



KAITLIN NOBLE

MORTAL

MONSTER

MYTH

MEDUSA

Heart of
Stone

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The gods did not fear their end, but—much to her parents' dismay—neither did Gorgo.

There were many things that separated the gods from mortals. They lived endless lives, could heal themselves, and had dominion over magic, but there was also the color of their blood.

Immortal blood ran in brilliant shades of gold, blue, and purple. But no immortal—god, monster, or nymph—had blood that matched the color of a poppy’s petal or a berry ripening on an evergreen.

Crimson blood belonged solely to mortals.

It was a bead of that deep red blood that dribbled down Gorgo's leg as she hobbled toward the cave. Raw and slightly swollen, the scrape on her knee ached more with each step. She stopped short of the door, straightened, and wiped away the tear forming at the corner of her eye before going through.

The air was cool and moist as she crossed over the dirt floor, doing her best not to wince at the pain of trying to walk normally. A round wooden table with three stools stood a few paces inside, and beside it, baskets of vegetables and bread filled the shelves that were sunken into the stone wall. Mounded in uneven piles, pillows lined the back of the room, and a few large chests were pushed against the walls.

The light from the open door lit up Stheno and Euryale, who were sprawled over the pile of cushions. Euryale brushed grains of sand off her birdlike legs and stretched out the four clawed toes that made up her foot. She mumbled to herself as she cleaned away the sand, her lip sticking around the tusks that had recently grown big enough to peak out of her mouth. Next to her, Stheno dug into an orange, her sharp brass nails tearing through the rind like talons.

Gorgo's hand slipped behind her back, tightening over the delicate treasure it was holding, and her wings shifted to hide her hand further.

Stheno rolled her head back when Gorgo's shadow stretched across the room, and her eyes flitted over her sister before landing on Gorgo's wounded knee. She raised an eyebrow and scoffed. "You just can't help yourself. Can you?"

I'm fine, Gorgo thought defiantly, wishing she was capable of vocalizing her retort. *Thank you so much for your concern.*

"Shut up, Stheno." Euryale knocked her golden wing into Stheno's side. "Bapa said we should be nice when she's injured."

"It's her own fault that she keeps getting hurt. Why should I be nice about it?"

Euryale dug her nails into Stheno's orange and snatched it away. She got up, dodging Stheno as she lunged after her, and walked toward the door. "We'll get Mom."

Gorgo reached for her sister as she passed, wrapping her short fingers around Euryale's wrist where the metallic brass of her clawed hands faded into dark skin. *It's just a little scrape. I'm fine.*

"Come on, Gorgo," Euryale said as she shook her hand free. "We wouldn't want you dying on us."

Stheno sighed and dramatically kicked herself to a standing position. Folding her wings behind her, she flicked pieces of orange peel off her nails. Stheno followed Euryale out of the cave and started yelling, "Mooooooooom, Gorgo's bleeding again."

Great. Gorgo gritted her teeth and glared at their silhouettes as she moved toward the pile of cushions that made up her bed. When she was sure they were out of sight, she snuck her hand into the box that was hidden under her pillow and placed the wonder she had brought home within it.

Gorgo knelt by the chest next to her bed and pulled out the bandages she kept inside, hoping that she could treat her knee before her sisters brought her mother back and save herself from the inevitable lecture about how easily mortals could die—which she could recite word for word.

Using the light coming in through the door, Gorgo tried to assess the severity of the wound, but there was so much dirt clinging to the area that she couldn't tell where the deep brown of her skin stopped and the scrape began. She wiped the blood off her leg and winced as she picked at the pieces of soil that were stuck to her raw knee. Despite not being upset about the

scrape, tears gathered in her eyes, and she had to keep sniffing to prevent her nose from running.

A shadow streaked through the beam of light on the floor, and Gorgo didn't need to look up to know it was her mother looming in the doorway. She felt Ceto's disapproving gaze burrowing into her, and since she couldn't defend herself with words, she met her mother's narrowed eyes with every ounce of defiance she could muster.

With her sharp form draped in sapphire silk, Ceto was a sight to behold. Light caught on the iridescent streaks that flowed over her shoulders and ankles, tinting her skin shades of blue and green. Gorgo's mother held the same allure as a poisonous jellyfish—captivating enough to make someone forget that it's dangerous.

"Honestly, what were you thinking?"

The tears that had formed in Gorgo's eyes while cleaning her knee became harder to hold back under Ceto's scrutiny, and she felt how small she was compared to her mother. *I wasn't trying to get hurt.*

"Ease up, dear." Phorcys landed a peck on Ceto's cheek before coming inside the cave. "It's just a scratch. Let's not act like she's bleeding out."

Gorgo felt herself soften at her father's defense. *Hi, Bapa.*

Ceto stiffened. "If she doesn't learn to be careful, she won't live to see what little time she's been given."

Not bothering to respond to his wife, Phorcys knelt down and brushed a tear off Gorgo's cheek. "Alright, Little Monster. Let's get you patched up."

A smile tugged at Gorgo's lips when she heard her father's name for her. Even if it was just an illusion, it let her pretend that she belonged in her family.

Gorgo's parents had given birth to a variety of monstrous children. Two of them were born wrinkled and old and had to share one tooth and eye by passing them back and forth, and another had a serpent's tail instead of legs. Her sisters were all wondrously strange and unique, but from the moment Gorgo was born, she was notably different. Outside of the golden wings she shared with her triplet sisters, Stheno and Euryale, she looked human, but worse than that, she was mortal.

Gorgo's father picked up one of the bandages, and the fabric caught on the tough, crustacean armor that protruded from his ebony skin and covered his hands.

"So, how did you earn these wounds? Did you trip?"

Gorgo shook her head.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Your sisters didn't do this, did they?"

She hesitated, tempted by the chance to repay her sisters for calling her mother, but ultimately rejected his theory. The bright, bumpy shells that encased his fingers brushed against her leg as he examined her wound.

"Hmm"—he took a long pause to think—"Did a griffin fly over the island, and when it saw your pretty golden wings, did it swoop down and try to steal you away? Did you fight it off as its claws reached for you, walking away uninjured except for a measly scrape to your knee?"

Eyes wide with childish wonder, Gorgo nodded.

"Did you hear that, Ceto?" he asked with feigned awe. "Our child is incredible."

"Sometimes, I wonder if *you're* still a child," Gorgo's mother responded coldly.

Phorcys leaned in as he dabbed some blood off Gorgo's leg and whispered, "You actually fell off a tree. Didn't you?"

She shrugged, but her laughter betrayed her.

"Thought so. Did you have fun climbing it?"

Gorgo nodded.

"Well then, I have made the determination that you've found the best possible use for your time. It is far better to have one life that is filled with wonders and adventure than to live an endless, monotonous life. Isn't that right, Little Monster?"

Gorgo smiled at her father, who always managed to make her mortality sound like a gift to take advantage of rather than a challenge to overcome.

The repeated thrum of her mother's fingers against the door mingled with her sisters' distant cries of laughter. Phorcys carefully wrapped a strip of cloth around Gorgo's knee and addressed his wife without looking up from his task. "We won't be late."

"I'm not worried about being late," Ceto said a bit too sharply.

Phorcys' hands paused their work, and he shot a disbelieving glance toward Ceto.

"It's just that they're expecting us by sundown, and Apollo isn't going to keep the sun in the sky over a scraped knee."

"Ceto, it's barely midday."

"We still have to get there, and it could easily be a half day's journey."

"I think you're exaggerating a bit."

"You know how Poseidon gets when we aren't on time."

The thrumming quickened against the door, and Phorcys stopped tending to Gorgo's knee to look at Ceto. "We'll be fine.

I promise we'll leave as soon as I'm done fixing her up. Why don't you go see what the girls are doing, and I'll join you in a moment?"

With a final few raps of her fingers, Ceto sighed and left the doorway. When she walked out of view, Phorcys quickly tied off the bandage. Gorgo expected him to leave and follow her mother, but he stayed by the edge of her bed, looking at her with anticipation.

"Well? Are you going to show me what little wonder caused this injury or not?"

A grin filled Gorgo's face as she scrambled across the cushions. Shoving aside pillows, she revealed a small wooden box. She scooted back to her father and tipped open the lid. On top of her collection of shells, rocks, and dried leaves sat the pale replica of a beetle. She had mistaken it for a new type of bug, but a crack in the thin crust had revealed the form to be empty. Gorgo tentatively picked up the hollow shell she had found clinging to a tree branch and presented it to her father.

Phorcys turned it over in his hands, examining each tiny detail. "This is certainly well worth the scrape."

