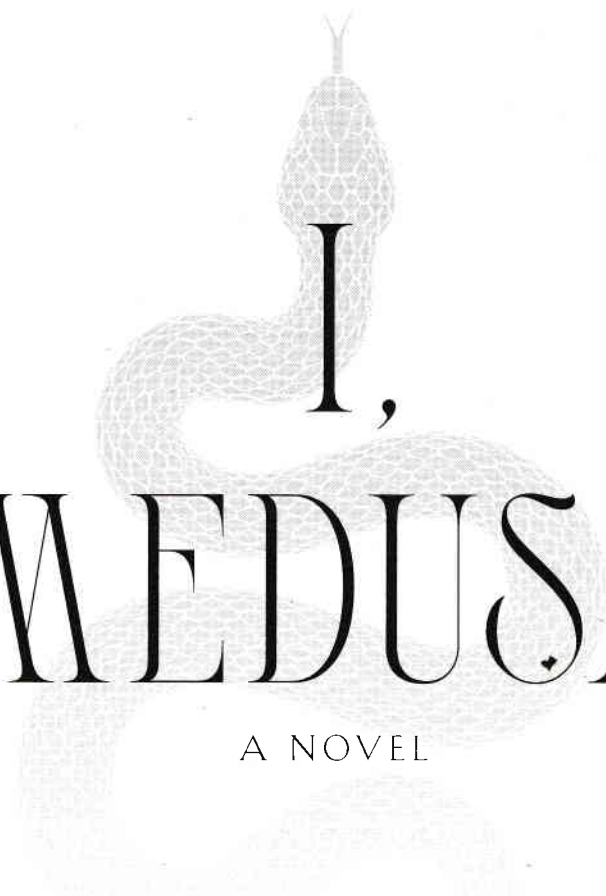


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AFTER

IT'S WELL PAST midnight when the woman finds the temple.

Her first thought, as her heels sink into the beach's wet sand, is that the place at which she has arrived is not at all what she was expecting. The holy sites she is accustomed to are grand and imposing marble complexes staffed by a retinue of dutiful priests or priestesses. The lone torchlit building that looms before her in the dark, with its crumbling stone ramparts and visibly neglected grounds, is neither grand nor imposing. The woman notes that the place is, in fact, quite small, half obscured by the surrounding dunes, and unlikely to have other visitors this late in the night. The woman is not deterred as she diverts from the coastline to draw closer.

Tonight, a temple without visitors is auspicious.

A crude path lined with pebbles and driftwood leads her from the beach to the temple's only entrance. The moment she crosses its threshold, the smell of myrrh fills her lungs, drawing from her a dull ache, a long-buried grief. She ignores that ache, smothers the grief, then presses on.

Eventually, she finds the old priest alone in the temple's open courtyard. He's holding a broom, locked in fierce battle with the sand that litters the tile. His olive skin shines with perspiration, his gray tunic is modest and plain. He is a foreigner in these lands, just as she is. It takes several seconds before he looks up and notices her. He has cloudy, albeit kind, brown eyes and a decidedly paternal smile. That smile makes the

woman think of her own father, what he'd think if he knew what she was about to do. She dismisses that thought quickly. Her father is a god, and if she knows anything about gods, it is that they care little for mortals and less for mortal plights. Instead, her attention returns to the priest. She offers him a low bow—a lingering habit from her time as a priestess. Then she speaks. Her voice is petal soft.

“I’ve come to ask for a blessing.”

The priest sets his broom aside and laces his gnarled fingers. Silence stretches between them before he gives his answer.

“What do you offer in exchange?”

The woman bows her head, contrite. “I’ve no coin, nothing of value.”

This is met with more silence.

“Please, I’m . . . I’m desperate.” The woman waits a beat before lifting her gaze. When she does, she finds the priest’s expression has changed. She knows what he sees: a young, dark-skinned woman wearing a simple white tunic and a simpler white head wrap. She knows that this is a game, that she has already made the first move. Now it is his turn.

“It is no matter,” the priest says gently. “There are always other ways, other kinds of exchanges.” He gives the woman a significant look—a look she has been anticipating—before he beckons. “Come, child.”

The woman obeys, closing the small gap between them to accept his veiny hand. She does not shiver when he traces the pad of his thumb over her palm.

Then his grip tightens.

The woman does not object when the priest pulls her against him, nor when he crushes his wrinkled lips against hers. She does not protest when he lowers them both to the sand-swept floor, nor when he guides her to clumsily mount him. His body is bony and frail, but she feels it harden with desire between her thighs.

“I am untouched,” she whispers. “I have never . . .”

“That is all right,” says the priest. In the flicker of the torchlight, his once-kind eyes have grown wolfish. “I will show you what to do. But first, let me see you.”

The woman hesitates, then unfastens the pins that hold her tunic

together at the shoulders, so that the garment falls around her waist. A low, appreciative groan escapes the priest's lips.

"Tell me your name." His voice is scraped raw with lust.

A small smile touches the woman's face. "I could tell you who I am," she says. "But I think it better to show you *what* I am."

