~~Chimera~~

He did not like where this was going.

The ship moved at a slow pace, or at least he thought it was slow. In the middle of the night, the stars and breeze should have been more than enough of a guide, but the fog of the dead blocked his senses. It felt almost as if they were holding still, but the rest of the crew assured him they were moving, slow but steady.

Crew. He sneered, and looked across the deck to the others. The two satyrs were chatting about the tale of Bellerophon, and the female one, Pinna, shared specific details with her husband. She spoke of the battle between Chimera, Bellerophontes, and Medusa. She spoke of the nights the two had enjoyed each other's bodies. She spoke of Bellerophon's journey into Tiryns, and his battle with the Amazon inside its walls. She spoke of his escape, and how the giant had saved him in a primal slaughter.

How could she have seen so much? It ate at him, rats in his gut, and he clicked his fangs across his teeth as he glowered at her. Every time she looked his way, he could see she was weighing whether to taunt him or not. She chose wisely.

The other two, the serpent monster and the volatile 'hero,' they held each other's hands, walked the railings of the enormous ship, and spoke of ridiculous futures. What they would do once they were done this journey, with Pegasus free, the Fates no longer at Bellerophon's back, and perhaps even Medusa's curse undone. It was a silly fantasy; stories never ended so well, and not only did Chimera know it, he knew his old enemy knew it too. Or at least, so he thought, but the wisp of hope edged into Bellerophon's voice, and it earned a frown from the giant each time it did.

But none of that was the reason for his current frustration. The fog of the dead may have covered his senses, blocked him from Gaia, but he could still feel the world in his bones. He could feel the water through the unnatural wood, he could feel the faintest breeze sneak through the fog and touch his skin, and he could feel the rising of the sun.

He knew the direction they were heading.

“Chimera,” the male satyr said, “you said you can't track with this fog?” He hopped up to stand near the giant at the front of the ship, wife at his side.

“Not well. What animal can with a wet cloth over their nose?”

Gallea laughed. Chimera did not see what was funny.

“Are we at least heading in the right direction?”

He nodded. “We are.”

The two satyrs nodded in return, and went back to the deck. They seemed oblivious to his discomfort, but it was likely a farce. Tricky, mischievous creatures, satyrs were, and too smart for their own good.

He turned, and stared out against the wall of fog. Thoughts drifted through his mind, ruining the stillness he sought, waves on what were once calm waters. Would he see them again? Would their old bones recognize him?

“Chimera.”

Bellerophon. Chimera growled and looked over his shoulder to the small man. Dressed in only his tunic, the small warrior looked smaller still, an easy kill if he had the desire.

“Bellerophontes.”

“I really wish everyone would just call me Darian now. Bellerophontes is a dead name of a dead man, okay? Zeus saw to that.” The fox man hopped up onto the railing and sat upon it next to the giant. “No more glory, no more epic battles, no more conquests. Okay? If the situation was repeated, and I was offered a quest to kill you, I'd spit in their face.”

Chimera eyed the little man. “You did not enjoy the battle?”

“I did... and I still do, but if I had to pick between that and a woman's arms? I'll take the arms.” He winked, and motioned with his head to Medusa and the two satyrs she now spoke with. “A year in a quarry lugging around rocks, and then shipped off for slave labor who knows where? Shipwrecked, I end up with the most amazing woman ever. I'm taking my miracle and I'm leaving my old life behind.”

What a fool. The Fates would never leave him alone, they never did, Chimera was sure. They would hunt him for all time, no question. He didn't need to say it though, Bellerophon knew how childish his wishes were. The way his old enemy glanced down, then back at Medusa, and then back at the floor each time the topic of the future came up, it reeked of uncertainty and worry.

Chimera shrugged. “What do you want?”

“Just wanted to talk.”

“Why?”

“Because we're going to be fighting side by side. You don't want to know the person you'll be fighting next to?”

He knew well enough. “A fox.”

The small warrior smirked, and stood up on the railing. One slip and the warrior would fall from the boat, and yet the agile little man walked down its length a few feet, turned on a heel, and came back again, pacing with hands together in the small of his back.

“I guess that makes you the lion.”

Chimera nodded. “It does.”

“Can I count on the lion to watch my back then? Lots of opportunities to kill me coming your way, I'm sure.”

For a moment, he considered getting angry. He pledged himself, what more was there to discuss? But, humans were humans, sneaky and conniving creatures. Traitors to their own kind without a second thought. He could not blame his old enemy for the concern.

“Our fights are over. It is her I wish to see unleash her anger.” It was his turn to gesture to Medusa.

“... you think she will?” The tiny warrior hopped down onto his butt on the railing, and looked at Chimera with heavy eyes.

“I do. She suppresses her anger, and for what was done to her, I do not blame her. But you taught her to hope, little fox, and when she's forced to fight for that hope....” He tilted his head to the side, and groaned with release when the motion earned a loud crack. “Her name will be remembered for all time, for the death she will cause.”

It would not be him, the predator who hunted the humans and gods for centuries, whose face would be painted onto the vases of the future. It would be hers.

The small warrior did not look happy about it. Bellerophon looked at Medusa, who was circling the two satyrs in a game of predator and prey. The two half-beasts laughed, and jumped over her coils. How quickly the serpent beast regressed to a child, despite a century of solitude and turmoil. How had her innocence withstood the years?

Is that jealousy crawling up your spine, 'Chimera?'

“I suppose that's why I like her so damn much,” the small man said. He scratched his short beard, ran his fingers through his hair, and nodded. “And I'm jealous of her.”

Chimera quirked a brow at his old enemy, and rumbled a chuckle. “I saw the Erinyes return your armor. Repaired, I assume?”

“Yeah. They can't have their precious main character going into battle with compromised armor. It's back, shiny and whole.” Bellerophontes groaned and cracked his knuckles. A bundle of anger, the little warrior.

“... do you still think you are the main character in this story, Bellerophontes?” Chimera said.

“What do you mean?”

“Raped, cursed, and ruined by the gods she served, a monster, the once innocent woman becomes. The ancient serpent who finally finds the courage to leave her cage, and embark on a quest to free herself from her curse, when a human at last shows her compassion.” His voice grew deeper, quieter, and it rumbled deep in his belly as he spoke. “The Fates may have their eye on you, Bellerophontes, but your name will be forgotten as well. It is hers people will remember.”

Bellerophon's eyes opened all the wider. But, as if awakening, he shook his head before he hopped down from the railing, and smiled.

“If people remember her name, I don't want it to be for the bloodshed. We can do something better than that.”

“Oh? And what story do you think will strike harder than a story of murder and slaughter, little hero?” Chimera shook his head; no story he knew.

But Bellerophon grinned at him, and winked. “Redemption maybe? Guess we'll find out.”

And with that, the fox walked off to join the snake.

Alone with his thoughts again, Chimera turned back to face the fog, and frowned. Redemption. For who, for what? He was a relic of a dead age; he had no sins to atone, only the vengeance of a murdered race to dole. Bellerophontes was nothing more than an angry man with the power of the Fates behind him – or perhaps there was more? His old enemy never spoke of his past; what little Chimera learned of him was nothing meaningful.

Medusa though, the only sin the serpent had committed was being beautiful when she was human. Redemption for her was... what, to be forgiven by the gods? Chimera snorted, gritted his teeth, and stroked the claws of the dead creature's paws around his neck. What had Bellerophon meant? Sly, the little fox was.

He glanced over his shoulder. The group were chatting, smiling, and nodding at each other. Bellerophon didn't remain with them though, he moved past them after sharing a quick kiss with the serpent. His old enemy did not like the satyrs, but then, neither did Chimera. Storytellers, poets, musicians, liars. Every word they spoke set him on edge; they were trouble.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

A day past. The satyrs, the serpent, and the hero all stirred with anticipation. No patience, but at least Bellerophon did not start any more arguments. Medusa, as Chimera expected, played mediator, and kept the peace. Pinna and Gallea also regaled Medusa with tales of other heroes, of gods and goddesses, and of wars. But they kept to the stories with romance, and spun exaggerated tales of valiant men saving women from monsters and the like. Chimera found it sickening, Bellerophon did not care, but Medusa was enamored.

The serpent sat, coiled, chin in her palms and weight on her elbows, eyes wide as she listened to the tales. Like a young girl. He smirked, memories of his own family coming to his mind, children sitting around the fire, eyes wide. Eyes wide with the power of the Earth of course, with fire and dirt and water and wind, not the lies of storytellers.

A slow ache filled gut. At first, he assumed the memories were stirring the pain, but then the beat of his heart ached as well. A deep, slow ache that made his fingers tighten and his teeth clench. He got up, turned to face the fog in front of the ship again, and rumbled.

“Gallea,” he said, loud enough his voice carried over the empty deck, “we are near. Take down the veil, so I may see.”

Everyone got up. Bellerophon was by his side in a second, dressed in his armor, weapons at the ready. The satyrs joined him next, while Medusa was slow to slither across the deck to join them, eyes down and shoulders heavy.

“Medusa,” Bellerophon said. He must have noticed his lover's concern. “You can stay here, you know.”

“No! No I... if there were civilians, I would. But if it is deserted as Chimera says it will be, then I should come.” The serpent forced herself to stand tall, and removed the bow from her shoulder before plucking at the string.

“I suppose you two will be staying out of harm's way?” the small warrior said to the two satyrs.

Gallea snorted. “We will. Want no part in the violence, just here to tell the tale.”

Chimera rumbled deep in his chest. Would Gallea say the same if Chimera forced him into the fight, he wondered. But it was not worth the trouble. He was there to protect Medusa, not make things more difficult for her.

On the same flute as he used to summon the ship, Gallea played another tune. Another sad, slow piece, with mournful notes that rung across the empty deck; a perfect match for the laborious rowing of the undead beneath them.

The veil came down as would a settling mist. Heavy, but unhurried, the thick wall of fog fell to the deck, and then off of it over the railing and onto the sea. Chimera knew the sun would be setting, but the others had lost track of the time of day, and they each looked to the West in surprise.

But it was the sight before them that made them gasp.

The mountain rose high, black, and quiet. Where once, he would remember the rumbling of the Earth, the whisper of Gaia to her children, and the call of the wind along her fingers, the great mountain had long since gone dark. Now, only the blood of Gaia cracked along its sides, hot and red, dripping down into the sea, and where once earthquakes were like thunder, they were now only quiet murmurs.

Medusa, jaw dropped and eyes wide, slithered up next to him at the front of the ship. “The mountain... it's....”

“As I feared,” Chimera said, “the Amazon has gone to Sreria, where death is a part of its land.”

Bellerophontes hopped up onto the railing and peered out toward the black mountain that jutted from the sea like a thorn. “Death?”