I think so too. Pride filled Gorgo's chest as he handed back her newest treasure, and she carefully replaced it in the box among the collection of unique items she had gathered. She settled the lid into place and returned the box to its hiding spot behind the pillows, far from her sisters' prying eyes. When she turned back, Phorcys was holding something wrapped in purple fabric.

"I have something for you. A little treasure of my own." Gorgo scooted closer, and he lowered his hand so she could see. "Now, it might not be as interesting as your beetle, but do you think you'd still want it?"

She nodded fervently, and he smiled down at her. He gently passed the present to her, and it looked much bigger in her small hands than it had in her father's. Gorgo peeled back the soft cloth and revealed a knife and sheath hidden behind the layer of fabric.

"I thought it might be helpful when you search for new wonders."

Gorgo picked up the knife and ran her thumb over the bumps of uneven pearls. Merging together to form a handle, they clung to a sharp piece of sea glass. She held the knife up to the light coming through the door. The translucent blade lit up in shades of turquoise and topaz, and the pearly hilt shone every color like a liquid rainbow was trapped beneath the surface.

Gorgo's attention caught on her sisters tussling with each other in the distance outside the cave. She lowered the knife so they wouldn't see it and slid it into the leather sheath. A list of possible hiding places compiled in her mind as she watched Stheno grapple with Euryale and flip her onto the sand.

Her sisters had never shared her appreciation for the small marvels she collected. When Gorgo had found a perfectly intact dried sea urchin, she had shown it to Stheno, who barely looked at the columns of bumps or purple stripes that adorned the shell's surface before tossing it to Euryale. But since Euryale hadn't been prepared to catch it, Gorgo's precious discovery had shattered on the cave's floor. After her sisters had ruined a number of her wonders, she stopped sharing the beautiful things she found with them. They never destroyed her treasures out of malice or cruelty. It was always carelessness, and a part of her feared they would accidentally break the knife if they got their hands on it.

Phorcys didn't need to follow Gorgo's gaze to know what she was worried about. He had helped her collect the sea urchin

off the dirt floor as she cried over each broken piece, and together they had returned the shell to the ocean. He had left for a few days after that, but when he returned, he had brought her a small, wooden box for safely storing her treasures.

"You don't have to show them if you don't want to. Sometimes it's alright to have things that are just for you."

Gorgo slid the sheathed knife under a pillow, climbed into his lap, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, thanking him for the beautiful gift.

"You have to be careful not to cut yourself with it so no one finds out, and so your mother doesn't get mad at me for giving it to you."

Shifting her weight into his arms, Phorcys pushed himself off the floor and, ducking under the door frame, carried her out of the cave. As he walked out from the forest's cover and onto the beach, Gorgo tightened her hold on him. Squeezing her back, he joined Ceto by the shore.

"Stay inside while we're gone," Ceto said in her best imitation of a motherly tone. "Maybe you can work on your embroidery."

Gorgo nodded even though she felt like rolling her eyes. Satisfied with her response, Ceto turned and walked toward the lapping water, beckoning Phorcys to join her.

He knelt to set Gorgo down on the sand, but she clung to his shoulders. *Bapa, don't go.*

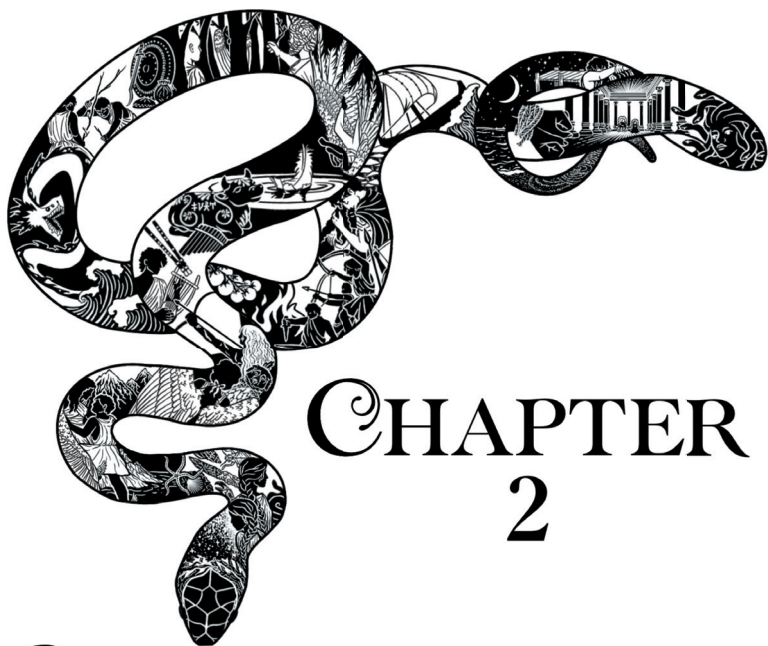
"We'll be back by sunup." He nuzzled his head into her black curls and whispered, "Try not to get into too much mischief while I'm gone."

He tickled her sides, and as silent laughter forced its way through her throat, Gorgo let him go. He kissed her cheek and

then lifted her knee so he could kiss the wound before joining Ceto at the shore.

They stepped into the ocean, but Phorcys parted the water under their feet. They walked on the sandy ocean floor, and the water swam around them, splitting into walls as they entered deeper waters. Foaming waves sloshed over the surface as the water collided behind them. Eventually, the ocean closed over their heads, hiding Gorgo's parents from view.

Gorgo returned to the cave and pulled her embroidery out of a basket, but she had no intention of working on it. Instead of sewing, she waited. It didn't take long for her sisters to take to the air, and when they did, she grabbed her new knife and ran into the forest behind the cave.



CHAPTER 2

Gorgo ran a few paces behind the treeline, reaching out to brush her hands against each tree's bark as she passed. When she found the one she wanted, Gorgo hooked her foot on a knot in the trunk and pushed herself up into the leaves. Grabbing the clothes she kept hidden among the branches, she hopped back to the dirt and started unpinning the shoulders of her dress so she could change into the outfit she had to keep hidden.

Ceto had made numerous attempts to direct Gorgo's energies toward safe, sedentary activities, but sewing was the only one Gorgo had tolerated. The real excitement had come when she realized she could use the skills Ceto had taught her to make new clothes—clothes that made exploring easier. Using the fabric from one of her dresses, Gorgo had traced around her legs, cut away the excess, and hastily sewed together the two new pieces. By the end of the day, she had been wearing her first pair of pants

quite proudly. They had been poorly sewn and ill fitted, but even so, they had been better suited for searching for treasures than any of her other clothes.

Ceto had not been as taken with the new clothes as Gorgo. Gorgo had thought her mother was upset that she had destroyed one of her dresses to make the pants but quickly realized otherwise. Ceto hadn't intended to give her a new means to make exploring more efficient, and the next time Gorgo had looked for the pants in her chest, they were missing. Rifling through her family's possessions, she had found them wadded up among her mother's things. After she made new pairs and they continued to disappear, Gorgo had decided that her pants were best kept a secret, only to be worn while on adventures and out of sight. She stored them on branches where she had once found a well hidden bird's nest, and whenever she needed to, she snuck away and changed into them.

Gorgo slipped the pants over her wounded knee—which wouldn't have been hurt at all if the extra fabric of her dress hadn't caught on an errant branch and thrown her off balance—and tied the laces at her waist. Adjusting the back so it sat around her wings, she secured her top with the pins from her dress. Gorgo tied the sheath's long leather straps around her thigh and slipped the sea glass knife into place. Pleased with the new addition to her outfit, she gathered her dress, stepped up on the tree's knot, and flung it over the branches before heading deeper into the forest.

Following trails that were invisible to the eye but well traveled by her little feet, Gorgo moved around the trees and brush toward her favorite place in the forest. She passed a few bugs and flowers that would have normally piqued her interest, but the sun had already shifted from rising to falling. She picked up

her pace, ignoring the twinge in her knee, as she begged the sun to stay at the top of the sky for a little longer.

I can't miss the stars.

In the middle of a small clearing, moss ate away at a single fallen tree lying among the rest. Gorgo had never successfully pictured the tree upright; it belonged with the earth that was slowly consuming it. Lichen and tiny mushrooms sprouted from its surface, forming a miniature forest along the trunk and melding it with the ground below.

Gorgo straddled the log, spread her golden wings to either side, and leaned back, trying not to crush any new mushrooms. Delicate moss twisted between her fingers as she settled herself against the uneven bark. Her little toes dug into loose soil, and the cool dampness of the dirt enveloped her feet until she couldn't tell where her skin stopped and the dark soil began. As she breathed in the raw scent of the clay and plants around her, her heart quieted, and she felt connected to every root below the ground and each plant that sprouted from them.

