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ALSO BY NATALIE HAYNES

THE AMBER FURY
THE CHILDREN OF JOCASTA
A THOUSAND SHIPS

Non-fiction

THE ANCIENT GUIDE TO MODERN LIFE
PANDORA'S JAR

NATALIE
HAYNES
STONE
BLIND

PICADOR

HESPERIDES, garden-dwelling nymphs charged with guarding golden apples that belong to Hera. They also tend to have everything you might need for a quest

NEREIDS, fifty sea nymphs of changeable temper

ZEUS, king of the gods; husband of Hera

Mortals

DANAË, daughter of ACRISIUS, a minor Greek king

DICTYS, her friend; brother to POLYDECTES, king of Seriphos, a small Greek island

PERSEUS, son of Danaë and Zeus

CASSIOPE, queen of Ethiopia; wife of CEPHEUS

ANDROMEDA, their daughter

ERICHTHONIUS, legendary king of Athens

IODAME, a young priestess of Athene

Other

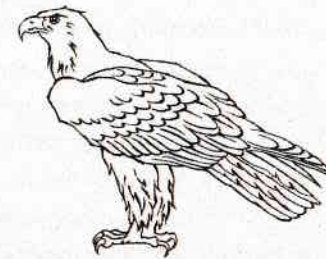
CORNIX, a chatterbox crow

ELAIA, an olive grove in Athens

HERPETA, snakes

Part One

Sister



Gorgoneion

I see you. I see all those who men call monsters.

And I see the men who call them that. Call themselves heroes, of course.

I only see them for an instant. Then they're gone.

But it's enough. Enough to know that the hero isn't the one who's kind or brave or loyal. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – he is monstrous.

And the monster? Who is she? She is what happens when someone cannot be saved.

This particular monster is assaulted, abused and vilified. And yet, as the story is always told, she is the one you should fear. She is the monster.

We'll see about that.

Panopeia

As far towards the evening sun as it is possible to travel, there is a place where the sea winds inland in a narrow twist. You are where Ethiopia meets Oceanos: the furthest land and the furthest sea. If you could fly above it, see it as the birds see it, this channel (which is not a river because it flows the wrong way, but you may see this as part of its magic), coils like a viper. You have flown past the Graiai, although you may not have noticed, as they keep to their cave to avoid stumbling on their rocky cliffs and falling into the wild sea. Would they survive such a fall? Of course: they are immortal. But even a god doesn't want to be battered between the waves and the rocks for all eternity.

You have also sped past the home of the Gorgons, who live not so very far from the Graiai, their sisters. I call them sisters, but they have never met. They are connected – though they do not know, or have long forgotten – by the air and the sea. And now, also by you.

You'll need to travel to other places too: Mount Olympus, of course. Libya, as it will come to be called by the Egyptians and later, the Greeks. An island named Seriphos. Perhaps

Stone Blind

this seems too daunting a journey. But the place you have found yourself means you are already at the end of the earth, so you'll need to find your way back. You're not far from the home of the Hesperides, but they won't help you, I'm afraid, even if you could find them (which you can't). So that means the Gorgons. It means Medusa.

Metis

Metis changed. If you had been able to see her in the moments before she realized the threat, you would have seen a woman. Tall, long-limbed, with thick dark hair plaited at the back. Her large eyes were ringed with kohl. There was a quickness in the way her gaze seemed to fall on everything at once: even when she was still, she was alert. And she had her defences, what goddess did not? But Metis was better prepared than most, even though she was not armed with arrows, like Artemis, or with thinly contained rage, like Hera.

And so when she sensed – rather than saw – that she was in danger, she changed into an eagle and flew high, the gentle south wind ruffling the feathers of her golden wings. But even with these sharp eyes, she could not see what it was that had made the short hairs pulling at the edge of her plait prickle when she was in human form. She circled in the air a few times, but nothing revealed itself to her and eventually she flew down and settled on the top of a cypress tree, curving her muscular neck in every direction, just in case. She perched there, thinking.

Stone Blind

She dropped down from the high branches onto the sandy ground, her talons scratching small furrows in the dust. And then she was not an eagle any more. Her hooked beak retracted and her feathered legs disappeared beneath her. As one muscled body became another, only the intelligence in the slit of her eyes remained constant. Now she slithered over the stones, a brown zig-zag stripe along her dorsal scales, her belly the colour of pale sand. She flickered across the ground as quickly as she had flown through the sky. And as she paused beneath a large prickly pear, she pressed her body into the earth, trying to feel the source of unease that she had not been able to spot as an eagle. But even as the rats that lived on scraps from the nearby temple raced away from her, she could not feel the footsteps of the creature she should be fleeing. She wondered what to do next.

She stayed under the cactus for a long time, enjoying the heat of the ground, allowing her hooded eyes to move, but nothing else. She was almost invisible, she knew. She was faster than most other creatures, and her bite was venomous, devastating. She had nothing to fear. But still she did not feel safe. And she could not stay here, a snake for ever.

She uncurled herself from the base of the cactus, and moved into the shade of the cypresses. Suddenly she reared up, and transformed again. The zig-zag on her scales fractured and became spots, the scales themselves softening to a coarse fur. Ears sprouted, clawed feet appeared at the end of muscular legs. The panther was beautiful, swishing her tail to send the flies spinning. She moved slowly at first, sensing each individual stone beneath the pads of her paws. Again, she felt the ripple of alarm she produced in the animals nearby. But once more, she could not shake her own

fear. She ran through the trees, weeds snagging on her fur as her speed increased. They did not slow her at all. She could catch anything. And what could catch her? Nothing. She revelled in her power. She felt almost weightless, pure muscle in pursuit of prey. And then she was caught.