“Giants died here,” Pinna said. She winced when she said it, and took a small step back when Chimera looked over his shoulder down at the little thing. Quivering, but she spoke nonetheless. “Most died in Phlegra, where the land looks much the same. Bleeding, and hot. Some giants went to Sreria, a mountain, isolated in the sea. The gods chased them there too, and....” She looked back to Chimera, as if waiting for him to strike, or stop her. But he did nothing, only rumbled, and stared at his old home. “The giants accepted death.”

Accepted was not the word he'd use.

“This is not a coincidence,” he said, “but I do not know what the Amazon, or the mask thief would have of this land of the dead.”

Medusa shivered with his words. Bellerophon had said she'd spent a hundred years surrounded by the dead, statues of people she'd killed. Another island, another mountain, and more bones. He would have to keep an eye on her.

“Alright, plan.” Bellerophon paced back and forth on the railing, shield on his back, sword in its scabbard, spear in hand and helping him balance. “We need a plan. I figured she'd be hiding in another city, somewhere she can use our reputations against us. But there's nothing here according to you two.” He gestured to the giant and the satyr. “It looks like it'll be a hot place. You going to be ok Medusa?”

“I'll be fine.” She nodded, and humphed.

“Chimera, you should lead. You refuse to die – stubborn bastard – so I can count on you to be at the head. And you know the land better than any of us. You alright with that?” As if a general to his captains, Bellerophon pointed his spear at Chimera in wait.

The giant smirked. Guard captain, Bellerophon said he used to be. He could see it now.

“I am.”

“Good. Ready the away vessel. Let's put the veil back up, hide Charon's ship in the fog, and see if we can get to the island on the smaller ship without being spotted.”

Chimera groaned, but nodded. It was as good a plan as any, but being trapped on the tiny boat – tiny compared to him – with a giant serpent, two satyrs, a volatile Fate's Child, and an array of undead rowing, was not an enjoyable experience. No room to stretch his legs.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Darian~~

Nervous. Again. He never used to get nervous, just excited. Now, it was definitely nervous.

Andromeda. Whoever she was, this thief had stolen a Moirai mask, and the Fates had said it was her who attacked him when he was a prisoner on a boat. A giant sea creature had attacked the ship, so... what, the thief could control that? Or had tricked it into doing so somehow? This thief had Pegasus, they had an Amazon queen at their beck and call, said queen was turned into a Fate's Child by said thief, and who knows what else. It was going to be the hardest quest he'd ever been on. And this time, he had people with him. There were plenty of good things about friends, and plenty of bad. If Medusa died on this journey, he didn't know if he could take it.

He breathed deep, and stared out at the mountain before them through the eye-slits of his ebony helmet. It wasn't just Medusa's life making him nervous, it was Otrera. He remembered sinking that sword through her shoulder, deep and hard enough that the wound would have bled out anyone. He remembered the thrill of the kill as he butchered and slaughtered her entire tribe. Over a hundred women, battle-hardened, sword and shield and bows and spears; he destroyed them all in the shadows of the trees.

And Otrera was a stark reminder of how much he really did enjoy that. He hated it, loved it, and hated that he loved it. Conflicted much, Darian? Bellerophontes? A name change was doing little to protect him from his past. Only Medusa was interested in the 'new' him, while everyone else seemed content to judge him purely on his history, Otrera most of all. And she deserved to.

He had to capture her, so she could take them to Andromeda. He had to capture her, so he could prove he was different now? What a joke.

Chimera got out of the boat first. He had no weapons, but Darian doubted the giant would be any better off with a weapon over his hands. He had no armor, but they didn't have time to hunt down a blacksmith and force him to make armor that could fit someone twice as tall, wide, and thick as a normal man. And yet, the wall of flesh and muscle stepped forward onto the black sand of the island as if he had all those things and more.

Unless someone had a giant axe to cut his head off with, he doubted the beast would ever die.

Medusa and Darian got off after him. The sea water, up to his ankles where the smaller boat stopped, was warm. He frowned down at it, and the black beneath. Were it a normal color, he'd probably have entertained lying down and enjoying the odd warmth, but the whole beach seemed sullied. Land of the dead, as Chimera put it.

“We only have an hour of sunlight left. I'd rather not do this in the dark,” Darian said. No time to wait, he slipped his shield onto his left arm, spear in his right hand, and walked beside Chimera. “So let's follow your nose, and go on the offensive.”

“You wish to spring their trap?” Chimera said.

“Yeap. We have a secret weapon.”

“... which is?”

Darian motioned to Medusa beside him. Both the giant and the serpent raised a brow, and Darian smirked.

“They've never seen what Medusa can really do, they've only heard the stories. If it comes to it, Medusa can jump in, same as she did with me and you.” As loath he was to admit it, when Medusa transformed, she was a force, and one that not he or Chimera or any Amazon could contend with. He tried to offer her a smile, maybe the best one in the world, but it wasn't there. He didn't want this.

Medusa nodded, snake eyes closing, breath slow, snake hair flat to her scalp, before she drew her bow and readied an arrow.

“A hundred years of practice. I'll be ready.”

He nodded, but his jaw clenched inside his helmet. A hundred years of killing and you're still soft, Medusa. He loved that, and hated it; how familiar. It was going to get her killed.

And so, the three monsters moved forward. The weird mountain was only tall at its center, otherwise the island was a wide berth of gentle slope, black leading up to cracks along the mountain's face that bled red. The closer they got, the hotter it got. Medusa would have trouble if it got worse. Sweat was already dotting his forehead.

“I've never seen lava,” Darian said, “only heard it described. This is... this is unreal.” The waves of heat that poured out onto the slopes of the mountain were, unlike the land they trod, anything but dead.

“I hope where we're going isn't so hot!” Medusa shook her head and tasted the air with her forked tongue. Her snake hair did the same, though the nest of snakes had flattened to her head even more.

The giant rumbled. “It is cooler inside the mountain.”

“Inside?” Darian shook his head and leaned on his spear. “You think they're in a cave?” It made sense, he supposed. Chimera slept in a hole; it must have been a giant thing.

Chimera nodded, and marched forward. “Gaia's blood is deadly, even to a giant.”

Gaia's blood. More ancient entities who didn't have the good sense to die. Darian gritted his teeth but didn't say a word; pissing off Chimera would not be a good idea.

The walk up the mountain side was easy, except for the heat. The ground was smooth, flat, black, and calm. Vibrations filled the ground, rumbling depth that reminded him of Chimera's voice, deep but gentle. It'd be almost soothing, if it wasn't for the heat. The blood of Gaia, as the giant said, was so hot he couldn't even approach it. The bleeding red poured down crevices of black rock in small rivers, slow like mud, but alive. Some of the strands of red were small enough that he could approach, and not find himself buried in a cloud of exhausting heat. Close, he watched the lava flow, watched the lines of black along it glowing reds and oranges, and watched Earth's blood ease its way down to the sea. He tossed a rock in, and smirked at how it didn't sink immediately when it landed, but rather coasted along the surface of the lava before eventually succumbing to the crimson.

“Is there anything else here?” Medusa said. “It's all rock, and heat, and... more rock.”

“It was not always this way. But nothing remains of then, only the ashes.” The giant shrugged, and motioned for them to continue.

A higher slope greeted them, steep enough it'd be difficult to climb, but the slope also broke way into a flat path that came to a quick stop at an entrance. A grand entrance, tall, obsidian rock not dissimilar to the color Darian's armor. Squinting, he could make out the faded remains of carvings, indentations, or designs that must have been carved into the rock long ago. A cave big enough for giants.

“Stay behind me,” Chimera said. “This old home, it is one room, a stairway down, and then another room, larger, deep in the mountain.”

Darian nodded. “Probably in the second room then.”

The giant snarled, and gritted his teeth together hard enough Darian could hear it. Darian didn't care about the dead; what did the dead care if you touched their things? But he knew he was unique in that. Most people cared, and apparently that included the beast in front of him.

The cave was huge, tall, big enough that Chimera did not have to crouch at all. The walls were carved, polished, and shelves were cut into the odd rock. A couple of lit torches had been set on the shelves, out of place among the soot-covered relics. The shelves were decorated with carvings of things he only barely recognized: places, animals. And skeletons as big as Chimera were propped up against the walls. Odd decorations for a home.

Chimera stopped, and he stopped too. Darian blinked at Medusa, and she blinked at him, before the both of them looked to whatever the giant was looking at. He was staring at the skeletons, six of them, bones thick and long, tinted dark gray with age, and yet refusing to crumble with what must have been centuries of standing there. Real bones.

Real giants' bones.

“Gods,” Medusa said. She came up closer to Chimera, raised her height to his, and put a hand on his shoulder. “They're... that's....”

Chimera sighed, pushed her hand off his shoulder, and turned to keep walking. “Come. I can sense them, just ahead.”

He moved on, leaving Darian and Medusa staring at the skeletons. Who were they? Why were they standing up? Definitely not the time to ask. He tapped Medusa on the hip, and walked after Chimera.

The hallway, down a rough slope almost like a stairway, opened up into another huge room, tall, wide, and more skeletons. A room big enough that giants could have run around to play. In the center of the room, some more torches were laid out to provide light, and two people sat in the center. They were examining a pebble, a glowing white necklace.

Past them, a white horse stood, a gold ring of thorns around his muzzle, and dark eyes looking at Darian. Pegasus, he was still alive! He almost called out his name. The ring on his muzzle looked horrible, painful, thorny and brutal. Cruel. But, Pegasus was a tough old bastard. Darian breathed relief, smile sneaking in, and tried to step around the two in the center of the room.

They both got up, and faced the three.

“Otrera,” Darian said. He'd been hoping they were distracted with whatever they were doing. No such luck.

“Bellerophontes.” The Amazon plucked at the string of her unusual bow, a small grin on her lips.

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Is that it? Sort of looks like a ritual to me.” He gestured to the center of the room, where the glowing bauble sat. Its white light mixed with the torches, and lit the room well enough for all to see. It made their bodies cast colossal shadows along the cavern walls.

“Forgive me. Perseus thinks himself an actor, and thought we should pretend to be doing a ritual.” Otrera gestured to the man at her side with a nod of her head.

Perseus. A tall man, blonde hair reaching his shoulders from under his helmet, blue eyes, and he was wearing armor not dissimilar to Darian's, except gold instead of black. A radiant warrior, with an absurdly massive shield on his back.

“Perseus?” Darian said. Chimera stood beside him through all this, arms at his side, fingers flexing into fists. No doubt, the beast was looking to break the people who sullied the home of the giants.

“Bellerophontes. I've been looking forward to meeting you.” Perseus drew his sword, a perfect mirror of Darian's except for the gold grip, and smiled. A great smile.

Darian stabbed the shaft of his spear against the floor, hard enough to bring a loud thud of wood to rock. “I've never heard of you.”

“No, I don't suppose you would have, Fates' favorite.”

Darian froze. Otrera's and Perseus's eyes began to glow.

Oh shit.

But before Darian could react, Chimera took a step forward, and slammed a foot down hard enough to shake the mountain.