Gorgo's sisters might have been born to the air and her parents to the depths of the sea, but this—the earth, the forest, and all the wonders they held—was hers.

The branches of the surrounding trees stretched over the clearing. Stray beams of sun slipped through, hitting her gleaming feathers, and there, lighting up the undersides of the leaves, were her stars. She sighed in relief as little dots of light danced across the shadowed foliage above her, weaving together to create the night sky in the middle of the day.

The stars dissipated faster than they usually did, but she reasoned that was because she had gotten there late. When the stars faded away, there was an odd emptiness in the forest. Gorgo

sat up to see if anything was different or out of place, and it took her a while to realize that the forest had gone quiet. Besides the slight rustle of leaves overhead, nothing made a sound, and nothing moved. She waited for a bird to chirp or a rabbit to scamper across the dirt, but nothing happened.

Gorgo pushed herself to her feet and brushed the soil from her ankles. If something was wrong with her forest, she was going to fix it. Not entirely sure where to start, she wandered around the trees, checking their branches and trunks for any hidden creatures. Even as she ventured further into the forest, everything looked fine except for the distinct lack of any other living thing.

Disappointed in her sudden inability to find a single creature, Gorgo turned around to head home, but then she noticed a shift in the leaves a few steps away. When she went to investigate, she found a pair of snakes slithering quickly across the forest floor, both heading in the same direction. They slid past every sunspot and rock they came across.

Where are you two so determined to go?

She followed in their wake, keeping her distance and trying to be stealthy so she wouldn't disturb them. The sounds of the forest began to return as they led her to a clearing.

The snakes slid into the open grass and coiled up. Geckos and lizards lined the trunks of trees, taking up every available space. The birds filled the branches, decorating them with their colorful plumage. Gorgo had never noticed anything particularly special about the large glade in the forest, but now, with every creature gathered around it, it looked ethereal.

And in the center of it all, sat a young woman. A soft, yellow glow spread out from her bronze skin like the halo of shimmering light around the sun. Snakes coiled on the rocks and grass around

her, basking in the warmth of the sun, and as she leaned back with her eyes closed, it looked like she was basking with them. A black snake wrapped around her arm as she spoke to it, and it seemed to be paying attention to her words.

Gorgo moved closer to get a better look at the stranger on her island, but as she approached the treeline, the snakes at the edge of the glade rose up and hissed at her. She stumbled a few steps back, and when she looked up again, the woman was gone.

In her stead sat a child. She bore a resemblance to the woman Gorgo had seen. Her hair was pulled back in the same long braid, and the snake remained woven around her arm. But her skin wasn't glowing, and she was young. She couldn't have been older than Gorgo was.

Gorgo blinked repeatedly, trying to fix the error in her vision. Despite her efforts, the girl remained poised in the center of the clearing, and Gorgo wondered if she had imagined the woman that had been there initially.

The girl watched Gorgo just as intently as she watched the girl. Gorgo was still trying to process the fact that there was an unknown person sitting in front of her when the girl's head tilted to the side, and Gorgo realized that she was probably disturbing her. Feeling foolish, she backed away from the glade.

I wish I could have said something.

"That's alright. People don't tend to say what they mean anyways."

Her words rooted Gorgo's feet in place, but her head snapped back toward the girl. There were coincidences where someone's comment happened to match her proceeding thoughts, but this wasn't random. The girl had responded.

Except, she couldn't have.

"I find that snakes make much better company." The girl held up the arm that had a snake coiled around it. "Especially if you just feel like sitting quietly and thinking. But, if you need to complain about your siblings, they also make excellent listeners. I normally prefer thinking. But, today my brothers were particularly irritating, and I needed someone to talk to. Do you want to join me?"

Gorgo's mind blurred as the girl spoke. She was looking at Gorgo and speaking to her. She wasn't imagining it.

After a long pause, the girl said, "It's alright if you don't."

Gorgo managed to scrape together one coherent thought. *Okay.*

The girl's smile brightened as Gorgo approached the treeline. Gorgo examined the grass in front of her, noting where all the snakes were before she moved forward.

"Are you afraid of snakes?"

No. I just don't want to step on one by accident.

"You don't need to worry. They'll move."

Gorgo tentatively stepped into the glade, and the snakes around her slithered away. With each step a few snakes shifted, opening the path for her. The tall grass tickled her legs as she made her way to the rocky plateau and the girl.

You can hear me.

Gorgo meant it as a question, but in her shock, the thought came out flat.

"Oh, yeah. That's just a thing I do." The girl shrugged, and the snake that had moved from her arm to her shoulder bobbed uncomfortably at the motion. She pulled gently at the snake, and it let her unwrap its body from her arm and shoulder. "Would you mind holding this guy for a bit?"

Gorgo started beaming at the thought. She had always wanted to touch the creatures she found, but she hadn't wanted to disturb them. *Yes, please!*

The girl chuckled at Gorgo's overjoyed expression. "So, you're definitely not afraid of snakes."

Definitely not. Gorgo smiled.

The girl moved the snake into Gorgo's hands, and Gorgo could barely contain her excitement as it wriggled around her wrist.

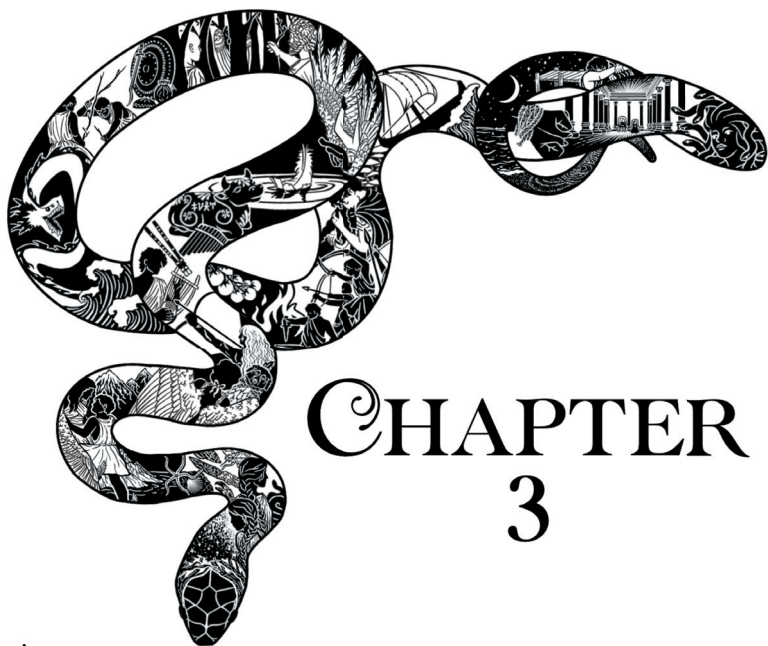
"What's your name?"

Gorgo. Her face scrunched involuntarily as she thought of the word. *But, I'm not sure I like it.*

"Well, maybe one day you'll find a better one."

What's yours?

"I'm Athena."



CHAPTER 3

A ging was not kind to Gorgo. As each season passed, her sisters grew stronger and more wild, but she barely changed. While she was stuck on the ground, Stheno and Euryale pushed themselves to fly farther and higher. Her parents egged on their every impulse while she was expected to smother hers in the name of safety. Their worlds became endless while hers stagnated.

Gorgo loved the days when her sisters left Sarpedon. It stung to watch Stheno and Euryale freely fly off the island with Ceto following them from the water. They could leave and see new places, but Gorgo had to stay confined within the unyielding limits of Sarpedon's shore. But on the days when they were alone, Phorcys explored the island with her, searching for wonders. He let her wear pants and climb trees. They wandered through the woods, and he pushed back the ocean to show her the shells

that lay deeper within the water. Those days always ended with scrapes, bruises, and a scolding from Ceto when she got back.

But Gorgo treasured the days when Athena came to Sarpedon the most.

When she came to visit, Gorgo's island was an entirely new place. Gorgo's joy for exploring the forests she had memorized reignited, and her monotonous days became memorable. Even the mundane became interesting when Athena was there to share it with her.

Gorgo rambled about interesting bugs and complained about her sisters, and Athena would tell stories about her family and all the places she had seen beyond Sarpedon. When Athena was there, Gorgo's world became a little bigger, and she didn't have to take a step off her island to make it happen.

Athena was only present for pieces of her life, but in those moments she became more of a sister to Gorgo than the two she saw every day.

Gorgo especially missed her when she was doing something boring like mending clothes or getting water from the stream. She often talked to Athena when she was absent, despite knowing Athena couldn't hear her thoughts when they were separated. All she wanted as she pulled up carrots and picked beans in the afternoon heat was to run off with Athena.

You've been away for so long. Save me from the agony of gardening.

