use my bow, I… I can’t hit that many. It’s too dark, and they’re on horses, and—”

“I will go. You can protect Bellerophontes.”

Medusa looked back at the giant. His fangs were exposed, his huge hands dug into the ground, and his lion pelt was back over his head. She looked into the eyes of the dead cat on his hair, and for a moment, she thought she could see the animal hunger there too. He was waiting for her word, to send him into a slaughter. His slaughter.

“… do it.”

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~~Chimera~~

The hunt was on once again.

He crouched low and moved by the snake woman. When he was past her, he closed his eyes, and breathed deep the night air. He could smell grass on the wind, the distant sea, the nearby birds, the stench of a dead deer deep in the woods, and of the humans that walked the road in the day. Digging his fingers deeper into the ground, he felt the gravel and grass, he felt Gaia in his palms, and he felt strength and stone and ancient blood in his veins.

Medusa, a woman and monster he felt worthy of his protection and his strength, would have no trouble dealing with these humans and saving her beloved, if she had confidence. For all her physical might, she was frail. He could see why Bellerophontes loved her.

He continued along the forest tree line, up on the hill. Below, the hill broke way into the huge valley of rolling hills and the long dirt road. It would be another minute before the Fate’s Child would be directly below him, and maybe ten seconds behind him were thirteen riders. They had swords, and spears, and torches. And a woman. His animal eyes saw through the dark and flickering flames to catch her shape, leading the pack of hollering and yelling soldiers. They were looking to her like she was a leader.

And he recognized her armor. The leather cuirass, the band of metal across her right breast, the right metal wrist guard, and though a horse blocked his view, he imagined she had a left ankle guard, to guard her ankle when she blocked with her shield. Amazon armor.

What an Amazon was doing leading a charge of likely Tiryn soldiers, he had no idea. But perhaps she’d tell him before he ate her.

He dug his toes into the dirt, and sprinted. The ground ripped apart underneath his vast weight, the rocks vibrated until they lifted from their homes, and what few animals were still near scattered, their little claws making tiny scratch sounds against the forest floor. He could hear it all as he ran down the mountain side, but those on their horses, with their ears blinded by torch and wind and human weakness would hear nothing until he was upon them. Leaning forward, he let gravity carry him down with the hill, growing faster and faster until each step became a struggle to run with its pull. He mastered the draw of it, wrapped it tight in his grip, and used the slope of the hill to turn him into a raging force of mass and muscle and momentum.

Bellerophontes galloped past. He was laying down against the horse, one hand clutched to the reigns, the other dangling off to his side. An arrow was sticking out of his leg, and another was sticking out of his back. Somehow, an arrow had pierced his armor. At least his old enemy was still alive.

The hill slope lessened and faded, until he was running across the flat earth. Five more seconds, and he would reach the road. Five more seconds until the Amazon and her dozen warriors would be where he would be. Chimera licked at his fangs; he would taste blood tonight.

“Faster! Faster! Fas—”

Chimera pounced forward, hands out, and crashed into the Amazon’s horse. The effect was immediate, and the Amazon was thrown from the horse with such chaos and speed that she flew into the air before rolling into the ground and skidding thirty feet over the grass in a mess of limbs. She did not get up. The horse did not get up either.

Chimera, growling deep into his gut, got up, and dusted off the dirt from his palms and elbows. Then he turned, and faced the other riders, before roaring. His voice boomed the deep, bellowing noise over the road, out into the hills, and far into the gravel to shake the landscape.

The other riders came to a grinding halt. “A monster! A monster!”

“A giant!”

“A lion!”

“The Chimera!”

Ah, one of them recognized him. Licking his fangs, Chimera dashed forward. The pure brute effort to push his titanic body forward so quickly tore the ground up and left massive track marks behind him. The gravel vibrated with the thunderous impact of each step. The horses could not stop fighting with their riders long enough to find a new direction before he crashed into them.

One horse, then another, and the two behind them fell over when his outstretched arms caught them, necks to his forearms, and the hoofed beasts were sent backward over and onto their screaming riders. Torches were thrown into the air in the collision, cries and crunched bones surrounded him, and he grinned. Even upon their beasts of burden, Chimera stood well above them, towering over them, and their torches lit the hungry gaze of his animal pelt for all the better.