“I have no fear of Fates' children. I'll devour you all.” He pointed a finger at the Amazon, and rumbled. “I owe you.”

Something wasn't right. Darian reached out for Chimera's hand, to try and pull back the giant, but rustling grabbed his attention. He looked back at Medusa; she had a bow in hand, arrow ready, but she was looking around in confusion as well.

There were more skeletons. Four giant monoliths of bone, taller than even Chimera, stood along the walls of the great cavern, and they began to move. They stirred from their sleep with the crack and twitch of snapping rock and grinding of sand in the joints. Bone clicked against bone, and each skeleton took a step forward. Some had lost a finger or two, one their jawbone, but each rose from their slumber all the same. Their steps were harsh, uneven, and they twitched with unnatural cracks of their bone. But as they approached, their movements grew more and more fluid, until each was standing, moving, and prowling the same as Chimera would.

And their empty eye sockets leaked a black, heavy mist down their torsos, rows of ribs, all the way down to their ash-covered talons.

It was Chimera's turn to be shocked. He stood up straight, and stared at the oncoming dead. His mouth opened, jaw hanging slightly at the sight.

“You dare?” he said.

Perseus chuckled. “Andromeda dares. And before you ask, no she is not here. She works her magics from a distance, because she is no fool.” The gold warrior slipped his enormous shield off his back, and hooked it onto his left arm. The face of the shield held two swirling vortexes that looked more like a pair of eyes than anything. “I don't suppose you will surrender if I threaten to kill your beloved Pegasus, Bellerophon?”

“Sorry,” he said, and he pointed his spear at his new foe. “Pegasus would never forgive me. You probably treat him like a cart horse, but he's a war horse.” They'd never understand his old friend.

Pegasus neighed in response, and tapped one of his hooves against the rock. Don't worry Pegasus, I'm coming for you.

“He's so... beautiful,” Medusa said, eyes switching back and forth between Pegasus and their targets. “How could you do that to him?”

Perseus frowned. “You probably think me cruel.”

Darian stepped toward the man, his own frown turning into a grimace and growl. “Then I have you to blame for Pegasus's capture? I'm going to cut out your innards and–”

“You'll be killing no one. Murdering bastard.” Otrera raised her bow – great, another magical weapon – lined up one of her massive arrows, and aimed it straight at his head.

“He captured my friend!” Darian pointed the spear at the Amazon. “I'm sure you've both been using him to drag you around places! Or is that what your Andromeda wants? An army of slaves?”

Otrera winced.

Darian blinked.

“Enough!” A booming voice erupted from one of the skeletons, and echoed throughout the cavern. The voice of a god? It filled the cave, vibrated the walls, stirred the dust and ash around the skeleton's feet, and made Pegasus jump away. “Perseus, you know better than to entertain a victim. Stop playing with your kill, and kill him. Hu–”

An arrow lodged its way into the skeleton's forehead. The mass of bones took a step back, then reached up to pluck the shaft from its skull. A hole remained.

“You'll be killing no one!” Medusa nocked another arrow, hissed, and slammed her tail against the rock floor.

The skeletons screeched, high-pitched wraith-like sounds, and charged.

A part of him had hoped they could have settled this diplomatically, but it was a fool's hope. And, another part of him was hoping for a fight.

Chimera didn't need any orders, the huge beast lunged toward the bones of his kin, and the mayhem began. His voice turned into loud roars and rumbling growls that filled the mountain halls; for a moment, Darian was sure it was the dead cat on his head making the sounds.

The giant reached for one skeleton, grabbed it by the hand, and yanked. Whatever magic that raised them from their slumber was strong enough to hold the pile together, but not agile enough to move with Chimera's attack. The skeleton fell down onto its face, and Chimera crushed the bones of its skull into powder. The other three jumped him like beasts themselves, and fell into the center of the room. Claws and fangs on them all, they bit and tore into the giant, and he returned with his own.

The sound of teeth and fingernails on bone was ear wrenching.

Darian brought up his shield at the snap of Otrera's bowstring. One of her great arrows cut into his shield, stuck into it, with a bit of its sharp tip poking through the thick wall of his protection. He blocked a hundred arrows with the magical shield in Tiryns, but hers were not so easily dismissed.

Another arrow came, and he raised his shield again to block it. But when he heard the thud of it stabbing into the shield, he ran forward, and charged, spear pointed toward the Amazon. He didn't reach her. Perseus jumped in, and with his larger shield, ran into Darian's side. Shield on shield sent Darian flying, but he landed backward onto a rolling heel and practiced hands. He backflipped onto his feet again, drove his heels into the ground, and stabbed his spear at the other Fate's Child.

Perseus. A true Fate's Child. Darian could see it from the way he smiled, from how his exposed biceps held no scars, how his movements were fluid with no hard edge or hesitance. Like water. Perseus brought his enormous shield up, blocked the spear at a steep angle so Darian's balance fell forward an inch. Only an inch, but Perseus took advantage and spun around, moving toward Darian in the spin and slicing out with his sword with the spin's momentum.

Darian only had enough time to see Otrera draw an arrow, and fire it. His heart and lungs froze for long enough to feel time freeze along with them. The arrow was for Medusa, and it cut through her snake hair as the serpent ducked.

Darian fell to the floor like a stone; it was the only way to get under Perseus's sword fast enough. Shield hit the ground hard, and he rolled onto it, dropped his spear before getting back up onto his feet between Otrera and the serpent, and swung out with his sword as he drew it. She stepped back, but his sword swing was a feint. The next moment, his shield slammed into her hands, and her bow was sent to the rock floor.

He turned to face Medusa, to try and get back between her and the enemy, but Otrera was quick to take advantage. She charged him, hands reaching down to her sides. He expected her to draw a sword and run him down with a shield, but where one hand drew a sword, the other did as well.

No time to defend both himself and Medusa, Darian brought his shield up to block one sword, only to have to do his best to block her other sword with his own. Not easy. The clang of metal hitting metal in a harsh snap, fueled by the strength of Fate's Children, threw both their arms backward from the impact.

“I'm going to kill you. You understand me? You don't get to be sorry. You don't get to apologize. You killed my world!”

Sword came down, then the other, and he stepped back from the impacts. Again, and again she brought a sword down, a whirling maelstrom of rage crashing down into him with each swing of the blade. Her swords were not special gifts, just regular xiphos blades of ordinary metal, but they cut flesh just as well, and while they couldn't damage his shield, they left him with no opportunity to regain control. All he could do was block as Otrera pushed him further back, away from the center of the room, the roaring giant on the floor, and Medusa.

Perseus walked toward the serpent.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Medusa~~

She probably shouldn't have shot first.

Before her, Perseus walked, shield pointed at her with its huge, weird, swirling eyes. Perseus himself seemed like a beautiful fellow, from what she could see under his helmet. The cross in the helmet's face was bigger than Darian's, exposed more of Perseus's face, and there she found someone with the same confidence and sexual allure as her lover. But, instead of coming to her rescue, the killer's confidence was directed at her.

Her whole body started to shiver, down to the tip of her tail. She shot another arrow, and another, but Perseus blocked them with ease. They were meaningless against armor that magical anyway.

Chimera rolled around the floor. Somewhere in the mess, a host of bones and claws were digging into him. Was this how giants always fought? So brutal and savage, with hands instead of weapons, skin instead of armor. Not far from them, the Amazon was beating Darian's shield down like an anvil and hammer. That left no one between her and the killer.

And he was a killer. It was in his eyes. They glowed white, same as Darian's and Otrera's, but while the Amazon and Darian were all fury, Perseus, whoever this man was, was dead calm. Calm and smiling.

Pain hit her. Lost in the murderous sociopath gaze of the man, she'd forgotten about her hair. Blood dripped from a couple of the headless snakes, and their bodies wriggled and squirmed like fish on hooks. Living hair, it bled and hurt same as any flesh, like a dog whose tail was cut off. She did her best to ignore the wet red dripping down her back. Focus on the man in front of you!

She started to slither backward, but backward slithering was very hard. No chance she was going to turn her back to the man though. Slithering backward up the stairway she came from, she shot a couple more arrows at the man, but in vain. They didn't scratch his shield, let alone pierce like Otrera's had. If she could get past Perseus, she'd have made a grab for Otrera's beautiful bow, but there would be no getting past the gold warrior.

She had to get him away from the others. Away from Darian, and their target, she would be free to turn this bastard into stone. It'd take more than a shield to block Athena's cursed gaze.

“Did you know, Medusa, that a few years ago, I was tasked with killing you?” Perseus said. He chuckled, pleasant voice like bugs on her skin. Didn't he realize what he was about to do? Why was he so tranquil about it?

“Another hero come for my head? What was your excuse?” A little further.

“A man wanted me dead. Sent me on a suicide quest.”

“Ssssounds familiar.”

Her uncontrolled hisses earned a chuckle from the handsome devil. “Ah yes, you mean Bellerophontes's issue with King Iobates. A little different for me, but then again, a little the same. Before I left though, Andromeda intervened.”

Both of them were in the first room now. The skeletons of dead giants stood along its walls, but they were still. The growls and cries of battle rang throughout the caverns from below, and for all she knew, Darian was dead. No time to think about him, Medusa, you can save him when you kill this man. No one behind him, no one else around, no space, no room to dodge, nothing to hide behind. Perfect.

“Why did she intervene?” This Perseus fellow liked to talk, and any information was better than none.

“She needed the strength of a Fate's Child. Her goal is admirable, and I'm willing to do what it takes to make that happen.”

She hissed louder, and threw her bow down after another failed arrow. “The Fatesss said it was your Andromeda who attacked Darian when he was on the prison ship. It was attacked by a huge sssea creature!”

“It was.” Perseus grinned, and raised his sword.

No time left. Medusa let out her own roar, and changed. Her human skin covered itself in the same scales as the rest of her snake body, her mouth and nose morphed into a gargantuan snout of teeth and fangs as her body grew in size. Her torso expanded, she became taller, her arms thicker, her eyes bigger and pulled to the side of her face, like a mutated snake. The snake hair both healed, and grew, grew and grew until and they were pythons, each the length of a man and then some. Claws, fangs, everything became a monstrous, larger version of itself.

“Oh, twice the monster? I–”

She unleashed her gaze. Eyes wide, the gold wave of petrifying death shot out of her eyes with the speed of light. Perseus had already raised his shield when she readied the attack, but the man would be stone regardless. Many men had blocked her gaze with their shields, but the cursed gaze could not be blocked by armament.

She put out a clawed hand against the wall of rock to stabilize herself. Exhaustion tore through her, left her breathless, until she was reduced to panting and struggling to stay upright.

Perseus was not stone. He lowered his shield; its eyes now glowed the same gold as her deadly gaze. From behind the massive shield, Perseus stuck out his head, and gave her another smile.