Zeus was everywhere and nowhere at once. She could not outrun this bright cloud enveloping her. She flinched as her cat's eyes could not tolerate the glare, changed back to a snake as the cloud seemed to thicken and close in. She tried to slither away beneath it, but there was no beneath. The cloud emanated from everywhere, from the ground as much as from the air. She tried to speed away from it, but whichever direction she turned, it became more impenetrable. The brightness was intolerable: even through the brille that covered them, her eyes ached. She made one last attempt to free herself, changing forms again in rapid succession: eagle, but she couldn't fly above it; boar, but she couldn't gore her way through it; locust, but she couldn't consume it; panther again, but she couldn't outrun it. The cloud began to solidify and she felt herself squeezed. Her muscles began to throb from the pressure and she had no choice but to make herself smaller and smaller still: weasel, mouse, cicada. But still the pressure increased. She tried one last time: ant. And then she heard his hated voice, telling her she could not escape him. She already knew what she had to do to make the pain stop. Submit to another pain. Beaten at last, she gave in and reverted to her original form.

As Zeus raped her, she thought of being an eagle.

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The only good thing about Zeus's sexual incontinence, his wife Hera had often thought, was its extreme brevity. His desire, pursuit and satiation were so short-lived that she could almost convince herself of their irrelevance. If only it didn't invariably result in offspring. More and more gods and demigods, each one appearing for no reason other than to confirm to her that he was virtually indiscriminate in his infidelity. Even she, a goddess with an almost limitless supply of spite, could barely keep up with the number of women, goddesses, nymphs and mewling infants she needed to persecute.

She did not usually have to turn her attention to his previous wife. Metis was someone she preferred not to think about at all, but if she did it was with a mild irritation. No one likes to come second, or third, and Hera was no exception. Metis had been wife to Zeus long before Hera had been interested in the idea. They had parted so long ago that people had forgotten they were ever married. On good days, Hera didn't think about it. On bad days, she saw it as cheating. It seemed particularly unreasonable that any goddess could claim priority over her, Hera, consort of Zeus, merely by having been there first. And since Hera had many more bad days than good days, she disliked Metis. But because she had so many other provocations to cope with, she usually ignored this.

It had been Metis, of course, who had advised Zeus in his war against the Titans. Metis who aided Zeus in his battle with Cronos, his father. Metis, who was so wily and clever, always hatching a plan. Hera was just as clever as her predecessor, she had no doubt. But circumstances forced her to use her plots against Zeus, whereas Metis had offered him her wisdom as a gift. Hera snorted. Much good that

had done her. Hera had replaced her: who now thought of Metis in conjunction with Zeus? Who doubted the superiority of his sister and wife, Hera, queen of Mount Olympus? No mortal or god would dare.

Which made it all the more infuriating that Zeus had betrayed her with his former wife. The rumour had flown between the gods and goddesses like a swirling breeze. No one dared be the one who told Hera, but she knew about it just the same. She despised her husband more with each fresh revelation, and she determined to take her revenge. Zeus had been very quiet for the past day or so, no doubt hoping that if he avoided his wife, she might somehow forget her rage. When she heard him returning, Hera sat herself on a large, comfortable chair in her chamber, deep within the echoing halls of Olympus, and looked idly at her fingernails. She draped her dress to reveal more than her ankles, and tugged it down a little at the front. 'Husband,' she said, as Zeus entered the room, a slightly shifty expression on his otherwise majestic brow.

'Yes?' he replied.

'I've been so worried about you.'

'Well, I was . . .' Zeus had learned over time that it was better to stop a sentence partway through than lie to his wife. Her capacity to unravel his deceits was one of her least appealing characteristics.

'I know where you were,' she said. 'Everyone's talking about it.'

Zeus nodded. Of course they were: no one gossiped like Olympian gods. He wished he had had the sense to render them all mute, at least the ones he had created. He wondered if it might be possible to do so retrospectively.

Hera sensed she did not have his undivided attention. 'And I was worried,' she repeated.

'Worried?' He knew there must be a trap, but sometimes it was just easier to jump right into it.

'Worried about your future, my love,' she murmured and shifted artlessly so her dress fell open a little further. Zeus tried to assess his situation. His wife was often furious and sometimes seductive, but he couldn't remember an occasion when she had been both at once. He moved a little closer, in case this was the right thing to do.

'My future?' he asked, as he reached out and pulled teasingly at one of her curls. She turned her head up to face him.

'Yes,' she said. 'I have heard such terrible things about the offspring of Metis.' She felt him stiffen, before his fingers went back to caressing her hair. He was trying very hard. 'It was Metis, wasn't it? This time?'

She could not keep the edge from her voice and Zeus quickly wrapped his hand in her curls. She knew he would wrench her hair from her scalp if she wasn't careful. 'I was just wondering if you can really have forgotten what she once told you about her children,' Hera sighed. 'That she would give birth to one who would overthrow you.'

Zeus said nothing, but she knew her barb had found its mark. How could he have been so foolish? When he had overthrown his father – with Metis's help, no less – and his father had done the same before him? How could he have forgotten what Metis herself had once told him when they were still married? How?

'You need to act quickly,' Hera added. 'She told you she would have a daughter who would exceed all but her father'