One of the riders, a brave one, charged through the chaos and slashed at his arm while galloping by. The blade cut deep into Chimera’s arm, and the pain stabbed up into his skull with hurried ire. He ignored it. Just another scar. And as the soldier galloped past, Chimera swung the back of his fist out and down at the rider’s back, and sent him up and over his horse.

“Off the horses! Get on the ground! Spears and shields! Throw the torches on the road.” The Amazon was back up on the path, and just as she said, she tossed the torch nearby while drawing her shield from her back. Whoever she was, she recovered quickly.

Chimera looked at her and rumbled in his chest. A beautiful creature, this Amazon. Small and terribly fit, like Bellerophontes. Long black hair, and dark skin, darker than found in Greece. Fearless too, stepping closer to him with her sword at the ready and shield up. The other soldiers stepped in around her, many with spear and shield, and others set the horses to the side of the road to join them.

Medusa would have preferred he ask them to leave, he was sure. The snake woman was far too nice, and naive. Blood was in the air, and he would not be satisfied until he’d had a taste.

He crouched down, put a hand to the road, and sprinted into the soldiers. The Amazon, barely half his height, ducked under his arms and got behind him, but two of the men behind her were not so lucky. They stabbed at him, panicked and screaming, mouths and eyes wide, while he reached out far to his sides and slammed his hands together. His palms were bigger than their skulls, and he crushed two of their heads together in his grasp. Metal bent and flattened in his grip, and the skulls within flattened quicker. Their screams were silenced in a glorious, explosive moment of blood and crunching bones.

The others approached him with timid steps. They poked at him with spears, stabbed his arms and legs, but he stood far above them, and their spears could not hope to reach his head.

One got too close. Chimera swung out with a foot while the other dug into the gravel. The human blocked, but the impact sent them flying into the air and into the darkness beyond the light of their torches. He’d heard the snap of bone when the kick collided with their shield; they wouldn’t be rejoining the fight.

“Bring him down! Bring him down!”

The few remaining — some had run away — moved forward as a unit. They locked shields into a wall, guarding each other by the shoulder, and charged toward him with spears and shields pointed at him.

He returned the favor in kind, and charged into the wall. Their weapons dug through his skin, muscle, and some reached the bones of his ribs. The pain soared into a crescendo. The smell of blood filled his nose.

And he roared his fury when his titan shoulders crashed into their puny wall of shields. They broke apart like water on rock, and scattered over and onto themselves in the mess. Chimera reached down to grab the nearest one by the leg, and lifted him while he stepped forward and walked onto the body of another. The weight of his giant frame was more than enough to crush the soldier underneath him, while the one he held he whipped to the side as hard as he could. The soldier flew away, disappeared into nearby brush and darkness with screams, but his leg remained in Chimera’s hand.

Chimera raised the leg up to his fangs, and took a bite.

The remaining soldiers screamed when he did. They turned, scampered for their panicked horses, and ran.

He roared after them, leaned forward, and readied another sprinting charge. But white fire surged up his back and forced him to his knees. Stabbing pain, deep in his muscle and ribs tore up through his back. And then another.

He stood up, but the pain remained. He spun around to see behind him, but when he did, he felt weight pulling down on his pelt.

“Fucking die already!”

The Amazon. She had one hand on the ancient pelt, and the other was holding a sword, stabbing him with it. He spun around again, but the little woman scaled him like a mountain. She swayed with the motion, grip relentless, and stabbed him in the side again, and again, and again.

He roared until he felt the ground tremble. When he tried to reach behind him with his arms, he could not grab the tiny thing. Again and again he tried, but her sword sliced open his side until his blood was gushing down his leg. Falling to a knee, he rolled with the motion and tried to land on his back to squash the creature there, but before he could, she let go and rolled off to the side. He crashed into the ground with a resounding thud that shook the earth.

He tried to get back up, but when he reached over to roll onto his knees, his vision blurred. When he looked down at his side, he found a river of red lit by torchlight. Looking himself over, he found more holes, made by more than just the Amazon.

Rumbling, he forced himself up to his knees, but fell forward onto a palm, the other clutching his side. Blood dripped from his fangs — at least that was not his own — but the host of cuts and stabs on his body were no longer healing. A couple of the remaining soldiers stopped running for their horses, and with slow steps, came back to stand before him.