“Ah, this makes more sense. I'd heard you were a truly ugly creature, but you seemed fine a moment ago. A bit more snake than I'd like, but pretty nonetheless. Now though, you're quite the monster, aren't you?” The bastard walked closer, smile never wavering. He spun his sword over his hand, used the balanced weight to catch the sword against his wrist so it spun around, before he caught it again. Like a dance.

She hissed and forced herself to rise. Her body weighed so much more after using her gaze, but she forced herself up anyway. The maelstrom eyes on the killer's shield glowed with taunting familiarity, but faded away after a few seconds, until the shield was dormant once again.

A shield meant for killing her.

Perseus jumped forward. She was still transformed, the only way she'd have the strength to fight a Fate's Child, but when Perseus slammed his shield into her face, it hit just like a punch from Chimera. He was only the size of a human, but the shield was meant for a giant! It didn't look it at first, but the wall of gold with its strange eyes was heavy, heavy enough it sent her top half spiraling over itself and onto the rock floor.

“Andromeda tells me Athena had a plan for me. It began with killing you. Imagine that.” He came closer, and smiled down at her prostrated body. Through the corner of her eye, she could see his sandals step across where her bloodied hair left a trail.

And when he got a little closer, she snapped her tail. A monster twice, she was, and a monster's strength she had. Her massive tail was heavier than Perseus and his ridiculous shield combined; it crashed into him hard enough to slam him back against the rock wall despite him blocking it. Like a bag of sand.

She forced herself up, took the opportunity of the opening, and reached up to her face. Blood dripped down over her claws, and something felt chipped or broken. Pain throbbed through her skull, through her face, under her scales, and into her massive jaw. Hopefully, the bastard felt the same way.

“Is this all a game to you?” she said, and started to slither along the walls of the room. Her voice was a layered mixture of horrible monstrous sounds, and her usual voice with all its tone gone, replaced with rasp and hiss. The deeper layer, the monstrous one, vibrated in her chest with its depth, and her neck scales flared outward like a cobra's hood with it. The pythons on her skull awoke from their concussions, and each started to dance, twist, and brace against the wall. She was dizzy, and everything shifted around when she was sure it should be holding still.

Perseus got up. He shifted his weight onto his opposite leg of the shield to deal with its mass, and raised his sword hand to rub a finger down his forehead. Blood. He looked at his red fingers, smiled, and licked a single time.

“No. A game, it is definitely not. But that doesn't mean a duel to death has to be cold and lifeless. This is where joy comes from, monster. This is fun.”

Before she could insult the man for his ridiculous, cruel views, he lunged. She backed away, and his shield collided with the wall. A crack ran up the side of the rock, and all the various old, dusty things sitting on the carved shelves fell to the floor. Perseus stepped through them, and swung with his sword. Another back pull of her body managed to avoid the blade, and it crashed into the wall same as the shield. When it bounced off, she lunged in.

But Perseus saw it coming, and brought his shield up within the same spinning momentum the bounced sword caused. The heavy slab collided with her shoulder, and sent her down into the center of the room. Perseus was on her in an instant, sword raised as the man jumped into the air and sliced down.

Her snake body lifted and yanked her top half out of the way, but not fast enough. Several of the snakes of her hair felt Perseus's blade, and fell to the floor, hissing, writhing, and gushing blood. She only had a second to look at the three snakes before the pain hit her.

She screeched, loud, hard, hard enough to hurt her lungs and twist sound until it sounded like strained strings and grinding rocks. Perseus winced and fell to a knee; blinded by pain and a familiar monster's rage, she took advantage. She launched her top half at him, as any snake striking prey would. Her claws found the flesh of his arms, and she lifted the killer into the air before she struck with her jaws.

But Perseus, despite her iron grip and monstrous claws tearing into his arms, brought his heavy shield up between him and her. She tried to bite it, to get her fangs around its edges, but each attempt was met with a hard shove forward from Perseus, each colliding with her teeth. But her snake hair was another matter. They struck out, finding chunks of armor and flesh and sinking their fangs into him.

His sword was not bound. Perseus only needed his wrist, and he swung the sword fast enough to catch her forearm. Scales and the odd angle prevented her losing her hand, but she had to let go of him and slither back. Blood flowed down her neck and over her scaled body, and the new wound on her forearm did the same for her claws.

But it was a familiar pain. She hated it, she loathed it, but the pain of someone coming to kill her, followed by the pain of their spears and swords, was normal. Enough was enough.

She snarled at the killer, and tried to put some distance between them. He dived at her, but instead of pulling further back, she took Darian's advice, and lunged in. Under his swinging arm, she slammed her arm into his body, and again sent the man spiraling through the air. The sound of his shield, no longer securely attached to his arm, cracking against the rock was deafening, but Medusa ignored it. She followed her lunge with another, and threw the whole of her huge weight toward the killer.

But Perseus did the same. Without shield, she thought he'd scamper for it, but instead the tall man charged at her with an upward thrust to guard against his rise. It caught her across the stomach, cut through her scales, and split the snakeskin until more blood squirted down the mess of her belly scales.

Snarling and hissing sounds that twisted and distorted her hearing, she held her cut belly and put some distance between her and Perseus. He walked after her, a smile on his lips despite the blood that soaked his arms.

If she didn't do something, he was going to kill her. She could still hear the sounds of battle echoing from below, of Chimera growling and what must have been Otrera's swords raining havoc on her Darian. She had no choice but to deal with the brute coming for her, and she was too exhausted to use her stone gaze again.

She feinted another lunge, but brought her body back as she snapped out with her tail.

Perseus smirked, did not flinch with her feint, and brought his sword up to catch her oncoming tail. With both hands on the grip, he kept the sword braced against her weight and her scales, so it cut through her snakeskin and halfway into the girth of her body.

She shrieked all the more, and convulsed in pain. Muscles refused to respond, blood gushed over the floor, and she fell to it as her body betrayed her. Everything became so heavy. Her hands pressed to the ground, claws scraped at the rock, and her snake hair writhed in agony. Get up. Get up!

Laughing, Perseus retrieved his shield, and walked over to her. He stood over her, sword in one hand, pointed at her monstrous face. His beautiful smile, his heroic pose, it all made her furious. How dare he treat this like a game. How dare he treat her like a quest! It wasn't fair.

“I think I'll take your head, monster. Perhaps I can use it to turn Andromeda's enemies to stone? Wouldn't that be wonderful?”

He raised his sword.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Otrera~~

She was winning!

Her swords came down one after the other. The power of the Fates flowed through her veins, colored her vision wide, blurred the edges and focused her on her target: Bellerophontes. Stamina was endless! Fury and rage and mystical power combined into a tornado of energy, and she slammed her swords down onto her enemy the same as he'd done to her to defeat her in Tiryns. There would be no mistakes this time. She would dance in his blood before the day was done.

She dared not look back at the giant on the floor. If he got involved, she'd be lucky to survive a single punch, let alone take on the Chimera and Bellerophontes at the same time. His screams of pain and rage were enough signal that he was preoccupied with Andromeda's summoned minions. To bring the ancient bones of giants to life, to do her bidding, that was a scary amount of power. The colossal, primal remains of the giants did not fight like warriors, they fought like beasts. They pounced onto the giant and tore into him with fangs and claws, ripped flesh from his body and tossed it aside before digging into him again.

She did not envy Chimera his position.

“Otrera, stop this! We don't have to do this.”

“How dare you!” She raised both swords this time, and swung them down with all of her strength. The impact raised her into the air; for all her strength, she was still a tiny person, and swinging a sword with the strength of a demigod meant every impact moved her small body in the opposite direction. But Bellerophontes was small as well, and every time he blocked with his shield, he slid back a few inches. “How dare you mock me!”

“I'm not mocking you! I'm trying to–”

She came at him again. One sword, then the other. The swords were regular metal, and the magical material his shield was made of could not be broken by her weapons. Her arrows still stuck out of the shield; those were magical. If she saw the opportunity, she'd try and grab one, maybe jam it through his helmet into his skull. See him heal from that!

“My tribe is gone, my family! Because what, because a pretty warrior boy had to play hero for a king? Make a name for himself? Get women into his bed, and gold, and have the crowd cheer his name?” She struck low, and he blocked. She struck high, and he blocked. Whenever she forced him to raise his shield far to block a wide strike, she caught a glimpse of his face through the slits of his helmet. He was sweating, grimacing, and if she dared admit it, looked sad.

Fuck him. She swung with both swords to the side, hard enough that when he blocked, he reeled with the impact. Running with the opening, she kicked at his chest, and caught him dead center. He fell back onto his ass, and she pounced, both swords pointed down. The slippery bastard rolled backward and hopped onto his feet, but she didn't give him the chance to recover. Swords came back at him, one to the side, the other following behind in a more downward angle. He blocked each one again, shield to each, with never an opportunity to counter attack. If things went according to plan, she'd have Perseus backing her up momentarily.

“I'm sorry about your tribe!” He pushed his shield back against her so the impact of her swords was enough to make her step back a few paces to keep balance. “You were attacking Iobates's land. I defended it. You can't blame me for that.”

“Oh yes I can.” Back on the attack and swords swinging, but Bellerophontes did the same, and got one sword with his shield, the other sword with his own. He knocked them aside away from her center, and he stepped quick to slice inward. She hopped back again, dodging the tip of his sword by only hair's breadth. “He was encroaching on our land!”

“You goaded him! Insulted him, in public, knowing how it'd go. You stirred a war, Amazon. You wanted a war.”

“He insulted our people! Called us weak!”

A part of her knew she was being blinded by her rage. Somewhere, a part of her knew she wasn't looking at the situation objectively. But she didn't care. She wanted him dead, gods she wanted him dead. Amandal, Lysia, Vella, dead. Nallia, Aeryn, Jonnah, dead. Her sisters, her mother, blood and tribe, all dead! Only death, only blood would avenge them. Ares would understand revenge, demand it!

“Then you're just as much to blame for falling prey to his words, Queen!” Bellerophontes came at her, and jumped. High above her, he brought his legs up and sword pointed at her, body hidden behind his shield. She had to sidestep to get around it, and she landed on his sword side as he came back down. Her swords were up a moment later, and she caught the swing of his blade as he sliced at her while stepping past her.

“I am a queen of nothing, and no one! My land gone, my tribe wiped out, and our children have fled.” Tears blurred her vision, but the white glow of her eyes only increased. She pushed the bastard's sword away with hers, and came at him again, this time from below. She crouched, sprang upward, and sliced up with one sword. Strength, powerful and inhuman, filled her and sent her flying; she came down after with the other sword swinging with her.

But the fox stepped aside for the first swipe, and stepped back again for the other. She landed in front of him, and managed to catch a glimpse of his pained expression yet again. He was too close to use his sword, but the moment she realized it, he brought his knee up with a jump similar to her own. The knee guard of his armor crashed into her chest, and sent her flying back. There was a cracking sound, and a flood of pain hit her once she landed. Cracked ribs. Wonderful.

