

Would've. Could've. Should've.

By Hannah Cataneo

A modernized retelling of the classic story of the gorgon Medusa found in Greek mythology

A dark shawl covers my head as I carefully walk up the opaque white stairs winding up into the sky. My arms wrap around my chest, holding the shawl tight as my hand trembles. The air grows lighter the higher I climb, and my heart beats heavier to keep up. A malicious caw echoes from the fleecy, snowy clouds above my head, and I don't dare think before my head snaps up. Wings fly past my vision, the color of olives, and the piercing sound fills my ears again.

Wind flaps around me violently, as a scrawny excuse for a harpy peers at me through her lifeless black eyes. Her skin is sickly pale and nearly green, her ribs poking out of her chest, and a mop of greasy, dirty chestnut hair falls down her back between her disproportionate wings. She hisses, and I catch a glimpse of her needlelike yellow tinted teeth. Her spindly fingers reach down towards me, her nails brushing my hood before I realize her poor intentions. I meet her vision, and she falters, pulling her clawed palm back. I know what she sees, and I experience the knots and stones that form in her gut. The harpy wastes no time in soaring up into her haven in the clouds again.

I reach the pearly gates, wreathed in clouds like an angelic halo. Sweet flute notes play ironically in the back of my mind. The double doors swing open, revealing a room full of thrones, and ethereal beings seated around a brazen table covered in silk. And the moment that strikes frost into my heart winds itself into reality. The gods' faces turn towards me, and I flick my

fraying hood down. Their faces bring me no joy, but I straighten my back and lift my chin defiantly.

The countenances that stare back at me are a mixed range of fright, absolute disgust, and anxiety. A woman with a heart shaped face, honey-kissed brown eyes, and coiled auburn hair was the only one to approach me. She grasps me lightly by the arm and leads me to a humble wooden chair seated near vibrant flames, dancing across the bottom of a fireplace. She pokes the flames once more, standing with her hands crossed politely behind my chair. Copper blooms in my mouth, and I realize I've been digging my fang into the soft part of my bottom lip.

A stunning blonde with perfectly white skin and rosy cheeks stares at me in disbelief, her mouth open in a perfect o. The young god sitting next to her had curly mahogany hair crowned by grape vines, who merely chuckles under his breath and took a sip from his drink. A cocky god with long silvered hair, loosely dressed in a white toga, leans over to the god next to him and whispers something. The latter's hair is a rich brown, and as he looks up toward me smirking, his eyes are a whirlpool of green and blue hues. Instantly, I'm sent back to the darkened temple, the beautiful ivory statue of Pallas Athena looming over my naked, cowering frame. My entire body aches and burns like Tartarus. Hate and terror fill my mind again like a cloud of flies swarming. And as soon as I was taken back, I return to the throne room. His features go cold and white as he stares into the dark, lifeless of my eyes, the deep scars lining my face, the tusks peeking out and the slithering obsidian serpents wreathed around my head, moving at will. Signs he should recognize. All curses he caused.

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Zeus clears his throat, not making eye contact with me but addressing me nonetheless. “What business do you have here, gorgon?” I urge myself to keep from lashing out upon him for his rash insensitivity.

“I am here for justice, Lord Zeus. The god next to you has wronged me deeply, as you can see before you,” I say, full of steel. The woman behind me sucks in her breath lightly. Athena stands from her platinum throne crowned in violets, her long white dress brushing against the cloudy floor. A golden battle helmet with a crimson plume crowns her head, covering her thick black hair.

“This woman speaks the truth,” she confirms, her voice sharp and judging. “Two nights ago, Lord Poseidon did something unspeakable, defiling this young woman and transforming her into the gorgon you all see before you.”

“How dare you!” Poseidon countered, rising quickly and flushing. “I did no such thing. Who even invited this . . . creature inside?” I stood, and Poseidon’s pupils dilate and he pales again. He fears me. As he should.

“You deny this?” I ask a small involuntary hiss in my voice. “You have the audacity to lie to the very face you’ve cursed.”

Zeus raises his hand to silence me, and I obey begrudgingly. Rage burns in my chest like writhing serpents, but I know better than to challenge the king of the gods.

“That’s enough of that. Whoever this gorgon is, she entered at the wrong time. Athena, calm yourself. We will deal with this later. Hestia, if you will.”

Hestia, the woman near the flame, places a comforting arm around my shoulder and guides me down a hallway that materializes, formed by cumulus clouds. The puffs feel significantly solid under the pads of feet, worn from travel and time. Our path descended

downward for what feels like hours, and the air grows thicker. A petite room greets me at the end of our journey, with warm flames brewing in the fireplace and a lumpy mattress fit for a malnourished farm animal. I gaze at Hestia, who to her credit, barely flinches.