The Amazon stepped in front of him as well. He reached for her, but she jumped back, and stabbed downward into his forearm to cut deep into the hard muscle. The pain was a blur, filling his skull and blinding him, until all he could do was kneel there and breathe through the burn. Then the tiny woman drove her small foot into his face, and sent him over onto his side before she ripped her sword from his arm.

“Chimera. I thought that Bellerophontes had killed you? You vanished when he’d said he’d killed you, after all. I never thought he’d have recruited!” She laughed, her hard voice on her small body a strange contrast. “I guess I’ll be the one to do it then.”

Her eyes were glowing white. He could smell the stink of the Fates on her. Yet again, another Fate's Child aided by comrades would be his undoing. The thought made him growl with the frustration of it.

The remaining two soldiers walked up beside her. “The Chimera. The king would—”

An arrow snapped past over Chimera, and into the sword arm of the soldier. The bleeding man screamed, and jumped back to hold up his shield. The other raised his own shield and got closer to the Amazon who did the same.

The Amazon bashed her shield with her sword. “Who goes there!?”

Chimera turned his head. Medusa slithered out of the dark, just at the edge of the light the torches gave, and she hissed at the three remaining.

“M-M-Medusa!” The two remaining soldiers dropped their swords, and ran.

And then there was only the Amazon. She lowered her shield enough to expose her face, and her glowing white eyes could not hide the blatant shock that laid there.

The serpent slithered up to Chimera, and for each foot the snake woman covered, the Amazon took a step back.

“Are you alright Chimera?” she said.

He rumbled deep in his chest. “I will heal.”

“Darian’s… he’ll live.” Medusa nodded to herself, but she kept her bow raised, arrow nocked, and her eyes on the Amazon. In the dark and torchlight, her yellow snake eyes were like beacons. “Don’t make me kill you. Please.”

Please? Chimera rolled his eyes. How the snake woman had survived a hundred years with Greece’s best coming to her doorstep, he could not understand.

But then, just her presence was enough to send the Amazon back further, and further, until at last the woman turned and fled. She managed to find a horse, and vaulted onto its back with ease. A moment later, she was gone.

And then it was only the two of them. Chimera, grumbling and rumbling, forced himself onto his knees again. With a hand on his side, he stood up, ignored the waves of vertigo that followed the waves of pain, and started to walk in the other direction.

“There’s… is that flesh in your mouth?” Medusa slithered next to him, and raised her body to meet him at head level. She reached up, and with a frown and firm hand, grabbed his chin to turn him to face her. “It is! What were you doing?”

“Fighting.”

“You don’t eat the people you’re fighting when fighting them!” She plucked the bit of human skin and muscle from his fangs, and tossed it aside with a loud ‘yuck.’ “You eat people?”

“I do.”

“I… I… why would you do that?”

“Why does an animal eat anything?”

“We are not… arg!” She slithered ahead of him, and looked over her shoulder. Her snake hair danced high with bared fangs and angry glares at him, similar to her own. “If I catch you eating anyone who doesn’t deserve it, I’ll stone you.” Her tail slammed into the dirt beside him, and then she slithered further ahead. “But… thank you.”

A few minutes of walking lead to Bellerophontes, laying on the grass with his helmet and breastplate removed. He was coughing, sputtering, and a couple of broken arrows were on the ground next to him. He tried to sit up, but fell back and starting coughing again. Blood splattered up onto his lips.

Chimera sat down beside the small warrior, and despite himself, did the same thing. Blood — his own this time — rose up onto his lips, and he rumbled with the pain of moving to lay down.

“Thanks,” Bellerophontes said.

Chimera turned his head to look at the tiny man, brow quirked. “… you’re welcome.”

“Darian, are you sure you’ll be alright?”

“Yeah. Fate’s Child and all that. I’ll heal.” He forced himself to sit up, but he couldn’t hide the painful groans when he did. Once sitting, he reached for the small rock dangling from his neck. It was glowing white. “That Amazon had this, and it started glowing when I showed up. And… and she….” He started coughing again. More blood speckled his lips, and he fell back onto the grass, clutching his chest with his one good arm.

Medusa’s stern face shattered. She put herself down onto her hands beside the small warrior, cradled his head with one hand, and stroked his chest with the other.