Gorgo was surprised by the crunch of leaves behind her.

"The moon hasn't even finished waxing since the last time I visited," Athena said as she knelt next to Gorgo and picked a bean pod off its stem. "And gardening doesn't seem so bad."

You're here! Dropping her basket of vegetables, Gorgo snatched Athena's wrist and dragged her through the trees. *Come with me.*

"Wait. Gorgo—the vegetables—"

Will still be there later, Gorgo finished for her.

"What is so urgent?"

Gorgo grinned back at her with a wide eyed enthusiasm that verged on insanity. *I found something amazing earlier, but I didn't have anyone to show it to. You have to come see.*

"Alright, I'm coming. Just let me walk there myself."

Gorgo let go of her wrist. Athena followed her, straightening her light blue tunic and smoothing stray wisps of dark hair back into her plait.

Hopping through the forest in bare feet, Gorgo dodged the familiar protruding roots, while Athena swiftly but decisively moved over the ground in sandals that laced up her calf.

Happy that her sisters preferred to fly on the other side of the island, Gorgo led Athena out to the empty beach. She raced to the shore, moving around the rocks that protruded from the sand until she found what she was looking for.

Gorgo crouched around a small pool of water that had collected in a groove in one of the rocks. A bright red creature with five spindly arms covered in bumps rested in the bottom of the pool. Athena sat next to her and leaned over the water to observe.

I've collected a couple that I found on the beach before, but they were all dried out. I've never found one that was alive. Gorgo settled herself onto her stomach and rested her chin on her hands as she watched the creature lay perfectly still under the water. *Bapa said they're called sea stars, but I named him Bion.*

She looked up at Athena who was evaluating the ocean instead of the amazing creature in front of them.

"Does the tide usually rise high enough to cover this rock?"

I don't think so. Gorgo leaned to the side to look over the edge. The tide was retreating into the sea, having come and gone since she was there earlier that day, and the rock they were on interrupted the divide the strongest waves had left in the sand, marking how far they had stretched out of the sea. When she brushed her hand over the rock's side, it came back damp, but apart from the pool Bion was in, the top was entirely dry. *The water runs up to the side, but I don't think that the rock usually gets submerged. Why?*

"You said you found him this morning, right?"

Yeah . . . Gorgo narrowed her eyes as she tried to figure out what Athena was thinking.

"Well, if he's been in this little pool for that long and the tide can't reach him to pull him back to the ocean, then he probably won't survive much longer. The heat will either dry up the water or burn him up. I think little Bion is going to end up becoming one of your wonders soon."

But I don't want that! Gorgo shot up and dusted off her hands, but they froze as she reached for the tidal pool. *I want to pick him up to take him back to the water, but I'm not supposed to touch things that are alive.*

"One of Ceto's rules?" Athena asked with disdain.

*A little crab pinched my finger. All it did was leave a bruise, but she made me stay in the cave for the rest of the day and work on embroidery—*Gorgo's nose scrunched as she thought about the endless pattern of swirls her mother had made her sew—*Now, I'm not allowed to touch living things on the off chance that they will hurt me.*

"Sea stars won't hurt you, but if you try to pick up Bion, you might hurt him."

Gorgo sucked in a breath. *That's so much worse.*

She stared at Bion as he bent back the tip of one of his arms. Slowly but smoothly, he moved across the pool and settled under the darkness of Gorgo's shadow.

New plan. We will bring the water to Bion.

"I admire your tenacity, but if the plan is to keep refilling the pool forever so he doesn't dry out—"

Nope. We need a more permanent solution than that. If we can't take Bion to the ocean, we'll help him get there himself. Gorgo reached out, opening and closing her hands until Athena took them, and pulled Athena to her feet. *We need supplies.*



Armed with every bowl and cup they could find in the cave, Athena and Gorgo returned to the beach. The tide had already sunk further back into the sea, so Gorgo wasted no time in executing the plan.

Gorgo sent Athena to fill every container with water while she dug her hands into the sand by the rock. She worked with no grace but great speed, diligently carving a ditch around the rock's edge. The sun was at its peak, and she pulled her wings above her in an attempt to shelter herself from its heat as she expanded her hole and moved away from the rock.

Athena trekked back and forth from the ocean until all the cups and bowls had been filled to the brim, and by the time she was done, Gorgo's trench almost reached the water.

How do you know that Bion will die if he stays in the pool?

"Well," Athena started, pausing a little too long before she continued, "Bion came from the ocean. Doesn't it make sense that he'd need to return?"

I guess that's reasonable, Gorgo responded, not at all satisfied with Athena's answer.

"Reasonable? I'd like to think that it's logical."

Of course you would.

"Why are you being so quizzical today?"

Because of things like that. Gorgo pointed at her accusingly. *That word is too big for you to know. It's suspicious.*

"It's not suspicious. I enjoy having a large vocabulary." Gorgo narrowed her eyes at Athena, and she restated, "I like knowing lots of words, and besides, you also know what quizzical means."

I know all sorts of things my sisters don't because I spend time with you. Sometimes you just know too much. Like how you know that Bion won't survive in the pool. Or when you called my beetle shell an ex—an exol—

"An exoskeleton."

Yes. An exoskeleton. How do you know what that is?

"It's just some information I've picked up along the way."

Athena had never given Gorgo real explanations when she asked her these types of questions. Her answers were always just good enough to keep Gorgo from questioning further, and as Gorgo connected the mouth of her ditch to the ocean, she decided to let it go again.

Gorgo joined Athena and Bion at the rock. Damp sand clung to her entire body as she picked up one of the bowls of water. She stood on top of the rock, placed her feet to either side of the tidal pool, and looked down at the sea star. *Ready, Bion?*

"I've been following your lead on this one, but I don't think this plan is going to work."

I haven't even told you what the plan is yet.

"I've definitely figured it out, and your plan is flawed."

My plan is perfectly fine. Who are you to say whether or not my plan will work?

"I think I'm qualified as the go—" Athena's mouth snapped shut.

Careful or you might end up telling me something about yourself. Wouldn't that be tragic?

Without giving Athena time to respond, Gorgo tipped the bowl over, flooding the tidal pool. Bion slipped over the rock with the rest of the water into the moat. With a victorious chuckle, Gorgo grabbed the next closest cup and poured it out behind the sea star to float him down the trench.

The sand swallowed the water she poured without moving Bion any closer to the ocean. She dumped a few more bowls into the moat, but the water seeped into the sand instantaneously.

Ah, no! Bion!

Desperate panic filled her chest. Her fingers plunged into the sand around the sea star, picking it up along with a mass of gritty sludge. Gorgo ran, mud dripping down her arms, and plowed into the ocean. She dropped to her knees with a splash that sent stinging sea water into her eyes.

But, Bion was submerged in the ocean. He floated through the water until he sank to the bottom and slid along the sandy floor in a wiggling dance.

When he disappeared into the water, Gorgo returned to the beach. Drenched up to her waist, she sat down and picked at the broken bits of shells that had lodged themselves in her legs.

So maybe my plan was slightly flawed.

Athena came to sit with her, but Gorgo's comment did not elicit a chuckle from Athena like it usually would have.

"Do you really feel like you don't know me?"

I think I know you—what kind of person you are—but it feels like you're hiding all the specifics from me.

"And here I thought you were the person who knew me best."

How can I know that much about you when you're always evading my questions?

"I don't evade your questions. I always answer them."

Athena, your answers are ridiculously frustrating. Gorgo leaned back onto the beach. I barely know anything about you. Or your family. And you know everything about me.

"I talk about my family all the time. If anything, you know too much about my family."

I know that you have brothers, but you've never mentioned their names. I'm not even entirely sure there's more than one. I might have invented the second one altogether. Or maybe you have eight. I'm not sure.

Athena stared forward, her brows furrowed together. Gorgo sat with her in silence for a while as she held a debate inside her mind.

Athena, why can you hear my thoughts?

She responded like it was a reflex, "It's just som—"

—something you can do. Gorgo flicked a shell out of the sand. That answer worked better when I was little.

Athena pursed her lips as Gorgo squinted at her.

I know you know why you can hear them. So that leads me to my next question: what are you?

"Excuse me?"

Gorgo's hands flitted through the air above her as she worked through her thoughts. *I'm fairly certain you aren't a Titan. My parents don't have any bad relationships with the rest of the Titans,*

so if you were one, you wouldn't avoid them every time you visit. You must have a reason for avoiding them like you do.

"They wouldn't approve if they knew I came here."

All this time I've been friends with my parents' enemy. How scandalous.

"That's not what I—They just might hold a grudge against people who are like me."

Interesting. This information is helpful. So, definitely not a Titan.

