

A childhood that bites, stings, and soothes

I was born the only mortal daughter of a god of the sea and a goddess of sea dangers. My two sisters reveled in their immortality, holding their arms up to mine to compare the sheens of our skin, claiming their limbs glowed with the gentle golden light of those unburdened by an eventual death. I thought our forearms looked the same. If anything, mine were closer to golden from the days I spent walking the shoreline in the bright rays of Helios's sun.

My sisters did not like it when I tried to point this out.

"It's because you're mortal," Stheno said, drawing near me before dancing away again as if my mortality was contagious. "Your skin is *aging*."

"Ew," Euryale added.

They giggled and pranced away, their dark hair curling in long, handmade ringlets down their backs. There were tiny shells woven in between the strands, and they winked at me as my sisters left me behind, their bare feet

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making no noise on the stone floor worn smooth by age-old currents.

Our home was balanced on the precipice of space near the sea where the sturdy ground gave way to shifting sands. The ocean was only a few seconds' sprint from the back door. The walls were formed in the shapes of the waves from the sea, gentle curves and sloping ceilings all bleached white by the sun. Against the pale background of our house, Stheno and Euryale stood out like dark, fluttering birds in a clear sky.

They both took after our parents in appearance. I did not. I had been overlooked not only in immortality, but in my looks as well, and my tawny hair announced my displacement amongst my sisters far before word of my mortality could. There were few things my sisters loved to hold over me more than this.

My mother told me that when we had been born, Stheno and Euryale had begun to cry immediately, their eyes squeezed shut in opposition to the bright light of our new world.

But you, Medusa, she had said, you were quiet. And you had your eyes wide open.

I was strange, right from the beginning. While some worried that a quiet newborn prefaced a dull child, and an even duller adult, I liked when my mother told me the story of our birth. I liked that while my sisters had cried for the darkness of the womb, I had immediately begun to take in the world around me. Perhaps I had already known I would not live long enough to see it all.

When my mother told this story to my sisters, Stheno

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asked our mother if she ever thought of tossing me in the ocean.

After a long pause, Mother had replied, *She does not belong there.*

We did not see our parents very often, since they preferred the wide expanse of the seas over the seashell-colored house on the shore, but when they returned to see three of their children, we were meant to appear in our triplicate. Late in my fourteenth year, our parents came to visit us. One of the quiet, elusive servants who kept the house in order, preparing our meals, and washing our clothes, had laid out the long, white sleeveless dresses my sisters and I wore to be presented as a group. My skin was still damp from the bath and I leaned against my bed, fingering the smooth fabric. A seagull screeched outside my window, the thin linen curtains that hung over the shallow alcove billowing in a faint, salty breeze.

Left on our own, Stheno and Euryale avoided me around our home, barring the times they sought me out to tease and torment me. This was fine with me. I had taken to walking the shoreline when I found that the sound of my sisters scampering up and down the halls of our house, accompanied by their cruel laughter, was soon to drive me insane.

The only time we willingly stood side by side as sisters was when our parents were home. So, on that early morning of their arrival, I stood between my sisters with Stheno on my right and Euryale on my left, our bare shoulders not quite touching. Our hair had been styled similarly, my sisters' straight dark hair twisted into curls and crowned with a delicate wreath of shells and iridescent stones. My own hair

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needed no aid to curl, but the pale greens, blues, and whites of the wreath did not stand out as sharply against my tawny head as it did with my sisters.

Our mother arrived first, rising elegantly out of the frothy waves in a chariot made of fiery coral, pulled by a sharp-toothed shark and a steely fish with a nose like a serrated sword that thrashed in the shallow water. She dropped the reins and stepped out of the carriage, the pale gray hem of her dress swirling with the tide. The chariot disappeared back into the waves, unmanned.

As my mother strode up the sand, my sisters bowed their heads in turn, first Euryale, then Stheno, and finally I dipped my chin to my chest, tilting my head down just far enough to be respectful. I had no issue with my mother, but she had not tried to harbor any feeling of empathy or motherly affection toward me or my sisters. Child-rearing came as an afterthought for a god.

“Gorgons,” my mother greeted us with our shared name. She glided to a stop a few paces away and turned around to face the ocean, crossing her arms and leaning on one leg so that her hip was angled out. The sharp bone of her hip was hidden under the fabric of her skirt, but the attitude in her stance came across all the same. She struck a very un-goddess-like figure when she stood like that, allowing her emotions to project outward through the shape of her body. This was something I had been told only mortals did. I made sure to stand very straight and kept my shoulders back.