“Rest. Just rest. I’ll get some water and make some bandages. And then I’ll take you back to Gallea and Pinna and they’ll take care of you and make sure you heal right and—”

Chimera tuned out the rest of her doting. The snake woman was treating Bellerophontes like a child, holding him and stroking him. A mother and her baby.

But then, memories drifted through his mind of a time long before, when the land was quiet, filled with wings and hooves, and the humans were just harmless, hairless apes. Warm, fond memories, of hands holding his head when he rested. To be cradled and doted on was not such a bad thing.

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~~Otrera~~

She didn’t return to Tiryns. Why would she? The king and queen were dead, the city was up in an uproar looking for Bellerophontes while at the same time trying to deal with the fact their king had died. Chaos did not begin to describe the madness she’d find there. Madness she caused.

The day was a cloudy one, with the hint of rain on the horizon as the sun rose from its slumber. Otrera laid in the grass along a hillside, and stared up at the dismal day.

Her necklace was gone; Bellerophontes had escaped with it. All in all, the ambush was a colossal failure. She had at least some information though. Medusa and the Chimera were working with the bastard. How in the world had the man acquired such companions?

She sat up, lifted her sword sheathe, and drew the blade she’d plunged into the brute a dozen times. The Chimera was a giant, not the four-legged beast she’d assumed he was, and he’d been a titan of muscle and strength. Twice as tall, twice as thick, twice as wide as any human. Only with the distraction of the city guard had she been able to best him. Medusa though, the snake woman was not something she could face directly.

So close. So damn close. She’d be so damn fucking close. An arrow through his arm, into his back, and leg! Fate's Children were hard to kill, she knew that, but she hadn’t expected him to be that hard to kill. What was it going to take to kill that bastard?

“Proetus and Stheneboea, dead. Heh.” She smirked and danced her fingers along her sword’s blade. Stheneboea deserved to die, all children of King Iobates deserved to die. Just as her clan had died.

Sometimes, she wasn’t sure she was mad at Bellerophon for doing the deed, or Iobates for ordering it. But, at least one of his children was dead. That was something, right? Philonoe could wait.

Is revenge all you have left, Otrera? This wasn’t supposed to be about revenge, remember. This was supposed to be about the future. You have a deal with Andromeda.

Shadows flickered in the sky, wings that cut through the clouds with size and width greater than any bird’s. It circled her, making its way down to her in a slow spiral. It was about time, she supposed. Time to explain her failures.

She got up, sheathed her sword, picked up her shield, her quiver, and her bow. The massive bow Andromeda had given her was still a strange and bewildering thing to hold, and its arrows with gleaming smooth tips were just as huge and unusual. No Greek used such huge bows, but it had done the trick. If only she’d managed to hit the bastard somewhere fatal.

A minute later, the shadow flapped its wings over her head, pushing aside grass and twigs with the blasts of air. It neighed at her, and then fell the last five feet with a clop of its hooves onto the ground.

The beautiful white horse trotted up next to her, and turned its head to look at her. Dark, deep eyes. Its grand wings were enormous, but he was a horse after all, and weighed much more than a bird. His coat, mane, and tail were such beautiful, vibrant shades of white, that she found herself wanting to comb and groom him.

But the gold muzzle around his mouth was a ring of thorns. Delusions of romantic, poetic escapes with the beautiful white horse were dashed every time she looked at his face, and the cruel muzzle Andromeda had put there.

“Sorry,” she said, and she patted the horse’s neck, “about… you know, everything.”

The horse nodded, and then motioned to his back with his head. Nodding in return, she put both her hands onto the beast’s back, and vaulted up onto him.

Then, the hard part. She leaned forward, held onto Pegasus’s neck, and prayed. The horse spread his mighty wings, broke into a hard gallop, and jumped.

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Soaring through the sky was terrifying. Every time she looked over and down to the Earth far below her, her stomach turned, and she had to close her eyes to keep her food in its place. The air was cold, and harsh, and every flap of Pegasus’s wings made them go higher. It wasn’t long before they were so high, the land beneath them was unknown to her; if she’d been a map maker, she’d have been overjoyed. But Pegasus’s job was twofold, she was sure: take her back to Andromeda’s nest, but also make sure she didn’t know how to get there.

The second part was easy. So high up where she could barely breathe, she could no longer tell North from South, and she was sure Pegasus’s route was filled with unnecessary twists and turns to prevent her from discovering its location. Trust in your allies is such a wonderful thing.