"I'm not trying to help you figure this out."

Gorgo ignored her and continued. You have magic, so you aren't mortal.

"Who says I have magic?"

If we pretend like hearing my thoughts isn't a dead giveaway, there's the fact that you spontaneously appear on an island in the middle of nowhere on a regular basis. You don't have wings, so you don't fly here. You definitely don't sail here. There's really only one explanation. And on top of that, you can change your appearance.

Athena's ears pulled tight as she turned to Gorgo. "Alright. I get the point. If you abandon this particular line of questioning, I will answer some of your questions."

Gorgo crossed her arms.

"With proper answers."

Deal. Gorgo pushed herself up and folded her legs beneath her. How many brothers do you have?

"The number varies depending on what your requirements are for someone to be considered my brother. I guess the answer is somewhere between zero and too many to count. But I mostly talk to you about two of them."

And their names are . . .

"Can I answer a different question?"

Gorgo flopped back down on the sand and resumed her deductions from earlier. *Maybe you're a nymph. I don't really know what they look like. Bapa said they could shift forms, but he never mentioned anything about them glowing.* Gorgo rolled her head toward Athena and lifted her eyebrows.

"You remember that?"

I remember a lot from when we first met.

Athena hesitated before admitting, "Their names are Hermes and Apollo."

Gorgo's brain immediately started turning. She knew the name Apollo. She'd heard her mother complain about him every time she worried about being late or when Gorgo had come home after dark. Apollo controlled the sun. He replaced Helios when the new generation of gods overthrew the Titans.

He was an Olympian.

Gorgo bolted upright and yelled through her thoughts. *You're an Olympian?*

Athena winced. "Yes."

Zeus is your dad.

"That is technically and unfortunately true."

All the Titans have a grudge against him. No wonder you avoided my parents.

Gorgo stared at the lapping water as she processed what Athena had told her. The awe wore off, and a playful anger replaced it.

I cannot believe you've been lying like this all these years.

"I didn't lie to you."

You didn't tell me the truth.

"It was strategic avoidance." Athena twisted the hem of her tunic. "How long have you been thinking about all this?"

Since I met you. The whole time.

"Why didn't you bring it up?"

How was I supposed to ask you about it when you avoided answering any personal questions? And I was excited to have a friend, so I let it slide. Why didn't you bring it up?

"I didn't think you remembered the first time you saw me."

Of course I remembered! Filled with too much energy, Gorgo pushed herself to her feet and paced in a loop by the water. You're the only person outside my family that I've ever met, and you thought I just forgot about the first time I met you? You thought I saw a glowing woman suddenly transform into a child and forgot that entire experience?

"I don't know how good mortal's memories are. Historically, they haven't been very smart."

I feel like I should be insulted. But I have too many questions, so I'm going to move on. If you're an Olympian, you must be the goddess of something. I'm assuming you aren't the goddess of pointing out flaws in people's plans.

"My siblings would probably argue that that title suits me better, but I'm the goddess of wisdom and strategy."

Wisdom . . . Is that why you can hear me?

"My magic has a lot to do with minds. I can hear thoughts if I search for them and they aren't guarded against me. I could also speak into your head. But everyone seems to find that unpleasant, so I don't use that trick often."

How old are you?

"I'm not entirely sure. I stopped keeping track after a few centuries."

Gorgo had to stop pacing just to process the fact that Athena could measure her life in centuries instead of years.

If you're that old, then why are you always the same age as me when you visit?

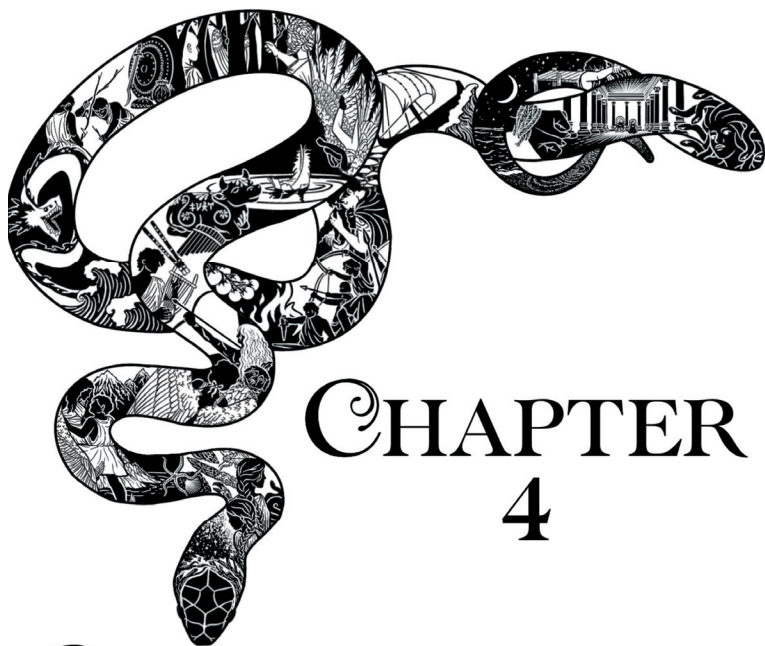
"I can alter my appearance, and I often change it to make mortals feel more comfortable. Children tend to be wary around adults—especially strange, glowing adults—so when I met you, I took on the appearance of a child. As I kept coming back to see you, I adjusted it to match your age. I liked talking to you, and I didn't want to scare you off by suddenly changing the way I looked."

Gorgo settled herself next to Athena. *That's actually really sweet.*

"This must be a lot to take in."

My parents are Titans. My sisters are all immortal monsters. I can get used to my friend being an Olympian. If anything, I'm the odd one out. Gorgo rested her head on Athena's shoulder. *It is a little weird that you're so old though.*

"It's a little weird that you're so young." Athena chuckled. "Let's call it even."



CHAPTER 4

Gorgo's fingers shook as one hand clung to the ridge she was using for support and the other sought out any possible handhold on the cliffside above her. She squinted at the gray rock as her hand failed to find anything else it could grab.

Stupid cliff.

She checked the distance to the ground, which was disappointingly close, before jumping down. Irritated and mildly out of breath, she never bothered to stand up from the crouch she landed in and instead rocked onto her back so she could lie down.

Gorgo peered at the blades of grass hanging over the top ledge that she'd never been able to reach. Her hand balled up over a small rock in the dirt, and she hurled it at the insurmountable wall of stone that towered over her. Her fingers felt around for another rock to throw when the patter of footsteps sounded behind her.

Hi, Athena.

Still reluctant to sit up, Gorgo craned her head back so that she could see Athena as she approached. Athena bore every resemblance to the woman Gorgo had met in the clearing as a child, her appearance reflecting the fact that Gorgo had grown into a young woman herself.

"I haven't seen this sight in a while," Athena said, holding a bundle of sage fabric by her waist. "I thought you gave up on climbing this cliff ages ago."

I can't stay away. I need to tame it. A mischievous smile broke past Gorgo's irritation at the unclimbable cliff in her forest. *How long have you been here?*

"Not too long. I dropped by the cave, but since you weren't home, I grabbed some embroidery and headed into the forest. I was on my way to check if you were at your tree when a familiar thud came from this direction. It didn't take much more for me to figure out where you were and what you were doing."

Gorgo sat up, dusted the dirt off her arms, and thought, *I'm so glad my fall helped you find me*, with a playful amount of sarcasm.

"Thank you for your sacrifice," Athena said as she plucked a few leaves out of Gorgo's curls. "So, why are we trying to climb this cliff again?"

Gorgo eyed Athena as her friend sat down against a tree and threaded a needle. *I wouldn't say we are trying to climb it.*

"Well, *you've* never been able to climb it before, so *I* certainly don't see much point in trying." Athena situated the fabric over her lap while Gorgo stood up and considered new paths she could try to climb. "Coming from someone who lives on a mountain, seeing the world from slightly higher up isn't as

exciting as you'd expect it to be. I don't think it's worth all the effort you're putting in."

It's not about the height.

"Then why are you torturing yourself over trying to climb it?"

I'm taller. No harm in trying again now that I've grown more.

"Gorgo, you're such a transparent liar. You've been that height for years, so this is as tall as you're going to get. I think we've both known that for a while, so why don't you try telling me the real reason?"

I don't think you'd understand.

Gorgo could feel Athena's glare on her back, and when she cast a glance over her shoulder, she saw that Athena had set aside her embroidery to devote all her energy to staring Gorgo down. "As the goddess of wisdom, I find that personally offensive. Now I definitely require an explanation."

Gorgo searched for the next foothold and gripped the small ledge with her toes. Once she felt secure, she pushed herself up and grabbed onto a crevice in the wall.