She coughed on her pain, only to make it worse, but it wasn't enough to stop her. Hands against the floor, she pushed up and rolled out of the way in time to see Bellerophontes crashing down. With his shield. Why his shield?

“I can only say I'm sorry that things happened the way they did, Otrera. I regret my decision to help Iobates, but you're at fault just as much as I am.” The small warrior rose from his knee in a slow, calculated fashion. His fingers squeezed on his sword grip hard enough to crack his knuckles, and a bead of sweat dripped off his chin.

“Like you know anything about regret.” She came at him again, one swing, then another. Bellerophontes moved into her attacks though, and with a sword to block one attack, shield the other, his feet were more secure. She was getting tired, swinging two swords into his shield over and over and over, and she knew it.

“I know everything about regret.” He came at her again, but sword first. She swiped it away with one of her own, and blade hit blade hard enough to ring loud through the massive cavern. Bellerophontes stepped in with his shield in front of him, and the proximity meant she had to step to the side, away from the earlier sword swipe, around his shield side. The bastard swung his shield out though, drove it into her other sword arm, and sent her flying back a few feet to land on her ass.

“Fuck you! You know–”

“Everything! Everything I did for Proetus and Iobates. I wish I could take it all back!” He ran at her again, glowing white eyes like rays of death through the slits of his helmet. In his ebony and silver armor, he looked like a wraith, and for a split moment, she caught her breath. He used the moment to feint a sword slash, but instead spun with a kick. The hard metal of his greaves slammed into her thigh, and she half turned as she fell onto a knee from the impact. And again, he did not waste the opportunity. He drove his shield down toward her head, and while she did her best to block it with her wrist, the one armored with a metal forearm guard, it wasn't enough to stop the impact from driving her into the ground.

Her head hit rock. Everything went black.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Darian~~

Finally.

He took a breath. How the crazy woman had managed to stay on the assault for so long, swing after sword swing, he could not fathom. She must have really hated him, more than he could comprehend. And he could comprehend a lot of hate.

Shit, Medusa. He spun around, but found neither the woman or Perseus. They must have moved up the stairway. Darian made a run for the stairs, but stopped after twenty feet. Chimera was on the ground only a leap away, and the giant was bleeding everywhere. Two of the skeletons remained intact, and they were on the giant's chest with their claws. It was like watching wolves tear into a deer, complete with their fanged, exposed jaw bones biting into his muscle and ripping out chunks of meat.

Forget him. Get Medusa. Let the giant die, get to Medusa!

Gods damn it.

He leaped toward the skeletons. In all the chaos and scrambling of giant limbs, it was hard to aim his sword, and if he missed he was going to skewer Chimera's neck. But sure enough, his sword cut down straight through the skeleton's skull. A short sword and a big skull was enough to keep the blade from cutting into his companion, and as Darian fell onto the rock floor next to Chimera, the skull broke apart with the impact.

He rolled with the landing as best he could, anything to get away from the giants. Bones of humans were light, but the bones of the giants were thick as clubs, and if it wasn't for the jumping plunge, he doubted his sword would have pierced the skull of one at all. It felt like stabbing a tree trunk. His arms vibrated from the contact, and he wobbled as he rolled away from the mess and got back up.

The headless skeleton reached for him, and grabbed his shield arm.

He did not see that coming. Looking around, he noticed the two skeletons Chimera had defeated were crushed into dust in many places; no use in just breaking the skull then. Shit.

“Bellerophontes.” The voice wasn't coming from any mouth, it was coming from the skeleton's whole body. It boomed, like thunder, and layers of screeching death underlined the morbid tone. “Defeated Otrera again? Poor girl.”

“You... you fucking twisted her! Made her–”

The skeleton threw him, hard. He flew through the air like a pebble, and crashed into the floor as a rolling mess before colliding with the far wall. Things inside him snapped, and the familiar pain of a concussion and broken bones flooded him. His shield was gone, but at least he managed to keep hold of his sword this time. He pushed with hands to get up, and breathed a sigh of relief when it worked.

But screamed when he put weight on his leg. Something inside bent, twisted, and tore against the muscle within his thigh. Broken leg. Wonderful.

“I am not Perseus, Bellerophontes.” The headless, colossal skeleton of fangs and claws marched toward him, each step heavy and loud with bone on rock. “I do not play with my food. You escaped my sea creature. You survived Otrera's wrath, twice now. You are the most stubborn of the Fate's Children to die.”

Well, that was something, he guessed.

“You're killing all the Fate's Children?”

“Of course,” the headless skeleton said, “or you'd be at my door, serving your masters. I struck first.” It reached down for him. He tried to hop away, but a broken leg meant he wasn't going anywhere. Hard bone wrapped around one of his arms and pulled him up. The other hand reached for his other arm, and held him apart like a cross. “Now die.”

He was going to lose an arm. Even he couldn't survive losing a limb, he'd bleed out in moments.

Pegasus! He looked over and down the cavern wall to where the horse was still standing. Pegasus probably couldn't move, by whatever magic was cast on the gold thorns wrapping his muzzle. His head was down, and he cast glanced Darian's ways, but the poor creature couldn't hold his eyes for long. Probably didn't want to see his old friend die. Understandable.

But just as the skeleton started to pull, Darian fell to the floor. He screamed when another crunch shattered his mind and replaced it with black pain. He'd landed on his broken leg, and the pain returned a thousand fold. But it was better than losing his arm.

Somewhere, in the chaos of being thrown across the room, the Chimera had come over to join him. Darian managed to look past him and fight through the blur of his vision to see the dusty remains of the other skeletons. Chimera himself was covered, head to toe, in bite marks, claw marks, and even giant-bite-sized chunks were missing from his body. The huge wounds were healing before Darian's eyes, slowly, but healing nonetheless. And the blood-covered giant had his claws on the skeleton's forearms.

And he crushed them into powder.

The skeleton tried to turn around, but Chimera got his hands onto the thing's rib cage, and tore it apart. The legs fell over, and Chimera stomped them into the rock until they too were nothing but dust.

The giant had saved his life. He almost said thanks, but looking up at Chimera, and with the beast looking down at him, it wasn't needed. Comradery born of the battlefield? He laughed.

“Die!”

The Amazon. Up above, both swords pointing down like daggers, she soared through the air and came down on Darian. He froze, eyes wide, staring up at the screaming woman.

Until Chimera snatched her out of the air like a troublesome fly. He held her small body by the waist in one hand, other hand holding one of her legs like a twig, and shook her. Her swords fell away, clinking along the rock, followed by the screams of the queen in his hands.

“Let go! Let go! I need to kill him! I have to kill him!”

Darian stared at the Amazon “Gods... Chimera. Th-thanks.”

The giant grunted, and nodded in return. “You proved yourself.” He motioned to the pile of skeletons in the center of the room, where Darian had intervened.

“Pegasus.... Medusa! Shit, Medusa. Gods, I have to... to....” He forced himself to stand. Pain was irrelevant. Broken bones, crunching and grinding, renewed the fire in his veins until he wanted to puke. But it didn't matter. Get up. Get up and do something.

He looked at Pegasus. His old friend was stomping his hooves, and shaking his head. His grand white wings unfolded to their full length, and he flapped them hard enough to stir the dust in all corners of the room. The horse wanted to move, but couldn't. Get to him.

Groaning, sweating from heat and exhaustion, Darian reached for the wall and forced himself to stand on his good leg.

“Let's... let's get that ring off of Pegasus's face. He can–”

A yell filled the cavern. Everyone looked to the stairway.

Perseus came down the stairs. He was reaching behind his head, trying to grab something that latched onto his back, and he twisted around with each step. But the thing on his back didn't let go. Its arms were wrapped around Perseus's neck, hooked under where helmet met breastplate, and its fingers were fighting to keep hold.

It was Gallea.

“Get off! Damn beast!” Perseus fell to a knee, leaned forward, and reached behind him with his other arm. He wasn't able to look behind him well with his helmet on, and Gallea used that to his advantage. The satyr twisted and turned, ducked under the hand, and held on like he'd mounted a lion's back.

But eventually Perseus's hand found one of Gallea's horns. The Fate's Child threw the satyr down hard enough Darian could hear the crack. Gallea bounced like a log cracking against a river rock, and went limp.

“Out of nowhere, like a....” Perseus stood up, and looked around.

“Perseus!” Otrera kicked and squirmed, but Chimera's grip was absolute. She wasn't going anywhere. “Get this bastard off of me!”

Perseus frowned and readied his sword. He looked to the skeletons, but they were nothing but dust and shattered bones. He looked to Otrera, but Darian could see the look in his eye; he wouldn't be able to save her.

Perseus, bleeding and bruised. Gallea had attacked him? Where was Medusa?

Darian's body froze. Ice ran down his spine. His eyes petrified in his skull. Perseus killed her. He tried to say something, but his tongue was paralyzed. Perseus killed her and Darian couldn't even take a step toward him.

“You–”

"Darian!"

Her voice, her monster voice. Thank the gods. If Medusa was alive, then the satyr was the one who saved her. The thought took a second to process. Gallea had saved Medusa?

"Darian? Him?" Perseus tilted his head to the side as he looked down at Gallea. Then he smiled, and stabbed his sword down.

Darian put up a hand. "W-wai–"

The sound of sword cutting into flesh and slamming against rock choked the mayhem to stillness. Darian's mouth, still open, hung there as Gallea's eyes opened, and a holler of pain echoed through the mountain. Perseus plucked the blade from Gallea's stomach like plucking a blade of grass, and he flourished the blade with a flick of the wrist so the coat of blood splattered against the rock.

"Gallea!" Medusa came down the stairs, and Otrera gasped at the sight of her. She was transformed, battered, some of her snake hair missing, and blood covered most of her torso. Some of it must have been Perseus's – he could see the claw marks in his arms – but Medusa, even in her monstrous form, looked like she was ready to collapse. Her stomach, her tail, her face, it was all bleeding.

"Oh, Gallea? Then who's Darian?"

"I'm Darian." He spit on the floor. He couldn't do much else, not unless Perseus was willing to run up to him and get into stabbing distance.

Medusa got to the bottom of the tunnel stairway, but she fell to her hands when she did. Exhausted; she must have used her vision. How was the bastard still standing? It must have been that huge shield, it had to be.

"You picked a new name, Bell—"

The serpent, seeing Gallea, screeched. She pushed against the floor, snapped her massive jaw like a crocodile, and got up.

"Gallea! You stabbed him!" Her inhuman voice buried Gallea's groans.

"B...bastard." The poor satyr dragged himself further and further from the center of the room, his blood leaving a thick trail behind him and spread by his hooves scraping the rock. He held his wound with one hand, the other bracing the floor to help him inch away.

Perseus smirked at the satyr, and then at Darian. His eyes drifted over the scenario, to the wounded giant and his captive, and the center of the room where most of the destroyed skeletons lay.