“Please stay here for the time being, until I can confer with the others and convince Lord Zeus to hear your accusation. For the record . . .” she says, choosing her words carefully, like Zeus himself is leaning over her shoulder, savoring every word, “I do see the truth in your statement, and I sincerely apologize for the suffering you’ve endured. Now we must simply let the other gods understand that pain.” She looks as though she is about to say something more, but then closes her heart-shaped lips. “If you need anything at all, please let one of the nymphs of the mountain know.”

I know her lie the minute it leaves her lips. As she leaves, I come to a conclusion. The gods will not help me. They are just as fearful of me as their little subjects in Greece. And it is high time to take matters into my own hands.

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The deep dark cool of the mountain surrounds me as I delve deeper and deeper into Mount Ida. The walls of the caves glisten navy blue, and small flecks of silver are embedded in the rock face. A somber song from a female voice echoes through the rock, in an old language that I could not recognize. I avoid the serenade bouncing off the walls, following a narrow tunnel lit by the sunlight outside. The voice stops, and I freeze cold in my steps.

“Who is there?” The same female voice calls out, quivering slightly. I do not respond, and I continue walking, my feet creeping closer and closer to the sunlight by the second. Footsteps patter behind me, and I catch a glimpse of a pale face with coal hair trimmed short to

her head. “Ma’am? Ma’am, who are you? Please, slow down!” The moment the sunlight greets my dark skin, my hood flips back and the serpents coiled around my head scream at the searing light. The nymph’s hand is outstretched to me as I turn, her olive eyes surveying my face. The horrors of witnessing my monstrous being frozen on her pale complexion, turned stone forever.

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Weeks pass as I sleep in the darkness of the mountain, undisturbed. The singular nymph is still frozen in her step in the daylight, a warning to anyone who dares to enter my cave of solitude. I have not seen any of the gods since my ‘disruption’ of the summer solstice meeting. Not even sweet Hestia, who had given her word to come back and visit. After what I think to be a month, sunlight dims over the cave entrance. The stars twinkle as a frosty breeze blows in, cutting against my skin. As I listen to the night owls chorus, soft footsteps followed by metal nears the cave. The swish of expensive silk follows.

Athena stands there, bathed in starlight in front of me. Her coiled black hair is kept neatly under her golden war helmet, trailing down one shoulder. I stand as well, suddenly struck with inferiority to her godly beauty. My fangs peek from under my lips as I growl, “What are you doing here? I thought you had decided to leave me here in my misery.”

The goddess smiles coyly, and a flicker of an idea appears in her eye for only a second. She holds out her arms to me, and in her palms is a silver sword as long as my arm materializes. The handle is glimmering ebony, intricately carved with the leaves and prisms. Laid on the pommel was a bloodred stone. “Medusa, you have suffered too long. Take this, as a gift, and avenge yourself. Poseidon has sent one of his many sons, Perseus to rid this world of you. Do with this blade what you will, but do not take it lightly.”

My hands prickle as I take the sword, feeling its weight and power under my fingers. Athena is giving me a choice. Before I can utter a mumble a slip of an apology, I see her glance at the frozen nymph, and a small drop of rain falls down her cheek, and sorrow fills her eyes. Then she is gone.

The moon traces the sky as I wait, cross-legged on the frigid floor. The details of the blade handle press into my palm. Silence hovers around me, until the sound of metal sheathing. One of the serpents hisses, coiling protectively. I stand, my back towards the entrance to the cave and the moonlight spilling inside. The bottomless shadows of the cave conceal my figure from the sea god's son.

I unsheath my blade as quietly as I can as I hear the boy creep closer. My heart thunders through my ears. I swing the blade through the air with a sudden spur of courage and recklessness. A dull thunk is followed by resistance to my sword. The hero's blade meets mine, ringing as he drags it back down. Cold slices across my eyes and the bridge of my nose, the serrated tip digging into my left eye. Blood trickles down my cheeks, warm. The looks I've received, of disgust, fear, and hatred flash in my mind.

My chest twangs sharply and my eyes throb along with my heart. My blade swings through the air quicker than I can think. The boy's body crumples to the ground. I do not look down or back as I walk out of the cave, nodding to the innocent nymph framed in the entryway. The handle of the sword is warm in my hand. I kneel down to wipe the hero's blood into the grass. Silk brushes against my legs as I lift my face towards the sky, unable to see the stars. This is the last time I will suffer for nothing.

The son of Poseidon died for his father's crime. And he is only the first to pay.

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