The old priest looks up from her bare breasts, confused, but the woman is already loosening her head wrap. She lets it slip to the floor, then blinks with newly yellow eyes. The priest's grow coin-wide with terror.

"*Abomination*," he rasps. "You're a—" He does not finish his sentence. Already, his vital organs are calcifying to cold, gray stone, as is the rest of his body. His fingers curl inward as he claws at the air, grasping at something he'll never reach. All the while, the woman sits silently astride him, waiting. Some distant, detached part of her—the part of her that's remained human, perhaps—knows that she should feel *something*. Relief. Vindication. Horror.

The best she can manage is exhaustion.

The woman presses her fingertips to the priest's stone tunic as his fluttering heartbeat slows, then stills. Only when she's certain that he's dead does she rise. She reaches up as hissing fills the temple, and the ink-black serpents that sprout from her scalp in place of hair taste the salt air with eager forked tongues while they nuzzle her hand.

Vaguely, the woman wonders how long it will take to drag the statue of the priest down to the shoreline, how many hours might pass before his absence is noticed. She tallies how many men she has killed thus far and wonders how many more she will kill before the rage within her is sated, before it feels like enough.

As she douses the temple's torch and surrenders to the dark, Medusa thinks about monsters, and how easily she became one.

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PART I

MORTAL



I

“MEDDY!”

I straighten at the sound of my name, doing my best to look attentive. The effort is entirely wasted on my mother. Her dark, glittering eyes are already fixed on me, and narrowed with familiar disapproval.

“You aren’t paying attention,” she accuses. “Do it again.”

I stifle a whine as she ushers me, none too gently, to the center of our veranda. Once I am in the correct stance, she claps.

“Begin.”

A slave seated nearby on a wooden stool starts to pluck a short-necked lute, filling the warm morning air with a sweet melody. On cue, I pivot, raising my arms and clapping in time with the music while attempting to ignore the stiff ache in my biceps. I focus on the heady scent of flowers in the distance, on the hard press of the tile against the ball of my foot. I try to lose myself in the song’s rhythm, and when I close my eyes, I pretend I’m somewhere else, anywhere else. Barely a minute passes before my mother tuts. The music halts.

“Stop grimacing,” she says irritably. “You’re moving like you’re in pain.”

“I *am* in pain,” I mutter. “I’ve done this dance a hundred times.”

My mother remains unmoved. “You’ll do it a hundred more times, if that’s what it takes,” she warns. “You must be perfect. The gods gracing our halls will expect nothing less.”

This is a reminder I do not need.

Tomorrow night, my parents will host a feast under the guise of celebrating the start of spring, but I've spent enough time watching the political games of gods to understand the real reason for the occasion. My sisters and I are now all of age, which means it is time to see us made useful. For my parents, this means married.

"The gods of the Sea Court won't be the only ones in attendance." My mother speaks as though she were privy to my thoughts. "There may very well be potential suitors present, men of high and noble birth in search of a young bride. It's all the more reason for you to be at your best."

"Do any of these men of high and noble birth come from an interesting place?" I ask.

My mother assesses me anew, suspicious. "They could."

"Do you suppose any of them might bring anything interesting with him, like maps or scrolls from his homeland? I'd love something new to read." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know they are a mistake. A young male slave sweeping at the other end of the veranda shakes his head, visibly amused. The two female slaves flanking my mother with sunshades exchange looks of uncertainty.

"Of course not," my mother snaps. "And I don't want to hear another word about maps, scrolls, or any other nonsense. Start again."

I return to the dance's first position and wait for the lute player to resume. This time, I stumble as I pivot, then trip on the hem of my tunic. Behind me, there's a poorly disguised snort from one of my sisters. A tingling heat that has nothing to do with the sun overhead creeps up my neck.

"You're not trying hard enough," my mother scolds. "Each step should appear light, effortless. I want you to try to move with more grace, like—" She catches herself, but I finish her sentence in my mind.

Like Stheno and Euryale.

I turn to look at my older sisters, not far off, reclined on chaises in the sunlight. Plenty of goddesses—our own mother included—prefer to manipulate their appearances so as to seem ever young. But my sisters truly are twenty-one and nineteen, only a few years older than me.

Stheno is like a gazelle—tall, supple, and fine-featured. Euryale is of a more petite build, but she has inherited our mother's round cheeks and dimpled smile. I don't like to imagine how I look when I stand next to them. My sisters and I share the same dark, sun-blazed skin. We all favor our parents, but there, our similarities end. At seventeen, I'm still skinny, devoid of any feminine softness about my hips, and I once overheard a slave call my wide-set brown eyes "owlish."

I sigh. In these moments, I feel like a common moth trying in vain to pass for a butterfly. A well-worn sense of defeat settles over me.

"Never mind," says my mother. "We'll continue later." She collapses onto a chair while her attendants lean in to fan her more vigorously. In the morning light, she looks like a shining daughter of the sun god Helios, but Ceto is a goddess of the sea through and through. Her rich brown skin stands in brilliant contrast to her yellow tunic and is complemented by the white cowrie shells braided into her black hair. To the untrained eye, she would appear only a few years older than my sisters and me, but that is all illusion. My mother is, in fact, thousands of years old.