“My my. You three are a hardy bunch. Such a grand tale this will make!” The Fate's Child stepped toward the center of the room, and with a large smirk, crushed the glowing necklace they'd all forgotten about. “The cursed serpent, the mighty beast, and the struggling hero, dead at my hands, Perseus, who loses his companion to such foes.”

“Uh... I'm still alive. I–”A hard squeeze from Chimera's grip silenced the warrior woman.

They all turned to look at the Amazon in Chimera's hand. Beaten and battered like the rest of them, but there'd be no getting out of Chimera's grip. Otrera's head sank.

Medusa hissed, but when she leaned out to ready a pounce, she fell back and braced against the wall. Darian did the same. Neither of them were going to go on the offensive. Neither of them could get to him, get Gallea out of there and away from the bastard. And Perseus knew it. He took a long time grinning at Gallea, who still inched further and further, coughing and groaning, blood trail growing. He turned to look at Medusa, and from how Medusa snarled, Darian could guess the fucker was grinning like a madman at her too. He completed his turn to face Darian, and he pointed his sword at him.

“I could kill you now,” he said.

Chimera snorted, and took a step forward. For a second, Darian thought he was going to offer their prisoner, but Chimera gripped the wriggling Amazon's hands into one so she could not escape, and he readied his free hand. Everyone was bleeding, but Chimera was a standing mass of crimson. It leaked from his colossal muscles, soaked the cat on his back, and when Darian looked down, he could see the trails of blood the giant had left everywhere. The skeletons had really hurt him, but Chimera stood tall, with a warrior woman subdued in his grip, and his rumbling voice challenging Perseus.

“Try.”

Perseus slowly lowered his sword, and looked up at the giant. “Don't suppose you'll let her go?”

“Your tale said I wouldn't.” Chimera rumbled again, deep sound echoing and filling the grand chamber until the mountain vibrated with it. He shook Otrera a little too, until she groaned and tried to kick him. But she was too short, the beast too massive with his arm held out, for her legs to reach him. “And....”

“And we heal quickly,” Medusa said. Where Chimera's voice was like the Earth, Medusa's voice was a monster's, layered with rasp and harsh growling sounds that defied her long snout and longer snake tongue. She was standing up.

“Ah. In the company of monsters.” Perseus, chuckling, reached up to his mouth, stuck a finger and thumb between his lips, and whistled. The sound was high pitched, painful, enough that Chimera and Medusa reeled back a foot, before they all looked to the sound of hooves on rock.

Pegasus jumped over to them, wings spread. A flash of memories hit Darian, of clouds and sky and wind, of rain and sun and the thrill of the drop. He almost called out to him, to his old friend, when the splash of hooves on blood forced his eyes down. Pegasus looked his way, lowered his head, and neighed a choked sound.

Perseus sheathed his sword, and jumped onto the beautiful horse's back, coating his white body in red, until slithers of blood dripped down his legs.

“Pegasus....”

“He will be there to see you die, fool, when I return with a proper force. A few skeletons? Andromeda has far greater at her whim, and you shall suffer it full force.” He laughed, and the unhinged madness in his voice made Darian's blood run cold. Lot of that happening tonight. “We underestimated the giant. The last of his kind, after all. It will not happen again.”

The blonde worm was a drama addict. He waved at them, kicked Pegasus's sides – fucking bastard – and left. Pegasus stormed past Medusa, hard enough to push past her and knock her monstrous body aside. His old friend was no gentle creature, he was a big and powerful horse, and he rushed by the great serpent as he left through the tunnel stairs.

And they were left in silence.

Darian looked to Medusa; she was already slithering over to Gallea, a trail of blood following her as well. Her transformation fell away, human skin returning to her bruised body, face returning to a human shape, and snake hair shrinking into its usual bundle of small snakes.

But before she could reach the groaning satyr, Pinna appeared. Like a ghost, she faded through the air beside Gallea, on her knees, already ripping off bits of her tunic and fastening bandages.

“... what the fuck,” Otrera said. Darian, Chimera, the two of them stared at the satyr. She didn't look their way, eyes locked on her husband at her feet.

“Stupid bastard!” she said. “Stupid stupid stupid. You're not supposed to intervene! If the Fates find out, they'll kill you!”

“Think... that Perseus fellow... beat them to it.” Gallea broke into bloody coughs, and lay back.

“No! No no no, you... you saved my life!” Medusa didn't care that Pinna appeared out of thin air of course. The serpent lowered herself down, and did her best to help Pinna bandage her husband. “You're not going to die. No no, we'll do something! We'll do something!”

Gods damn it. Darian wanted to help, he really did, but all he could do was lower himself down to the floor, and lay back as well. Otrera, dangling from Chimera's grip, glared at him with enough venom to chill his blood. Pinna's cries and Gallea's groans were a disturbing lullaby as exhaustion overwhelmed him.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

“Burn in Tartarus,” the Amazon said, and she spit on the wood beneath them.

“Yeah, well, maybe later.” Darian groaned and rubbed his leg. Half a day since it broke, and his body was already healing. The bone didn't need alignment, his flesh did that on its own – painfully – and the swelling and pain were all signs that it was healing very fast. Accelerated healing was not pleasant, but it was better than being off his leg for a few months. He'd be back on his feet in a few days, and in a few days after that, all traces of the wound would be gone.

It paled in comparison to Chimera and Medusa. Chimera, he knew could heal so fast, you could see the flesh cover itself in minutes; it was why fighting him in the past had required some sneaky, underhanded tricks. Medusa, her snake hair was already regrowing, and the huge gashes along her body were closed. Still wounds, but closed at least and no longer bleeding.

Gallea was a different story. He coughed, groaned, and screamed when they bandaged him up. Pinna cried, held his head as they did their best to treat his wound, stroked his hair, and everything else someone would do for their dying loved one.

Back on the ship, they all sat in the middle of the deck in a circle. Otrera was smart enough to not jump overboard with her hands and feet tied, thank the gods. Chimera kept a close eye on her too; he looked like he wanted to eat her.

Medusa stayed close to Gallea and Pinna. Her hair laid flat, her eyes too, and her hands held Pinna between bouts of sobs.

It was a very painful day, in both ways

They were headed to a nearby island, Paros. The villages there were growing, but for the most part the island was devoid of human life. Some place they could hide, get food, clean water, and try and save Gallea's life.

“Gallea you....” Darian winced when muscles tried to move him, only to bend and shift broken bone. “Gallea, you shouldn't... after what I did? You... you shouldn't have....” He frowned at Pinna, and she glared right back at him. She had appeared from thin air; some trick of the Fates so she could monitor his journey, no doubt. She hadn't jumped in even to save her husband.

From the way the wife was holding Gallea, it was obvious she'd wanted to, though. Darian wanted to yell at her, get angry, but he knew it was just his own hate at his choice. He'd chosen saving the giant because... because in the heat of battle, he put victory over Medusa. And that ate at him.

 “Sorry. Sucker... for a girl... with a tail,” Gallea said between coughs. He managed to smirk too, and wink at Darian, before more coughing fits took him.

 Pinna shook her head. “I–”

“I hope he dies.”

“How dare you!” Medusa slithered over to the Amazon, and glared down at her. “He saved my life.”

“Yeah well, you can guess what I think about you, the infamous Medusa.” And then, the Amazon spat on Medusa's belly scales.

Darian gritted his teeth until his jaw clicked and his temples hurt. If he could walk, he'd be kicking her jaw and teeth in until she was spitting them out. The satyr saved Medusa's life. Saved her life! Gods, he hated himself as much as the Amazon did.

“She's just trying to get you to kill her, Medusa.”

“I won't kill her,” Medusa said. But, she did lean down, and glare at the woman with her hard yellow snake eyes. “She may live if I turn half of her to stone, though.”

Everyone blinked. Even Chimera.

“Bunch of monsters,” the Amazon said.

Darian rolled his eyes. “You're the ones who kidnapped my friend, are holding him against his will. I'm helping the Fates to save him, and to get her a second chance.”

“Second chance?”

“I get the mask back from your thief friend – Andromeda I assume – and the Fates arrange a meeting between myself, Athena, and Medusa. A chance to argue for her side of the story.” Telling her didn't matter. She wasn't going anywhere. Even if she did escape, it was innocent information.

“To save your friend... Pegasus? He's a horse.”

“Fuck you.” Darian slapped his palm against the deck, tempted to drag himself across the deck on his broken leg, just so he could hit her. “Pegasus is... he's my friend, my best friend, and you enslaved him!”

“I did nothing! He was already enslaved when I woke up.”

“Woke up?” he said.

The Amazon frowned and looked away.

“No no, you started this,” Medusa said. Hissing, she reached down, and picked the Amazon up by the shoulders. She stared at the warrior as she slowly encircled her with her coils and wrapped her with a few feet of her snake body. “Explain yourself. Darian said he defeated you almost two years ago. He was still with Pegasusss then. What do you mean 'woke up?' How are you ssstill alive? How did you get the powers of a Fate's Child?”

Like a snake crushing its prey, Medusa tightened her length around Otrera's legs. Both winced, Medusa was still injured, but Darian could see the anger and desperation in her eyes.

Otrera's eyes went wide. Her breathing shortened to quick pants, and her struggles renewed. But with legs tied – bound in snake coils – and hands tied behind her back, she wasn't going anywhere. Medusa held her shoulders, and encased more of the helpless Amazon; each row of thick snake body around the warrior woman had her wriggling and fighting.

But despite her obvious discomfort, she only snarled, and stared Medusa down. “Why should I tell you anything?”

“Because... because....” Medusa looked to Darian. Darian grimaced. There was no reason for her to tell them anything.

“Because they have honor.”

The booming voice of the giant filled the deck. He hadn't said a word in some time, staring out into the mist from the front of the ship as usual. But, like a stalking cat, he'd sneaked his way over, and cut through the atmosphere like a knife.

“Honor?” Otrera said. “Don't make me laugh, you idiot–”

Chimera reached down, took the Amazon by the shoulders with both hands, and lifted her. Medusa had to loosen her coils to not get picked up along with the warrior woman. She was small person, Otrera, smaller than Darian, and she practically disappeared into the giant's hands when he wrapped her torso in both palms.

“They fight to save a friend. They fight to free themselves of an unjust curse. They fight to escape the whip of their captors.” The beast raised Otrera higher, so she was eye to eye with him, and he rumbled deep in his chest until Darian could feel it through the deck. “You went to war, and lost. Such is war. But now you are a child, whining and seeking petty revenge.”

“Petty? I–”

“Pathetic! Petty. Instead of raising an army once more, learning from your defeat, and marching to victory, you've become nothing more than a resentful assassin. You are a disgrace to the Amazons, and Ares will never favor someone such as you.”

Otrera opened her mouth, but said nothing. She was stunned. Chimera glared at her, face so close he could have licked her like tasting his next meal. They glared at each other, but Darian could see how shaken the Amazon was. He didn't know why, but Otrera looked... defeated.