Father arrived a few moments later with much more fanfare. The surface of the ocean rippled and bubbled before bursting open as no less than four creatures battled with the

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waves, their front half made up of a horselike head and legs, the longer tufts of hair around their chin and hooves plastered wetly to their skin, while their flanks transitioned into tightly packed gray and purple scales leading to heavily muscled fish tails. The creatures pulled a dark stone chariot studded with pearls. Father stood straight-backed in the carriage, his bright red, clawed hand resting on the crossbar and his mortal hand holding his spear. The creatures were moving without the guidance of reins. They splashed their way to the edge of the surf and skidded to a halt, spraying frothy white sea-foam and sand.

With far less elegance than Mother, our father leaped out of the carriage and trudged up the slope toward us. The sea creatures whirled away and dove back into the water the moment his feet touched the sand, and the ocean seemed to pull away from them, creating a temporary path for the creatures and the chariot to dive into and disappear.

Unlike my mother, who had emerged from the ocean as dry as desert stone, my father reveled in the drops of water that clung to his reddened skin. He would remain this way, as if he had only just been drenched by a tumbling wave, even when he was on land and away from the water for long periods of time. I thought he began to smell a bit like a washed-up piece of rotting seaweed after a few days.

Father paused next to Mother where she stood with one hip cocked out, high on the beach. I could see a faint smile tempt his mouth at her stance, and he dipped his head to kiss the back of the hand that she had proffered to him to fulfill the expectations of a respectful greeting between husband and wife.

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I did not think my parents loved each other. Love was a human fault, a mortal emotion the gods did not have the patience nor the desperation to entertain. My mother and father had probably been paired together for their shared affinity for the dangers that lurked below the ocean's surface. If anything, they had similar tastes in pets.

"Hello, my urchin," my father said. My mother turned her nose up and away from him.

"Phorcys," she greeted tersely.

Turning away from his wife, he brought his gaze to my sisters and me, which commenced another round of the synchronized, delicate bows. I put even less effort to be polite into this one, my chin barely dipping down a finger's length. He did not seem to find this half-assed display of respect as amusing as our mother's thinly veiled irritation.

"And hello, Gorgons. You are well?"

"Yes, Father," Stheno replied, speaking for all three of us. Nothing would come of me saying otherwise, or telling my parents of Stheno and Euryale's treatment of me when we're left on our own. This was a truth I had learned long ago, so I stayed silent.

"We will go to the banquet hall," our father declared, and he swept around us toward the whitewashed house. My sisters and I parted to allow our mother to follow him, and when she stepped between us, she placed her hand on Euryale's cheek and tilted her head up, smiling faintly. I noticed Stheno's jaw tick with annoyance at our mother's obvious favoritism, but she was smart enough to keep her mouth shut. When Mother dropped her hand and continued up the sandy hill, Stheno and Euryale were drawn together once again and

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they followed our parents toward the house, leaving me to bring up the rear.

The banquet hall was built on the east end of the house, open to the beach and the ocean on one side. The remaining walls had wide windows carved into the sides, flooding the room with light that turned golden and flushed when the sun set over the horizon. In the growing light of the morning the hall looked washed out and dim, tinted a faint blue. Usually the polished stone floor was empty, since my sisters and I had little use for this room on our own, but now there were a few low couches piled high with cream-colored pillows arranged in a semicircle facing the altar at the far end of the hall. The quiet servants in the house always seemed to be aware of my parents' imminent arrival before I was.

My father waved his claw at the couches as he passed them and told us, "Have a seat, girls."

Stheno and Euryale spread out over one of the two middle couches, lounging so that their limbs took up as much room as possible and there would be no room left for me. I sat on the edge of the remaining middle couch. Our mother had followed Father to the base of the altar where two more couches were waiting, and each of my parents took one for their own.

As soon as they sat down, servants carrying trays laden with food filed into the hall. The low tables set in front of our seats became crowded with plates of all kinds of fish and crustaceans, as well as small bowls of the tough fruit that grew on scraggly trees at the edge of the sand. There was also a loaf of bread on each table with some hard

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cheese and a small knife. A carafe of wine was placed in the middle with small, foggy green glass cups, and my mother immediately reached for a cup when the servant placed the wine in front of her.

My sisters picked at a few of the dishes the moment they were set down, but I kept my hands folded in my lap.