"You, there!" She snaps her fingers at a passing slave. "Bring me my wine!"

The slave she beckons is a small, stooped woman, wrinkled and dark like a raisin. She stops what she's doing immediately and bows. "Yes, Goddess." She retrieves a silver goblet and pitcher from a nearby table and begins to pour.

My mother holds up a hand. "Not the red." She snatches the goblet away. "I want the white."

The old woman stiffens, as does every other slave in the vicinity.

"My apologies, Goddess," the woman says quietly, "but there is no more white wine left."

My mother's brows arch. "Where is it?"

"Gone." The old woman begins to tremble. "The last of it was finished yesterday."

"There's more somewhere, *find it*." My mother dismisses the woman with a wave, but agitation colors her voice.

The woman's trembling worsens, and that's when I know with cer-

tainty that there is no more white wine in our reserves. We do have a small vineyard on the island, but I suspect that our inventory has been significantly depleted by the preparations for tomorrow's feast. I also suspect that when my mother works all this out, someone will suffer for it. The muscles in my stomach begin to knot. My mother's mercurial moods can come on like a late spring storm, sudden and catastrophic. I search the veranda, desperate, then lock eyes with my older sisters. The plea I exchange with them is wordless, but I know they understand. Euryale steps forward, tactfully placing herself between the old woman and our mother.

"Mama," she says sweetly. "It's so early. Perhaps water—"

My mother strikes with the speed and precision of a viper. The goblet she's been holding hits my sister in the face, splashing dark red wine across her tunic's front before clattering to the tiled floor. Euryale cries out in pain. I start toward her, but Stheno rises to catch my arm and holds me back. We both watch as Euryale doubles over, a hand clapped over her mouth. When she straightens, I see that a bead of bright golden blood has bloomed at the center of her bottom lip. She stands there a moment, stunned, before dragging a bare arm across her mouth and smearing the blood like honey. Anger prickles hot against my skin.

"When I desire the counsel of children, I will ask for it." My mother's words are low, menacing. "Do you understand me, Euryale?"

"Yes, Mama." Euryale stares at the ground. "Forgive me."

My mother's face slowly changes. Her dark brown eyes grow shiny and wet; deep lines wrinkle the corners of her mouth, so that her divine façade of youth is momentarily lifted. She stares in horror at Euryale's bloodied lip, and I find myself wondering if she's thinking of our father, of how many times he's bloodied *her* lip. Abruptly, she pulls Euryale close and cups her face. At her touch, Euryale flinches.

"My beautiful girl." My mother thumbs away the golden blood, her voice suddenly warm and gentle. "I'm so sorry. You know I didn't mean to strike you so hard. It's only that the preparations for this feast have taxed me a great deal. You forgive me, don't you?"

"Of course, Mama." Euryale has not lifted her gaze. "I forgive you."

My mother smiles, and I watch as whatever piece of herself she has

exposed reburies itself as though it were never there at all. She crosses the veranda and grasps the entire undrunk pitcher of wine the old woman tried to offer before. She holds it with both hands and drinks directly from its rim. I watch, slightly nauseated, as red wine dribbles from the corners of her mouth and down her neck, soiling her front. When she lowers the pitcher, her expression is slack, unfocused. She gathers up the hem of her tunic and saunters off the veranda in a flutter of yellow. Her attendants fall into step behind her, and after an uncomfortable pause, the lute player bows and excuses himself, too. In my mother's absence, the morning air seems to warm again, but a staleness lingers.

Euryale trudges back to her chaise and slumps onto it. Thanks to her immortal blood, the cut on her lip has already healed, but the white tunic—one of her favorites—is ruined. She looks down at herself, then at Stheno and me. There's a terrible helplessness in that look, and the anger I felt before reignites. Blood rushes to my face, and I clench my fists so tight my fingernails leave tiny red crescents in the meat of my palm. I eye the abandoned goblet still on the ground and fight a reckless impulse to go after my mother and hurl it at *her*, to let her have a taste of the pain she has caused. When Euryale's face crumples, Stheno and I quickly move to the chaise to sit on either side of her.

"I *hate* her." A tear rolls down Euryale's cheek.

"Don't cry," Stheno whispers fiercely. "She doesn't deserve your tears." She squeezes one of Euryale's hands hard. I clasp the other, but more gently. Stheno begins to hum a nameless tune, and I join her. We hum together until Euryale calms.

I don't remember how old I was when I realized I was different from my sisters, that their blood was golden while mine ran red; that the threads of their lives, and my parents' lives, would extend for all eternity while mine would eventually be cut. It is a quiet but unavoidable truth, one that has always set me apart from the rest of my family. In these moments, though, I know my sisters and I are still bound together—by the confines of our home, by the expectations of our ambitious father, by the shared fear of our erratic mother.

"I *will* marry," Euryale vows. There's a new steel in her dark brown eyes. "And then I will leave this island forever."