It's just that you get to leave here. You see mountains, cities, and I don't even know what else. This island is just one place you visit, but it's all I have.

She hadn't even climbed halfway up, but she was already high enough to be stuck. Gorgo couldn't see her next move, and she took a moment to consider where she was on the cliff and what path she had seen from the ground. She stared up at the top ridge of the cliff, which still felt desperately out of reach. Gorgo found the little ledge she had planned on climbing to, but even when she stretched toward it, her fingers fell short. She redirected her attention to finding a new foothold so she could move close enough to reach it.

I love Sarpedon, but I've seen all of it a thousand times over. I've walked all the beaches and memorized all the forests. The only place that could be new to me is on top of this stupid, unclimbable cliff.

Unable to move upward, Gorgo moved to the side, hoping she could find a new approach. She flexed her hands as she climbed, trying to work the soreness from her fingers.

"I can understand that, but you know there's probably just more forest up there."

You remember who you're talking to, right? I can find something interesting anywhere, and forests are full of hidden treasures. Gorgo finally hooked her fingers on the ledge and quickly hoisted herself up. The shelf in the rock was wide enough that she could rest her forearm along it for support, and she caught her breath as she scoped out her next move. *And even if it's totally empty, it will still be something new for me, which I can't say happens often anymore.*

"Alright. Comment rescinded." Athena picked an errant thread off her embroidery. "I had a question for you, but I feel like I might know the answer now."

Gorgo squinted at the crevice she needed to reach above her. She pressed her foot against the stone by her hips, lodging it against a slight ridge. Knowing her foot wouldn't hold her weight for long on such a small support, she planned exactly where each hand and foot would land before she reached up. Her leg extended, pushing her into position, and she smiled as her hand gripped the edge of the crevice.

What was your ques—

Gorgo's fingers met with a damp sludge and slipped off of the rock. Unable to adjust in time, her foot fell from its ridge, and her body crashed into the ground below with an alarming thud.

"Gorgo!" Athena scrambled to her side. "Are you alright?"

Gorgo grimaced at the ache in her back as she tried to shift. She flexed her hands and feet to make sure everything still worked. A sharp pain shot down each wing, and she wondered if she had broken them when she landed. She forced herself to sit, and the radiating pain slowly dissipated as she stretched her wings. *I think I'm fine.*

"Think again." Athena pulled Gorgo's arm toward her. Athena's hands were quickly coated in blood as she pressed the fabric she had been embroidering against the gash along Gorgo's forearm.

Gorgo's jaw clenched tight, and her arm burned around the edges of a wound she hadn't noticed at first. She searched the cliff face and found a drop of deep red blood sliding down the gray stone.

"Come on," Athena said and offered Gorgo a hand. "I don't think it's too bad, but we should fix you up so your mom doesn't panic."

Gorgo took Athena's hand and pulled herself to her feet, keeping the fabric pressed between her arm and chest. *If she ever comes back again.*

Athena undid the ribbon that was holding Gorgo's hair back and used it to tie the fabric in place around her arm. "What do you mean?"

Gorgo hadn't meant for Athena to hear that thought, but Athena's brows lowered in concern as they walked to the cave. *She hasn't been back in a while. No one has really. Bapa visited in the summer . . . I guess that was almost a year ago. The last time I saw my mother was at least the summer before that, but it was probably longer. My sisters went to live with the sirens. I can take care of myself, so no one needs to stay here anymore.*

Athena's countenance hardened. "They could at least come visit you, so you aren't alone all the time."

It's not like anyone other than Bapa paid much attention to me even when they were here, so it's not that much different with them gone. Gorgo bumped Athena's shoulder with hers. Besides, you visit.

"Well, regardless of whether or not Ceto is going to panic about your flagrant disregard for your mortality—"

"Flagrant disregard" seems extreme.

"Fine. Your general indifference," Athena said, softening. "Either way we should still clean your wound."

They quickly made their way back to the cave, and when they arrived, Athena rummaged around the shelves while Gorgo sat at the table. Eventually, Athena joined her with a jug of water and a small jar Gorgo immediately recognized.

Not the honey. I'm saving that. I had to hide it so I wouldn't be tempted to eat it all at once.

"We need it," Athena argued as she opened the water jug, so Gorgo stole the honey away before Athena could stop her.

Can't you use anything else?

"No. I can't." Athena reached for the jar, so Gorgo held it as far behind her as she could with her good arm.

Please.

"Stop fighting me." Athena leaned over her and snatched the honey away. "I can bring you more."

She dragged a chair around Gorgo so they could sit in the light from the doorway. She undid the hastily knotted ribbon and pulled her ruined embroidery project from Gorgo's arm. Gorgo winced as the air hit the cut. Dark blood coated her arm, and she couldn't tell exactly where she had been injured.

"Where's your dagger?" Athena asked as she rifled through the bloody fabric.

An ache spread in Gorgo's chest that she knew had nothing to do with the cut on her arm. She thought of the empty scabbard neatly stored away in the box under her pillow and the sea glass blade that should have been settled inside it. *I lost it a while ago.*

"Oh," Athena said as she found the grain of the fabric and tore against it. The threads gave way, and she ripped a few strips from the areas that hadn't been completely soaked in blood and laid them out on the table. "I'm sorry. I know you loved it a lot."

When I noticed it was gone, I searched the whole forest three times and couldn't find it. I'm still hoping one day I'll find it stuck in a bush or something.

"If anyone can find a beautiful object in the middle of the forest, it's you." Athena tilted her head toward the collection of polished rocks lying on the table.

After her sisters left the island, Gorgo had placed some of her wonders around the cave. The more fragile ones stayed safely tucked away in the box under her pillows, but she had put a few dispensable rocks and leaves on the chest next to her bed to start. As time passed and her sisters didn't return, more wonders were displayed around the room until every available surface held a small collection of items.

"Ready?" Athena uncorked the jug and didn't wait for a response to pour water over Gorgo's arm, rinsing away the blood to reveal a jagged wound that stretched from her elbow almost to her wrist. It looked as unpleasant as it felt, but Gorgo doubted it would be the injury that killed her.

Athena picked out some stubborn pieces of rock and dirt that were lodged in the open cut. "This looks very survivable," she

said as she opened the jar and dipped her fingers in the golden liquid. Gorgo's heart broke as Athena spread globs of honey around the wound.

Why are we putting honey on my arm?

"It'll help the cut heal and keep it from getting infected."

It'd heal fine on its own. This is a waste of honey.

Athena chuckled as she grabbed a strip of fabric off the table.

"I'll be sure to tell Apollo you think so."

Is this his fault?

"He figured out that the honey helps."

Then I'd like my new jar of honey to come from him.

"I'm sure he'd be happy to supply you with as many jars as you'd like if it means you'll take proper care of your injury."

In that case, we should tell him it took five jars to treat me.

"Apollo has his moments, but I don't think he'll buy that it took us five jars to dress one wound on your arm."

Gorgo considered Athena's point. *Fine. Three jars, and we tell him it's a really big gash on my leg.*

"I'll do my best," Athena said as she tied off the bandage. "But it's on you if he figures out I'm lying."

Gorgo examined the cloth wrapped skillfully around her forearm. *When did you get so good at treating wounds?*

"I have a brother who's interested in injuries and a friend who's an expert in getting them. I thought a little training from Apollo could come in handy." Athena rinsed the blood off her hands before fitting the stopper back into the jug's opening. "It seems I was right."

You are rarely wrong.

"So people tell me," Athena responded matter of factly.

Gorgo narrowed her eyes. *It's extremely annoying.*

"That's usually what they say next."

As Athena put the water and honey away, Gorgo picked the fabric off the table. Now torn to pieces, the light green cloth spilled out chaotically in her hands. When she grabbed at the falling pieces, her fingers brushed over the embroidery that was lost amid the browning splotches of blood. She traced each twist and turn of the thread as it climbed over the fabric, and as she found the pattern, she noticed a remnant of Athena's handiwork preserved in the strips of cloth around her arm. The delicate chain of orange and yellow flowers appeared occasionally among the overlapping fabric.

Were these tulips?

Athena didn't turn around when she answered, "Yeah, but that was just practice. And it wasn't very good anyway."

Gorgo looked back at the painstakingly detailed, little flowers decorating her arm. *And you think I'm transparent when I'm lying.*

"Fine. My work was immaculate, but I still don't mind that it's ruined."

Regardless, I'm sorry to see such a lovely design destroyed. But at least I get to wear them while my arm heals.

"Now that everything is taken care of, what should we do?"

Gorgo cocked her head to the side. *It's almost sundown. Beach?*

Athena nodded. "Beach."