“Andromeda... is a sorceress. She spent a long time bringing me back from the brink of death, almost two years. When I woke up, she... she... sacrifices lives to fuel the mask. I didn't know. I didn't... know....”

Darian and Medusa jaw-dropped in sync. She was talking. Chimera grumbled, but set the Amazon down with a gentle motion so she was sitting once more.

“A sorceress,” Darian said. “That explains what she did with the skeletons. And... and that creature she sent after me.”

Otrera sighed, and nodded. “She wants to kill all the Fate's Children, cause she knew the Fates would send them after her, once she stole the mask. When she heard about what happened to Bellerophontes, she captured Pegasus, because she needed wings.”

The Amazon was being helpful! Darian quirked a brow at the giant, and Chimera nodded in return, before sitting down with legs crossed, knees apart, and looked Otrera to listen. Whatever he'd said had broken her to the point her eyes were downtrodden, and her head hung forward.

“Why did she steal the mask?”

They all looked Pinna's way. The satyr stood before them, with Gallea doing his best to remain quiet behind her, head propped up on a bed roll. The poor woman was covered in his blood, but the man was alive.

Otrera raised her head. “... she... she's going to kill the Fates.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Medusa~~

Gallea did not look good. Pinna and her took turns watching him, replacing his bandages as best they could, cleaning them, and tending to his wounds. He was pale, and the wound wasn't closing like Medusa was used to.

She'd forgotten how fragile people could be. She was a monster now, she healed from worse wounds in days, but the poor man who saved her life was struggling to heal from one simple stab wound. Just one. No wonder the two satyrs wanted to stay on the sidelines; one wound and their life was in danger. She'd forgotten what that was like. The men she'd killed, their deaths were always quick. She never had to see this.

“How much longer till Paros?” she said.

“A few hours.” Pinna was sitting across from her. They'd moved into the cabin room, the one Pinna and Gallea slept in. Otrera was no longer a threat, or at least, whatever Chimera had said to her had broken her resolve somewhat; she could trust the giant to keep an eye on her.

Pinna combed her blonde hair past her small horns, and frowned down at her husband.

“You damn fool,” she said, voiced hushed. “You... you know we weren't supposed to–”

“Couldn't let her die,” Gallea said. He managed to say it without coughing, and earned a smile from his wife. “Can... can you imagine that story? Bellerophontes, angered with the death of his woman, vows revenge? It's been... done to death.” His coughing returned, and both women grimaced with each painful heave.

“Where does that leave me?” Pinna said. “Without a husband, just... just....”

Everyone went silent. There was nothing to say, no easy answers. A pile of misery and sadness and no way to fix it.

Medusa shook her head, but regretted it immediately. Her hair still hadn't healed, and the stumps that were once living snakes would be days before regrown. Still, she patted Gallea's chest, and smiled for him.

“When we get to Parosss, Chimera says he can find some herbs to help with the healing. You'll live, and tell thisss tale.”

“He better live,” Pinna said, “I... I can't do this work alone.”

“He'll live!” She nodded a few times, as if each nod would make it more true. “And... and thank you Gallea. I thanked you a million times already, but I think you were delirious.”

“I heard it,” he said. The satyr smiled a mischievous smile, and winked. “Half-beasts have to stick together... or something, I suppose?”

Medusa laughed. “I sssuppose.” With a gentle hand, she felt the man's forehead. Cold, and the satyr was trapped somewhere between shivering and breaking into a sweat. He needed proper rest, on land, with fresh food, clean water, and quality medicine. She knew nothing about plants, or how to use them for medicine, but Chimera did apparently. And after what they'd been through, she was starting to trust him as much as Darian.

“It does mean... you'll have to... adjust the story,” he said to his wife. “Can't have my... interference be mentioned.”

Pinna shook her head and shrugged. “Medusa defeated Perseus on her own. I won't tell if you won't.”

Medusa nodded. “And the others will agree, I'm sure.”

Pinna slid over, and Medusa moved so the wife could cradle the husband's head in her lap. His head was so heavy, it was crushing her, and despite her desire to aid the poor man, it was a relief when Pinna took over. Sighing, Medusa slithered over to the door, and looked behind her as she reached the exit.

“I'll come get you when we're near land.”

“Th-thanks,” Gallea said. Pinna said nothing, only stroked her husband's head and chest. Worry creased her forehead, and when she did glance at Medusa, it was not a happy one.

Medusa left. Pinna blamed her. Medusa blamed herself. It was a horrible mess of self loathing and directed loathing on Charon's ship.

Back out on the deck, Otrera lay on the wood and stared at the fog and mist above them. Her arms were still tied behind her back, and her ankles were still tied together too. She looked... conquered. Her eyes wandered the gray above, and her breathing was slow and calm. Perhaps the Amazon had simply surrendered to the reality that she was captured? Unlikely, given her tenacity. Medusa could not understand what Chimera had said that had struck the woman so, but Otrera had become silent and reasonable.

Kill the Fates. Kill the Fates? What would that do? Would people be released from their bound fates? Or would everything fall into chaos? The idea was so grandiose and ridiculous, Medusa couldn't even contemplate it. You might as well blot out the sun for all eternity, or flood the world in ocean for all time. They were meaningless ideas, because they would never happen.

She didn't want to think about it. She wanted normal. She wanted regular, down to Earth, normal things. She wanted to go home with Darian and curl up by the pool. She wanted to start a garden, grow food. She wanted her legs back.

Chimera and Darian were sitting by the queen. No one was talking, but the air didn't seem oppressive. In fact, if anything, it seemed lighter than before.

Medusa slithered up to her lover, and lay down next to him.

“Leg still broken?” she said, and smiled.

Darian laughed, and winced. “Don't make me laugh, still hurts.”

“Chimera looks completely healed.”

“I need meat,” the beast said, “before that is true. I cannot heal everything without food.”

As if on queue, Otrera's stomach growled, loud enough that all three of them looked at the Amazon. In the dead silence that followed, she started to blush.

“Yeah, I'm hungry. Fuck off.”

Medusa frowned. The woman was so mean and cruel.

“When I was a little girl, I'd heard tales of the Amazons,” Medusa said. “I can barely remember the stories, but they spoke of women who broke away from the cities. They'd started clans in different corners of Greece.” The serpent raised herself high, slithered around Darian toward Otrera, and looked down at the dark-skinned woman beneath her. “I thought they'd be... different.”

“Yeah well, there was only one clan in my corner of Greece. And Bellerophon wiped that clan out. Forgive me if I'm a little changed for the experience of surviving having a hole cut into me. I was only human at the time.”

She said 'human' with an edge to it, something Medusa knew was meant to anger her. But at the same time, Otrera seemed... bitter. Less a villain seeking to undo her, more an angry child, upset with circumstance.

Darian sat up, but Medusa held up her palm to him.

“You don't think I'm human?” she said.

“Look like a monster to me.”

Medusa frowned. “You know the story?”

“I do,” the Amazon said. She sat up too, and eyed Medusa head to tail. “It was horrible what happened to you. But it happened, and now you're a monster.”

Medusa blinked. Why was this woman so cruel?

“...I remember my mother,” Medusa said, “from long ago. She was a baker. And my father, he worked with trading, and trade goods. I think he was responsible for importing wheat.”

“I–”

“I remember serving Athena, worshiping Athena, and paying tribute. I remember paying tribute to Poseidon too. I remember serving faithfully. I remember being just a little girl, and coming home from the temple to tell my mother how the day went. So long ago, it's all hazy, and I can't remember the faces. But I can still remember the sssmell of bread. Not many places made bread then, not like now according to Darian, so people showed up for some Athens bread. It was well received. I can't remember what my mother looked like very well, but... but I can remember her smiling, when I said it sssmelled good.”

Darian and Otrera were both staring at her like she was a ghost, a spirit speaking of dead days. She had to dig hard to find those memories, and let her mind roam over things she'd rather forget; it was too painful to remember what it was like when she was human, when she had legs, when people didn't want to kill her on sight.

“I am not a monster. I am a woman. Are you no longer human because you're a Fate's Child?” she said.

Otrera looked down, then to Darian, then back to her. “I'm not sure.”

This woman! She dripped of self loathing. Medusa couldn't help but be reminded of herself, when she was newly transformed. How many days had she spent staring down at her reflection in the pool, wishing she wasn't who she was anymore.

“I think you are,” Medusa said. “Or at least, we all still have our souls.”

She slithered back over to Darian, and lay down around him in a few coils. On queue, Darian sat up against her coils near her torso, so she could rest her human half atop one of her coils, and stroke the man's hair.

Chimera rumbled a laugh, deep and slow, but when Medusa caught his eye, he looked back to the front the ship, and went quiet. The giant didn't believe as she did, but that was alright. She'd get through to him sooner or later.

“So, monster or not, what's the plan, hmm?” Otrera looked at her and Darian, and frowned whenever Medusa's fingers combed through to Darian's forehead and back. “You think I'm going to tell you where Andromeda is? I told you, I don't know where she is, I couldn't tell with how Pegasus flew me there.”

Darian shrugged. “I am sure you'll think of something useful.” His eyes closed, head drifted back, and he melted against Medusa's scales. She smiled, body warming at the feeling of his weight against her. Twice now he'd been through battle with her nearby. Twice he'd lived. Maybe they'd succeed on their journey after all?

“What about Perseusss?” Medusa said. “Do you know anything about him?”

The Amazon shook her head. “Not really. Andromeda never told me anything about him, and he never spoke of himself.”

Never spoke of himself? The man had seemed more than willing to talk about himself to her; probably because he thought she'd be dead. Cocky, arrogant.

“He told me... he told me he'd been sent to kill me, before all this. Andromeda intervened, and... recruited him, I guessss,” Medusa said.

“Well, now they're lovers, bent on killing the Fates together. And I'm sure that'll end well.” Otrera groaned, and lay back down.

“Why did you help her then, if you do not want her to succeed?” Darian said.

“For a chance at killing you. And because I owed her my life.”

Medusa eyed the Amazon. The small woman, thin and lean, muscle obvious against her tunic, shrugged and shook her head, long black hair shaking as she did. Acting. The Amazon was hiding something. Something to do with what Chimera had said to her that had broken her, perhaps? Medusa nodded, but made mental note. There was something there, some hidden reasoning that meant something.

Look at you Medusa, being sneaky and smart! She lowered her head to hide her smile in her forearm, and continued to comb Darian's hair.

Darian's eyes closed as Medusa ran her fingers down to his neck. “And you said she has to sacrifice people to power the mask?”

“She... did.” Otrera looked down again, and Medusa watched her. The Amazon looked torn, sad, which only made sense if she felt guilty about the lives sacrificed to give her her gift. Another mental note!

Darian raised a hand to take Medusa's out of his hair, only to hold it tight and press it to his chest.

“Did she say where she was getting those lives?” he said.

Otrera blinked, and raised her head to look at him. “... she did.”