The clouds were the strangest thing. You never reached them. From the ground, they seemed like big balls of puff, but when flying through the sky, they were nothing more than fog. A depressing note for her depressing journey. They cut through layers of mist, high through the sky, before they started to descend in a downward spiral between a quartet of mountains. Try as she might, Otrera could not recognize the area, only that the mountains could not be crossed easily, making the raised valley that laid between them quite protected.

And a beautiful valley it was. A flowing river along the lush grassland ran through its center, and all around were patches of green forest atop soft soil and blankets of flowers. The unnatural garden of life, sitting in the center of where the four mountains connected, was almost as high as the mountain tops themselves, and the river — she had no idea how it held a river this high — flowed off an edge into a waterfall. The waterfall turned into mist long before it ever reached the Earth.

Serenity untouched by man. Mostly.

Pegasus lowered himself into the clearing along the river bank. Landing was easier than taking off, but Otrera still found herself clutching her stomach when she hopped off the beast. The world was spinning, but she forced her eyes onto the stationary objects nearby. The tall trees of unnatural perfection, the perfect clear blue of the rivers, the perfect grass made to be laid upon.

Before her, a trio of naked women sat in the grass, combing each other’s hair and braiding it. Some looked young, some older, all beautiful and ripe with sexual allure. Looking at them made Otrera lick her lips. Their skin was alabaster, their nipples pink, and the trio were a mix of brunette, blonde, and redhead. They smiled at her, their pointed ears and perfect lips a glorious combination of exotic and beautiful. Otrera waved back, and took a step toward them. She could do with some naked hair braiding too.

Sounds drew her ear. Much as she wanted to play with the nymphs, Andromeda wanted to see her. She started to walk along the river’s edge, and scanned the forest grove to find the source. Sure enough, she found the woman sitting on a rock, a staff in her hand and some floating pebbles over the other. Floating pebbles. Otrera blinked twice to make sure.

Andromeda was, as was everything in the Hesperides’ garden, beautiful. Long blonde hair, blue eyes, with a tall, lean physique, though what curves she had were hidden underneath her thick chiton. Unlike the nymphs though, Andromeda’s gaze was ice, and her stance and posture and hard chin all reminded Otrera of herself on a bad day.

The noises weren’t coming from Andromeda though, they were coming from the man sitting against the rock Andromeda sat upon.

A handsome man with shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes like Andromeda, except his eyes were warm, his lips looked soft, and his chin was both masculine and inviting. He was tall, with broad shoulders, a muscular body, and smooth tawny skin. Not a scar to be had.

Beside his left and right were two more nymphs, naked as he. On his lap was yet another nymph, and this one was facing away from him, her back to his chest, her legs spread open to hook around his, and her smooth sex on display. She was grinding her little body against the man’s, and making a host of mewling noises. When Otrera came closer and stood in front of them, she could see the nymph was pushing her ass against the man, while the man was laying back and enjoying it with arms wrapped around the shoulders of the other two nymphs.

It was a glorious display of anal sex, and when one of the nymphs slipped her fingers into her sister’s folds, the array of sexual stimulation was perfect. Otrera licked her lips again, leaned against a tree, and waited.

“Otrera, how nice of you to join us,” the man said.

Andromeda groaned. “Perseus, you have been fucking that girl’s ass for thirty minutes. Finish up already.” Andromeda looked down over the rock at Perseus, rolled her eyes, and returned to her floating pebbles. She must have been practicing, Otrera thought, with how she was floating them in various patterns over her palm with great focus.

The two nymphs beside Perseus looked up and frowned. The one on his lap was too busy trembling and wriggling all over the man to care about Andromeda though.

“You’re welcome to join,” he said, and he reached up with one hand to find her leg dangling off the rock. He slipped his fingers up underneath the chiton, and stroked her ankle.

Andromeda sighed, put down the pebbles, and turned on the rock so her feet hung of the edge and onto Perseus’s shoulders.

For a moment, Otrera thought of Stheneboea and her obvious sex addiction. Perseus seemed different though. He leaned over to his right, kissed one of the nymphs, and then again for his left, before he kissed the ankles of Andromeda. The sorceress rolled her eyes, but Otrera caught a glimpse of her grin before she managed to hide it.