No more words needed to be shared for the two of them to know exactly where they were headed. They turned around as soon as they left the cave, climbing the sharp hill it bored into, and followed the path the long shadows made toward the sun.

Gorgo stopped walking when she couldn't hear Athena's footsteps. She turned and saw Athena a ways back with one hand planted against a tree and the other picking at her sandal. When

Athena noticed Gorgo had stopped, she said, "I don't know how you walk around barefoot all the time."

Gorgo shrugged and picked at the fraying edges of her bandage. While she waited for Athena to pull a twig from beneath her heel, she remembered what they had been talking about before she had fallen. *You had something to ask me earlier. What was it?*

"Oh. I was going to ask if you ever think about leaving Sarpedon," Athena said as she caught up with Gorgo, "but I don't think people who are content with where they are risk life and limb for the possibility of something a little bit new."

An astute observation. Knowing Athena would never jeopardize her well-being for something as foolish as the chance to see something different, Gorgo couldn't help but be embarrassed at the risk she had taken. She hadn't come anywhere close to accomplishing her goal and had still managed to get injured.

The dirt beneath their feet transitioned to powdery sand as they headed for the shore. While Gorgo let the waves rush over her feet as they wandered, Athena never strayed close enough for there to be any possibility of water touching her. They had been walking long enough for the water to completely wash away Gorgo's steps before the silence was broken.

"So, I have a new question now," said Athena. "If you want to leave, then why haven't you?"

You say that like I haven't spent all my time trying to figure out how to leave. Not all of us can just appear where we want to be.

"I don't want to state the obvious, but if I was in your position, my first choice would be to fly somewhere else. You could also swim, but that seems like a lot more work . . ."

As helpful as this is, I don't think I need more suggestions.

"Why not fly? Your wings have been fully grown for years, but I've never seen you use them."

Gorgo stopped and let the waves slowly sink her feet into the sand. *No one bothered to teach me.*

"That answer is nonsense."

What?

"Teach yourself. You watched your sisters. You've seen birds before. You are curious and clever, and you're not a child anymore. I'm sure you can piece together how it works."

There isn't much point in trying. Even if I figured out flying, I wouldn't know which direction land is or how to get back to Sarpedon, and I wouldn't have anywhere to stay once I left. As amazing as leaving sounds, it's not a good idea.

"What if you stayed with me?"

Gorgo's laughter burst out with such unexpected force she almost lost her balance. *I'm sure everyone would be thrilled to have the mortal daughter of two Titans wandering around Olympus. I'd be surprised if Zeus didn't strike me down with a bolt of lightning before I took my first step into his realm.*

"You're probably right, but Olympus wasn't a part of my plan."

Gorgo pulled her feet out from the sand and washed off the grains clinging to her skin. *Your plan?*

"Well, that's why I came here today and why I wanted to know if you had any thoughts about leaving. I'd hate to show up one day only to an empty island and not know where you've gone, and I thought you might need somewhere to go once you left. So I've been working on someplace that's not Olympus and not Sarpedon. Somewhere new for you to live."

Somewhere new I can live . . .

"If you want to. I can help you find somewhere else if you'd prefer—"

Why wouldn't I want to? As she asked, a new concern arose in Gorgo's mind. *You'll still visit me if I live there, right?*

"I was actually hoping you'd be alright with me living there too. I wouldn't always be around between visiting Olympus and—"

Gorgo swallowed Athena in a tight hug and accidentally splashed a bunch of seawater onto her dress in the process. *Thank you.*

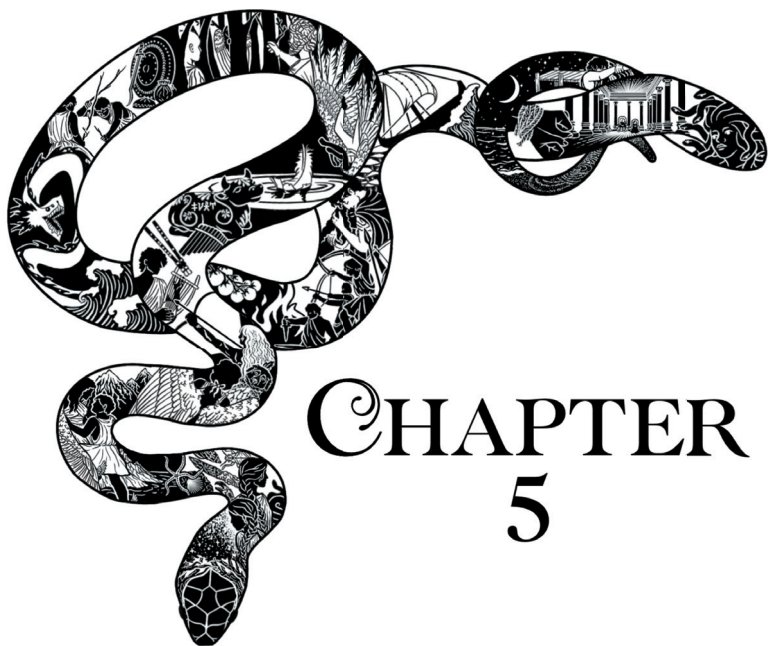
Athena gave her two awkward pats on the back. "Well, I couldn't keep coming back to Sarpedon without you here. Could I?"

We certainly couldn't have that.

"You've ruined the entire island for me."

Gorgo giggled as she released Athena. They resumed their stroll along the beach and let the lapping of the waves and the splash Gorgo's steps fill the silence. But as they walked, Gorgo closed her mind off to Athena and repeated one thought, and with every repetition, her smile grew wider and wider.

I'm going to leave Sarpedon.



CHAPTER 5

When Gorgo's sisters had first started to use their wings, her mother would play with them out in the ocean. Ceto would sit in the deep water atop a spined slithering creature. It carried her in circles, flicking its fins and sputtering water from its gills. She smiled up at Stheno and Euryale as they dipped and bobbed over the water, and when they occasionally fell in, Ceto helped them get back into the air.

And Gorgo had been left on the beach.

Jealous and filled with the stubbornness of a young girl, she had ignored her mother's nagging voice in her head and decided that she could fly too. She had wings like her sisters. Why had she been grounded?

She climbed up a tree, pushing herself to reach the highest possible branch, and jumped.

Her wings caught on the branches around her as soon as she spread them. What should have been a smooth descent turned into an ugly fall, and she landed on the ground, battered and breathless.

If the pain from the fall hadn't been enough to clip her wings, the scolding she received that night ensured she would never attempt to fly again.

And despite all that, now Gorgo was standing on top of a cliff intent on jumping over the edge.

Her wings weren't strong enough to lift her straight off the ground, and the idea of jumping from a tree was eliminated as soon as she thought of it. Gorgo knew better than to try that again, especially now that she had grown and her wingspan was twice as big. She needed enough open space to spread her wings and enough fall time to figure out how to catch herself.

So Gorgo stood at the edge of Sarpedon on a cliff overlooking the sea for the fourth day in a row. Her toes inched closer to the edge, and every logical part of her told her to back away.

She repeated the reasoning for why she needed to jump. *I need to fall to learn how to fly. I'll never leave if I don't figure this out. Falling head first into water is better than crashing into the ground, but nothing bad is going to happen. I just need to take one completely ordinary step forward. Off a cliff. And then I'll plummet in a deadly fall toward the sea. Spectacular plan, Gorgo.*

The scent of salt and sea foam climbed up the side of the cliff as each wave smacked against the rocks below. The sight was violent and made Gorgo's toes curl tightly around the grass. She wished the churning ocean below would be as kind to her as it was to her sisters when they had fallen into it.

Gorgo bounced on the balls of her feet. *Today is definitely the day. I can do this.* Her hands clenched at her sides. *It'll be easy. Stheno and Euryale flew all the time. I can definitely do this.*

Gorgo's pulse flooded every part of her as she willed herself over the edge, but her feet stayed locked in place.

Stupid mortality! She kicked at the dirt. *I'll never start living if I don't leave this island. But I'll never leave if I can't fly. And I'll never fly if I let my fears get the best of me day after day like this.*

She fought with herself as she stared at the ground that her feet had decided to meld themselves to. It almost seemed like the island was trying to hold on to her and keep her there.

Athena is waiting for you to figure this out. Don't be cowardly and ju—

"Jumping off a cliff is certainly a gutsy way to learn."

Gorgo's heart leapt into her throat as she whirled around to see a young man standing behind her. Forgetting where she was, she took a step back from him, off the cliff's edge. Before Gorgo fully realized her mistake, a pair of hands grabbed her arm, stopping her fall, and pulled her forward. When both her feet hit the ground, she ran a safe distance away from the edge before trying to steady her breathing.