“Father,” I said, as he clamped down on the tail of a whole cooked fish with his claw and dug out the meat with his other hand.

“What?” he said around his mouthful of fish. He was peering at me with narrowed eyes, which may have been because I had called him *Father*. I don’t think he liked being reminded that he had sired a mortal daughter.

Well, tough for him, I thought, but I’m the one who must live like this.

“Why have you and Mother come here?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his human hand. “Right, well—Ceto, would you like to tell them?”

He looked imploringly at our mother, who was idly picking a scallop out of its shell and did not look up at her name. After another beat of silence with our mother refusing to even look up and acknowledge Father, Euryale let out a poorly suppressed giggle.

Father sighed.

“Your siblings will be coming to join us here,” he said finally, “to celebrate your sister Echidna’s wedding to Typhon. Expect for them to arrive tomorrow afternoon.”

I was already sitting precariously on the edge of my couch, my back straight, but as Father spoke, my sisters quit

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eating and scrambled into an upright position. I looked over at them and, after first sharing a look between each other, they looked over at me.

There were only a few situations in which my sisters and I allowed ourselves to be willingly grouped together; one of those instances was when our parents returned home, and another was in defense against our parents' other children. While we all shared the same parents, the moments of our birth were so widely spaced that we had little in common with our siblings and treated them more like distant cousins when we were forced together. We were far from the most powerful offspring of Phorcys and Ceto, and we had discovered we stood a better chance against our elder relatives as a united front of triplets.

I studied my sisters' faces carefully. Stheno and Euryale would remain connected at the hip with or without me, but I could see they were weighing the benefit of three over two against all our siblings. The last time the entire family had been gathered—when our older brother Ladon and his hundred heads had been assigned by our father to protect the golden apples in the Hesperides' pompous little garden—we'd managed to fend off our relatives long enough to wedge ourselves into the corner of the banquet hall with a plate of oysters. Stheno seemed to be remembering this same moment, as she pressed her lips into a distasteful line and jerked her chin in acquiescence to my unspoken question.

A weight like a heavy cloak seemed to lift off my shoulders. Leaning back on my couch in an ungraceful slump, I realized I had been bracing for my sisters to close ranks against me, and so their decision to let me join them was a

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stark relief. I turned back toward my parents, who had either not seen our silent truce or not cared enough about our reaction toward the news of our siblings' imminent arrival to show concern.

I pulled the loaf of bread from my table toward me and ripped off a chunk, since the tension I had been holding in my shoulders had transformed into a sharp pinch in my belly. There was a small dish of rosemary and olive oil next to the bread tray, and I dipped a corner of the bread into it before bringing it to my lips.

"Oh," my father said suddenly, raising his attention off his plate, "the gods will be in attendance as well."

Mother looked at him sharply. She must not have been informed of this beforehand. I knew how much our mother despised being the last to know about news and rumors that spread across land and sea.

"Which gods?" she asked.

"Who knows," Father said, spitting out a fish bone. "None of those Olympians can keep a decision in their mind long enough to make it off their high-and-mighty mountain. I suspect that piddly excuse of a sea god will show his face just to spite me."

"Not Zeus?"

Father waved his claw in the air, a move of dismissal that was encumbered by the size and weight of the red exoskeleton. I thought it might have been more imposing when he was underwater. "Zeus would sooner give up his throne than attend a primordial descendant's wedding."

"Is he still angry about the whole devouring thing?" Stheno asked, lazily pulling apart a shrimp.

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“Wouldn’t you be?” I responded, before Father could. “All of Zeus’s brothers and sisters were eaten by Cronus, and he had to cut them out of the Titan’s stomach to free them. Would you not be angry, if you had to do the same?”

Stheno wrinkled her nose at me and sniffed, “Mother and Father would never eat us.”

“Ew,” Euryale added, once again perceptive of Stheno’s tone.

“Definitely not, since there are no prophecies that you will ever overtake them in legend, and that seems to be the main reason that parents eat their children,” I agreed, and took another bite of bread. “No prophecies yet, anyway.”

Father peered at me from over his plate again, and this time Mother turned her gaze on me as well, assessing for something, though I didn’t know what.

“Let us hope that none of you ever become worthy of legend, then,” she said eventually and lifted a glass of wine in our direction. Stheno and Euryale raised their cups tentatively, sharing a second-long glance, but I picked up my wine and tilted it toward my parents easily before taking a long drink. It was unlikely that I, a mortal, would ever overcome the legend of my godly parents and all the immortal siblings that came before me.

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