The four women watched Perseus fuck the little nymph in what was apparently a very pleasant rhythm for another few minutes, before at last the girl collapsed back onto Perseus’s chest, panting and moaning, her folds dripping over the fingers of the other nymph. And of course, drops of white started to drip down Perseus’s testicles to join the mess of juices on the grass.

 Was everyone she was forced to work with a sex addict? She couldn’t blame them, but it did make her jealous.

“Otrera,” Andromeda said, and she stepped off the rock, onto the air, and walked down invisible steps to stand in front of her. “You seem well, so I trust you have good news? When your necklace stopped responding, I feared the worst and sent Pegasus immediately.”

“I… don’t.”

“You don’t?”

Otrera shook her head. No use in denying it, the sorceress was going to find out eventually with those eyes of hers.

“I don’t have good news. Bellerophontes showed up, Proetus and his wife died in the confrontation, and he stole the necklace and escaped.” Despite several arrows in his body. Fate’s Children heal too damn fast. She was happy that now included her, but it meant Bellerophontes had escaped when anyone else would have died.

“… I see.”

“He didn’t just escape, Andromeda. He had help. A giant wearing a lion’s pelt, with horns, and he had a snake tattoo on his arm. And… Medusa. He had two monsters helping him! What was I—”

Andromeda put up a hand, and started pacing. The hint of kindness she had in her face faded, only to be replaced with more ice.

“So, Bellerophontes escaped. With the necklace. He killed Proetus and his wife. And he has the help of Medusa, and a giant.”

“I think the giant was the Chimera.” It was a sick joke. A bad, sick joke that the man had somehow recruited the beast that had launched his fame.

“I see.”

The sorceress continued to pace, chin in her fingers. Perseus was unfazed by the whole situation. The beautiful man got up, walked the three nymphs down to the river, and they laid upon its shore until they were neck deep. The girls giggled, buried the man in kisses — especially the one who had just enjoyed riding him — and caressed his lovely body.

Perseus. The man was always so calm, so confident, not unlike Bellerophon. He rarely said a word to her, but when he did, he was sweet and kind and the perfect gentleman. And he was gorgeous. No wonder the nymphs threw themselves at him.

His skin had no scars. Like a proper Fate's Child.

Andromeda breathed deep, and leaned her weight on her staff. “He has the necklace. That is strange. I thought he would come to Tiryns for revenge, not to take my bauble.”

“He was wearing black and silver armor, with thread designs on it. And he said he came to Tiryns looking for something.” Otrera gritted her teeth. Best not to say anything about her killing the king and queen consort. Let Andromeda come to her own conclusions.

“Then, I’m afraid we were too late, and the Fates have already made their move.” The tall sorceress reached into her dress, pulled out a strange, black mask, and raised it up to look at it from the front. Along its face were swirling lines of silver, some chaotic pattern Otrera could not follow. Its mouth and eyes were open, and it had hooks along the top and sides for a face. If someone were to put it on, it would not be easy to get it off. “He’s looking for this.”

“You think the Fates have recruited him? Then why would he come to Tiryns?” Otrera said.

“Cause you were there. You, or the necklace I gave you. He’s tracking us somehow.” Andromeda pulled her feet up, and sat upon the air. “The Fates cannot find us, but…. I’ll have to destroy the charm on the necklace, in case he can indeed track it. A shame. It took many lives to create that bauble, and that again to destroy it from here.”

“… lives?”

Andromeda tilted her head to the side, quirked a brow at Otrera, and nodded. “Yes, lives. To manipulate the power of the Fates requires lives.” She held out her hand, and the mask floated above her palm in a slow spin. “You saw the ritual that gave you your power, the skulls that littered the chamber when I asked you to join me. It took twenty lives to fuel this mask’s hunger. You saw the aftermath.”

“Those were… fresh?”

The sorceress smiled her ice smile. “Of course. The Moirai mask cares not for bones. It needs people. To bestow the power of a Fate’s Child? It took many.”

Otrera stepped back until her feet found the river. Her jaw parted, she raised a hand to her lips, and she blinked down at Perseus beside her. The man, his nymphs, none of them even cared about what the sorceress had just said.

 “Don’t worry about them,” Andromeda said, “they were just lives from Aethiopia. And believe me, Amazon, if you think your hatred for Iobates and Lycia is warranted, you have no idea what Aethiopia deserves.”