"Sorry about that," the man said before peeking over the cliff's edge and continuing on as if nothing of note had happened. "I know baby birds do that whole all or nothing technique, but maybe we could consider an approach that's a little less . . . deadly?"

Feeling a confusing mix of gratitude for saving her life and anger for causing it to be jeopardized, Gorgo turned toward the young man who was still standing uncomfortably close to the

edge of the cliff. Although, his proximity to a deadly plunge didn't seem to bother him at all.

"Right. I suppose introductions are in order. I'm Hermes."

Gorgo recognized his name immediately from Athena's stories—and complaints—about her brother. Her shoulders released tension she didn't know she was holding there. *I'm Gorgo.*

His tousled brown hair waved chaotically in the breeze as he bounced slightly, looking at Gorgo with anticipation. "... And you are?"

I'm Gorgo, she repeated.

It took an embarrassingly long time for her to realize he couldn't hear her thoughts the way Athena could. Gorgo wasn't sure whether to feel disappointed or relieved, but she pressed her hand to her mouth and shook her head to signal him that she wasn't going to be able to answer.

"Ah. Now I wish I was listening a little better when Athena told me about you . . ."

She told you about me? Gorgo's world was so small compared to Athena's. She hadn't imagined that Athena would tell anyone about the mortal girl she found on an island in the middle of nowhere. It seemed too insignificant a thing to mention.

Hermes looked at Gorgo and scrunched up his face a bit. His cheeks squished against irises so deep they looked black. His gaze drifted past her shoulders onto her wings, and then he perked up.

"So, obviously I should have listened better. I am genuinely sorry about that, but it's left me with a bit of a dilemma. I don't know your name, and I have to call you something. So, can I call you Goldie?"

I don't see why not. Gorgo nodded.

"Excellent. So, *Goldie*," he said, his smile becoming playfully lopsided, "I take it that you've never flown before?"

Gorgo eyed the obvious lack of wings on his back. *I take it you've never flown either. I'm not sure you have the high ground here.*

"It's not too hard to get the hang of. It just takes a little practice. And it doesn't hurt if you have someone to catch you when you're getting started. I'm happy to offer my services as your catcher, and sorry again for that causing that impromptu demonstration of my catching abilities earlier. But I think after a few tries you won't have any need for me, and you'll have no trouble doing this."

He bounced on his heels and disappeared over the cliff.

Hermes!

Gorgo ran toward the cliff's edge but knelt down before reaching the precipice. She swallowed as she tried to prepare herself to see a dead body in the water below. As she started to look over, Hermes shot up in front of her, whooping, and the force of the air almost pushed her backwards. He kept climbing higher into the sky, and Gorgo scooted away from the edge. Quicker than she imagined was possible, he was back on the ground in front of her.

A pair of white wings fluttered sporadically around the ankles of his sandals. Hermes knocked each of his heels against the ground, and the wings folded themselves forward around his feet. They then started to disappear as if they were being pulled into the sandals. When they were gone, there were beautiful, ornate wings embroidered onto the leather.

"See. No big deal!" His dusky skin was flushed gold, and he looked giddy. Hermes offered Gorgo his hand, which she used to pull herself to her feet. "So, I'm thinking I'll take you up high enough to reach a little wind, and then—I don't think there's

a better way to put this—then I'll drop you. But I'll be there to catch you if anything goes wrong. No plummeting to your death on my watch. Promise."

He smiled at her like he had just proposed an extremely well thought out and foolproof plan. Not feeling great about his idea but knowing it beat her previous plan of jumping off a cliff and hoping her instincts kicked in, Gorgo reciprocated with a smile that she hoped looked genuine.

"Excellent. You feel ready, Goldie?" He started backing away from her.

Gorgo barely managed to nod as Hermes leaned forward, preparing to run.

"So if we were in the air right now and I dropped you, you think you'd start flying?"

She nodded sharply, trying to look more certain. Despite that, he straightened up and started walking back toward her.

"Now, I wouldn't say I'm an expert on flying—some would, but I like to stay humble—but I am fairly certain you're actually going to have to open your wings for this to work."

Gorgo hadn't realized how tightly she had folded her wings against her back while he was talking. She gave a little laugh as she shook them out.

"I think we're going to need them a little more spread out. Here, stand like this." He spread his arms out to each side, rolling his shoulders back a bit.

She mimicked him and felt her wings reflexively spread too.

"There it is." He took a few steps back and bounced his heels. With that, the pair of wings pulled themselves out of the embroidery on each sandal and unfurled. He bent down like a bull preparing to charge. "Ready?"

Not feeling confident at all, Gorgo nodded.

He ran toward her and picked her up by her waist. Being carried much faster than Gorgo had anticipated, her wings folded forward around them as the air hit her back. Hermes ran through the air as solidly as if it were ground, and when he climbed high enough, the little wings on his sandals kept him hovering where he stopped.

“Alright, Goldie!”

If tiny shoe wings can do this, so can you.

“Arms out.”

You can fly better than tiny shoe wings. Breathing deeply, Gorgo stretched out her arms and wings, and she could feel the wind catching on her feathers.

“You’ve got this.”

Hermes let go of Gorgo’s waist. She fell for a moment, and panic settled in her chest before she adjusted her wings to the correct angle. But when she found it, the air carried her. A smile stretched over her face as the wind whipped at her cheeks. She made minor changes, figuring out what each one did, and flying very quickly felt like second nature.

Gorgo looked down below her and found Hermes doing flips and clearly cheering even though she couldn’t hear him over the wind in her ears. Even with all the celebration, he was keeping pace with her in case something happened.

She figured out how to turn and circled over her forest with Hermes following her. The trees and the clearing looked so odd from that perspective. They had felt boundless before, even when she knew she had explored every inch, but she was flying over trees she would have never dreamed of climbing to the top of. Flapping her wings to push herself higher, she could see her

entire forest at once, and it was all contained within the borders of the beach. And the beach was barely anything compared to the expansive sea. And beyond that there were promises of new places in the distance.

Gorgo flew back to the cliffs and stretched her feet out to the ground. It came with more force than she was ready for. Her knees buckled beneath her, and she fell squarely on her face.

“Are you alright?”

Hermes dropped onto the ground next to her as Gorgo turned herself over, laughing and wiping dirt from her cheeks. His concern melted into amusement, and he reached out a hand to her.

“So maybe we work on landings, but I’d say that was a good first flight.”

Grabbing his hand, Gorgo pulled herself up.

Again.



Suddenly, all of Gorgo’s days were spent in the air. Hermes visited every day until she was confident diving off the edge of the cliff by herself, but even after she didn’t need him for security any more, he still showed up. He ran by her side as she circled above Sarpedon in endless loops, trying to push how long she could stay in the air. Day by day, she grew fond of his company until she found herself looking for him on the horizon as she flew.

With each time Gorgo took off and caught herself with steady, strong wings, the air of mortality disappeared a bit more. And as it faded, a pang in her heart grew stronger. Flying should have been hers all along. The freedom, the joy, and the strength that her sisters had experienced all their lives should have been shared with her. Gorgo wasn’t any less capable because she was mortal.

An unwavering determination overgrew any doubts her mortality had planted in her heart. Each beat of her wings brought her closer to leaving until she found herself standing at the doorway of her cave, taking a final look at what she was leaving behind.

The memories of her entire childhood sat heavy in the air. The room was filled with reminders of every moment Gorgo had spent on Sarpedon. Of secret trips into the forest. Of scrapes she had gotten herself into and out of. Of learning to grow and persevere. But as she looked at her sisters' empty beds of pillows that she always left for them, Gorgo realized every memory had two sides. Each moment of joy and pride was met with a moment of hurt. Her sisters growing up without her. Her mother's fingers drumming against the door as she scolded her for her latest injury. Learning to take care of herself when there was no one there to care for her.

With each memory, the weight of guilt in Gorgo's gut ebbed away.

I'm allowed to leave. They left first.

Gorgo pulled the bag she had fashioned out of a blanket onto her shoulder with new resolve. She had packed everything she felt she could carry with her, but the bag did not come close to containing everything she wanted to bring.

Her chest ached as she looked at the wonders around the room, but when her eyes settled on the pillows in the corner, her heart twinged. Leaving behind the box buried underneath them felt like parting with a piece of herself, but somehow, taking it away from Sarpedon felt worse. Sarpedon had given her those treasures, and it felt wrong to take them from their home.

But as she turned to leave, Gorgo could already feel herself missing home. She walked back inside the cave and allowed

herself to take just one wonder with her—a rock the size of her palm with the imprint of a shell—before leaving for the last time.

One reminder of the island that raised her.

One reminder of home.

[End of Excerpt]

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