

Medusa – Micah, Year 10, SA

Content Warning: Violence, Sexual Assault

I wake up to silence. Of course, I always wake up to silence, but this is different. Instead of waking to the peace of the temple and the calm of Athena's presence an anxious energy surrounds me.

This silence is a knife's edge. It is the silence prey feels in the moments before its world ends and it becomes nothing more than flesh to be devoured by a monster whose existence it can barely comprehend. It is the calm before the storm, the air crackles with the tension of oncoming violence.

This silence will haunt me more than anything that comes after. When I wake screaming from nightmares it will be the silence that stays with me more than the blood or the screams or his seashell smile. But today, all I know of the silence is that it is wrong.

I wash my face and say my prayers. I pull on undergarments. Some scorn the simplicity of my white dress and long hair worn unbraided, but to me it is freeing. In my society, a girl becomes a woman when she has her first blood, and a woman is only valued for the sons she can produce. I became a woman at ten years old. My simple clothes were replaced with extravagant gowns and my hair tied up in painful braids. I was betrothed by eleven to a man twenty years my senior. So I ran away. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I would not let that man, or any other, touch me. My worst fear was the idea of any man claiming me, as though I were war spoils, as though I were nothing more than meat, flesh to be devoured and discarded and destroyed. I once heard one of my father's friends say that every time he remarried, he wished he could destroy his old wife, that way she wouldn't complicate his existence. As though we are nothing more than nuisances, as though we are somehow less than them.

There are few places for an unmarried girl to go, somehow, I found my way to the temple of Athena and swore myself to her, I became holy and untouchable. The temple had become a home and a safe haven and so much more to me. My dress is a symbol of my purity, and my hair worn down and unbraided to honour the childhood I lost to the ideas and fantasies of men.

The silence still bothers me as I begin my duties, but honouring the goddess is more important than childish superstitions. When I look back on this day, I try to convince myself that there was nothing I could do to change what happened, but perhaps if I had listened to the silence, it all would have been different. Perhaps he never would have found me. Perhaps this story would have had a different ending.

But he does find me, and the tension I have been feeling comes to a crescendo. I know him by the trident in his hands and the seaweed in his hair. Poseidon; lord of the sea. And he is furious. His anger is not at me, for a god like him could never hate a mortal like myself. To Poseidon, humans are nothing but playthings in his petty squabbles with the other gods. I vaguely wonder what my goddess has done to bring his fury to her temple doors, but that doesn't matter, only that he is here. The temple should be a sacred and peaceful place, but in his eyes I see only storms and tsunamis and whirlpools.

The silence breaks at the sound of his voice, it echoes, as though coming from the bottom of the ocean, "Hello little girl," he says in the way a million men have said before and will say again. It is a show of power, a reminder that we have none, and we are never safe. A phrase only ever used to induce fear in those who should be protected. Every woman knows that when a man calls her 'little girl' she is in grave danger. By those words I know that he is here to destroy me. He is here to defile me in the house of my protector. He is here to humiliate Athena, to show her followers that her protection means nothing compared to his power. He is here to humiliate a goddess, for even she is not safe from powerful men.

Even as I turn to run, I know it will be useless, but I cannot just lie down as my worst nightmares are realised. I must try to resist, no matter how futile my attempts. It matters that I fight, even if it does not change my fate.

He does not give chase; he does not need to. He is a god; I am no challenge to him. I am just another body, another girl to use up and throw away, another virgin to deflower. I turn a corner to where I know there will be a dead end, and somehow, he is there. I turn too slow and he catches a handful of my hair. I become a feral animal, desperate to escape even if it means I lose the hair I have coveted all my life. His other hand claws at my waist, fingernails like seashells cutting deep into my skin, the screams begin as he pulls harder on my hair. Clump by clump he tears it out and I see the bloody clumps like bursts of flame as they drop to the stone floor. When he is done, he turns me to face him, and tears stifle my screams.

After that there are only flashes, as though I am a statue, distant and impassive to his rape. The worn stone floor covered in bloody clumps of golden hair. My white gown, torn and stained by my blood and tears and urine. His seashell-white teeth as he smiles. And then it is over, and he drags a thick sandy finger across my cheek, collecting the tears I stopped crying hours ago. It is almost gentle the way he moves his finger, wet with the salt of what he has done and puts it in his mouth. He smiles, "tastes like home."

Then he is gone. And I am left alone in the disaster zone he created. At first, nothing, and then everything all at once. For now, I ignore all emotions but one. I will not be sad or scared, I have cried and screamed enough for this life. Sadness will forever remind me of my tears, of the ocean, of him. I have survived my worst fear, nothing can scare me anymore. So, for now, there is only anger; at him, at the gods, at myself.

I pour all of my rage into one bloody broken scream,

"Athena!"

I do not expect her to come, not now that my oath of celibacy is broken. But she comes, and I know I am expected to bow my head, to not meet her eyes, but there is nothing holy left in my life, there is nothing left for me to fear. So, I stand there; naked, bloody and bald, and I look into the eyes of the goddess I dedicated my life to as though we are equals. I expect to see pity for my state, disappointment at my failure, anger at my hubris, but all I see when I look into those beautiful eyes is my own fury reflected back at me and I think that perhaps Poseidon has underestimated us both.

She opens her mouth and I hear her voice for the first time, "I release you from your service to me, daughter. And I give you the power to take your revenge. Never again will you be defenceless. Never again will my protections fail you." Then she is gone. There is a sharp

pain where he grabbed me. My head is heavier, but not with hair. The wound on my side hurts, but this pain is not the throbbing agony he left behind, it is the pain of beginnings and rebirth. A snake growing from my head, one of many, has its fangs deep in my side. My skin peels away, taking with it the marks he gave me. I tear at the old skin to reveal a new layer, hard as marble. Athena has given me her greatest gift, rebirth and invulnerability. I hear the snakes hissing and know that in the days to come they will comfort me when the nightmares come.

I walk to the temple doors and step into the sunlight. I have a mission and I intend to complete it. I will take my revenge on every man who has ever done to a woman what Poseidon did to me, and then I will find the lord of the sea and make him feel the way I did.