“Where?”

The Amazon frowned, and tilted her head with a quick jerk, hard enough to crack her neck. “I'll tell you, on one condition.”

“Oh this ought to be good.”

“I'm sure you'll love it,” she said. “But, I won't tell you the condition until you're healed.”

“What? I have a broken leg!”

“You'll heal fast, you know you will.” And with that, Otrera lay back down again, and smiled. “I can be patient if I need to be.”

This woman had a stubborn streak to her, that was for sure. But Darian had beaten her twice already, three if she included the war. What lengths would this woman go to kill him? Medusa frowned; probably any.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Paros. Darian told her that there were several villages to the East, scattered across the rising land and dotted with fishing towns. As long as they stayed to the forest and rock faces of the West, they'd go unnoticed.

Chimera went out on his own, and disappeared into the rolling hills and forests. How a man twice as tall, eight times as heavy as any normal man could sneak around, she had no idea, but when Chimera wanted to, his feet were like feathers on the rock. Silent. Medusa and Darian found a decent cavern, a sort of large cave that bled into a canyon behind a short cliff. The karstic landscape of rock, cliff faces, sharp drops, and a smattering of bushes and trees made for good hiding.

The serpent, the Amazon, the two satyrs, and the hero sat around a fire come nightfall. Chimera still wasn't back, and Gallea wasn't looking much better. Pinna was holding his head and feeding him clean water. They found a nearby stream, boiled the water in a pot over the fire, cleaned and mended Gallea as best they could.

If Gallea died, Medusa wasn't sure what she'd do. She stared at the small man, and how his usually goofy face had a harsh grimace. He wasn't cold anymore, but hot, sweating, and his breath was shallow. If they didn't do something, the wound would start to swell, stink, and do all the things she'd heard stories about, horror stories about war seared into her mind to survive a century. And that'd happen to Gallea, all to save her.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it! Chimera will find something to help. Or the clean water, good food from the land, and lots of rest will save him.

“You think your giant can treat that injury?” Otrera said. The Amazon was still tied up – feet too – and lay by the fire. “I've seen a lot of wounds. His is how you die a slow death over weeks.”

Medusa snapped her tail against the grass. “What do you suggest?”

“Kill him. Spare him the pain.”

Medusa's jaw dropped. She looked to Darian, but he was frowning and staring at the fire. Every so often, he looked her way, and his eyes dropped again.

“Fuck you,” Pinna said. Her voice was wavering, and so was her hand. Gallea said nothing, but Medusa couldn't tell if he was sleeping, or just couldn't hear them. Or he could and didn't want to speak.

“You may feel differently in a week, when things are growing on his flesh, he's delirious with heat and pain, and he smells of rot. It doesn't smell nice.”

Pinna, Darian, and Medusa all stared at Otrera with wide eyes.

“He... he'll... he won't die! Chimera will save him!” Medusa slammed her tail again, but not as hard as she wanted.

Otrera had seen it then, the horror that Medusa knew from stories. Of course she had. Otrera was an Amazon, the queen of a tribe according to Darian. She waged war for years. Death was something she was used to.

Medusa shook her head. “Ssstop it. Stop being... stop treating him like he's gone. He's not gone yet.”

“He–”

“You're cold,” Medusa said. “You're cold, and mean.”

It was Otrera's turn to have her jaw drop, and she stared at Medusa as she sat up.

“You can't be serious.”

“I'm sssserious!”

“You... you're Medusa. Me-du-sa. Last I checked, you were betrayed by your gods, turned into a monster, and now the world wants you dead. Give me one good you shouldn't be as bitter as I am?” Otrera glared daggers at her, but Medusa met her stare and returned it. She knew hers were the scarier eyes, yellow snake eyes.

“Ssstare into the eyes of hundreds of dead men, women, and children, for a hundred years, and tell me how you feel.”

“Stare? I... oh. Stone....”

Medusa nodded, and slithered around the fire to get closer to Darian.

“That's right. An island of dead statues,” she said. “So forgive me, dark and scary Amazon queen, if I got over my hate and fear a long time ago. I had to face it every day.” Sighing, she shook her head again, then lay beside Darian. She never got perfectly comfortable though, not while Chimera was gone; she needed him to keep guard of Otrera.

Darian didn't seem too scared, even with his broken leg. He turned his head enough to meet hers, and put a kiss on her cheek. A quick kiss turned into a lingering thing, and his nose nudged against hers before he sank into her chest. She turned to face the fire, on her side with Darian in the groove of her body. She did so enjoy being the big spoon.

“And what's this about?” Otrera said. “Why are you two are item?”

She and Darian nodded in sync. It earned an annoyed groan from the Amazon.

“Andromeda attacked the ship I was on. I was being shipped to be sold off or something, and her sea creature – if that even was hers – broke the ship. I washed up on Medusa's island, and... yeah.” Darian propped his head up on an elbow and palm, and netted his free hand's fingers into Medusa's. “You don't approve?”

Otrera opened her mouth to say something, but caught herself. “... I don't disapprove, if that's what you're wondering. Humans sleep with centaurs and satyrs and everything else under Apollo's light. You say you're still a person, and not a monster, so I'm sure a snake woman is perfectly reasonable.”

“Even one cursssed by Athena?” Medusa said.

Otrera shrugged. “What do I care what that bitch does or wants?”

Medusa blinked. The Amazon was starting to sound more and more like Darian the more she opened up. Harder, crueler, and more bitter, but at the same time, the similarities were there. The thought made Medusa smile. If she could strike a friend in the Amazon, peace could be had! A better solution to their journey maybe.

Childish thoughts, but she entertained them anyway.

“You sound like you speak from experience, sleeping with non humans,” Darian said. Medusa half expected her lover to have a smirk or grin on his face, but his face was straight and calm. Intrigued even?

Otrera eyed him closely, as if looking for a weakness in armor. But after a moment, she shrugged and nodded.

“Amazons sleep with men only to breed; you probably already know. That doesn't mean we're not human and don't seek some companionship though. Typically, we'd seek that in each other, but a lot of us also enjoyed a good fucking from a dick every now and then. And I was the queen of my tribe; I had choices, selections. One time, we got into a bit of a fight with a tribe of humans, wild people, strange folk. We were hunting in their territory and we didn't notice. Instead of coming to blows, I negotiated with their leader. Turns out, they weren't humans, but something called a werewolf. They turned into these huge, giant wolves that walked upright. We're talking eight feet tall, fur and muscle, big shoulders.” The Amazon smiled and looked to the sky. “Sex with him was great. A few months that lasted, getting laid every couple of nights.”

Medusa's jaw dropped. “I... I uh... was he–”

“Oh they went full werewolf any time they were hunting, fighting, or fucking. So yeah, that was an eight-foot-tall beast between my legs. And his cock had the strangest shape too, you know? Flesh red from top to bottom, thick at the bottom. Fitting that thing balls deep inside was always tough. Worth it though.”

The silence hit them all like ice water. Even Pinna's gaze had drifted to Otrera, and her eyes were just as wide as Medusa's. The only noise was the crackle of the fire, a fire Medusa hoped covered the immense blush she started emanating. This Amazon was so... so... blunt! Otrera was smiling, but Medusa saw no teasing or mischievousness there. Was the Amazon truly so comfortable talking about sex? Sex with other non humans no less!

Medusa tried to picture the tiny, dark-skinned woman, naked, bent over, with a massive wolf human hybrid thing... doing things to her. A stark contrast to her, and how it was with Darian, a small man, who was regularly trapped in her coils.

The image made Medusa's body warm. Of course, once she looked back over at Gallea, warm vanished, and she settled her chin on Darian's shoulder. She could see Darian was intrigued by Otrera's story too, but her touch must have reminded him of the situation, and his growing smile faded. Contagious melancholy.

“You're very direct,” she said.

“Yeah well, life is short... for most of us.” Otrera looked over at Gallea too, and a frown settled on her face. “Brave of him to take on Perseus.”

“He... he shouldn't have had to,” Darian said. “I had an opportunity to run up and go after Medusa, but Chimera was in trouble. If I hadn't jumped in, he'd be dead. And... and you. Gods, this all your fault. You killed Stheneboea and Proetus just to put another mark on my head! And that fight in the cave, none of that had to happen. Gallea wouldn't be dying. Medusa and me were hurt, and somehow Chimera's still alive despite being half eaten and torn apart.”

When he stopped, Medusa looked to Otrera, and braced for the response. But the Amazon didn't bite back. She stared into the fire, and sighed.

“I'd never planned for anyone else to get killed or hurt. Just you, you fucking little bastard. Just you. Revenge for my dead family, my dead sisters, my dead tribe, re–”

“I–”

“Shut the fuck up!” the Amazon said. There was the bite Medusa was expecting. Her voice lashed out like a whip, and cracked the air hard enough to make them all freeze solid and their muscles stiffen. A prisoner, but a warrior queen still. “You think you got it bad, hmm? Shot out of the sky by Zeus because you got cocky? Turned on by everyone who trusted you because you were cast down? Boohoo for you, you stupid piece of shit. You treated a gift like it was something you earned, flaunted your power, and when your ego got so big you basically floated your way up to Olympus, Zeus shot you down. Condemned a slave for the rest of your life, and you spend a year in a quarry. Boo. Fucking. Hoo. Get back to me when you've seen a sole person butcher every loved one you've ever had as if they were pigs.”

She spat again, into the fire, and then she stared at Darian. Not a tear to be had, but anger so cold it made Medusa's blood run the same. From sexual to death in a single rant. The Amazon was a harsh woman.

“I am sorry though,” Otrera said. “About Medusa, and Gallea. By Tartarus I'm even sorry about all the stabbings your giant's taken. Big guy just can't die, can he?”

Darian nodded. “No, he can't. I had to drop a boulder the size of cart on him to beat him.”

Otrera smirked. “Useful dog.”

“Not a dog,” Medusa said. “He volunteered... sort of, when we asssked for his help. And... and he's proven himself a friend!” She nodded, and dug her fingers into Darian's shoulders to try and work through the tension she found there. So close, she could see him glance to her, and then away. His eyes found the fire, but when she moved her head a little closer, he looked away again. “... what's wrong? Is it about Gallea?”

“I... uh... no, it's not about him. Just... it should have been me. Not him.” The poor man gestured to Gallea. “I had to make a quick decision, and I saved the big dumb giant.”

“... that's why you look so guilty?” she said.

“Yeah, I–”

She put a hand on his mouth, and shook her head.

“Everyone is blaming everyone for everything, and that must ssstop. We're in this together, right?”

“She's right,” Pinna said as she wiped away more sweat from her husband's forehead. “I... can't take anymore blame. We–”

Rustling in the night made them all sit up straight. But, a couple clucks of the tongue – their chosen sound for telling each other it was one of them coming – settled their nerves. Chimera stepped into the firelight, and the sack in his hand was full.

“We are in luck,” he said. “Gaia has provided.”