

## **Medusa Oblingata**

In the ancient lands of the Greek gods and goddesses, there lived a sculptor by the name of Praxiteles. Short on cash, he often took commissions from his supernatural superiors to make ends meet, often fearing for his survival when the dietary climate permitted. While in the service of the gods, he took his wages in the table's delicacies. Such a salary came with a promise of an elongated lifespan, and, having endured winters that would have starved the common man, he believed he'd taken a promise fulfilled.

It was during free-for-all week at the circus maximus that he'd taken a commission from the divine royal family of the sea. Eager to deluxify his grotto, the aquatic god Phorcys employed him to sculpt vast, muscular crustacians in the walls, modeled after the head of the house himself. Arduous work for the sculptor himself, it nonetheless paid for his right to reside on Earth for a few more years. Besides, the stakes for Phorcys were worse.

He learned this one day when sculpting in the sacrarium, known in the mortal house as the worship room. He completed an alluring bas-relief sculpture of Phorcys wife, Ceto, and stepped back to admire his work. Then the hearth became active. Prax had been in enough sacrariums to know that this was where sacrifices, whether crops, livestock, or plain old money, were received. This was the first time a skeleton had tumbled through. It nearly toppled him, and it certainly left a bruise on his ankle. After recovering from the shock, he hoped to high heaven that this was not the thing Phorcys decided to pay him with.

He carried it to Phorcys's office and approached the topic with tact. "I wasn't sure, but I didn't think you wanted me to sculpt this into your walls."

Phorcys took up the skull. It was a ram's skull. He glowered into the sockets. "It is well you did not." He cast it onto the floor, shattering it. "It is a retracted sacrifice. Its benefactor did not need my favor, for the vessel he wanted sunk already fell into the Strait of Messina."

The Strait of Messina was Charybdis territory. As much as he tried to keep outside the margin of the gods' personal affairs, the seemingly numberless daughters that occupied this grotto had done nothing to assist his respect for their privacy. During his work, they would drop in to gossip (as did the Hesperides, the nymphs employed at Hera's garden), recite his future (the Greys, begging to inform him of the way he would die) seduce him (mostly the work of the Gorgons, whose efforts never superceded a pinch on the buttocks) or genuinely admire his work. Scylla was the only one who practiced an interest, even a slight one, in his handy-work. Occasionally, she would nag him about sculpting she and Charybdis -- or Cribby, as she addressed him -- in an embrace into her bedroom ceiling. Prax circumvented this request as best as he could, knowing that the whole aim of her father's sculpture was to intimidate Charybdis out of his careless, unprofessional camaraderie with Scylla.

"All you see around you, this finery and splendour," he referred to Prax's work, "this is the proof of my wealth. It is built upon the warships I have sent to their graves, and the willy-nilly cajouling of my daughter and her fellow beast threaten to undermine it." He pointed to the skull shards. "There is the proof of that."

Prax had already heard all he needed of Phorcys's personal grievances. He suspected that this business of "undermined finery" was a stab at absconding the agreed pay. Even that in itself held little logic; it wasn't all coming out of his bank, why should he worry about expenses now? Prax excused himself from Phorcys office before the deity could infer any more guilt.

Phorcys, meanwhile, rummaged through a few ornaments he'd collected for the dining hall. These included a rather hefty anchor, polished and bejeweled for display above the table, several vines of grapes and olives to spruce up the walls, and a table cloth, which displayed a mural of his daughters and their many romantic escapades. As sour as the memories it might bring up were, it ought to remind Scylla of the variety of relationships her father would permit.

Ceto came slinking into the room, running her fingers through her tendril like hair with her upper hands and adjusting her tunic with her lower. With the body of a giant moccasin as her lower half, she need not worry about the latest in leg-concealing fashion. Her husband's lower body was that of a giant crayfish. His four extra pairs of legs went nude. Neither held any knowledge of how all eleven daughters took on the basic anatomical template of mortal humans.

"Phorcys, a word, if you will." Phorcys rested his rummaging. "The grotto is becoming unmanageable, even with slave staff at our disposal. I do love the law Hera instituted for us, that those who steal from the garden spend their afterlife as a dumbwaiter or maid here, but does that truly justify the advancements you commission?"

"You name the wrong reasons. It is our livelihood that is at stake." This was an argument rehearsed and performed on a nightly basis. The two of them sang the same songs Scylla's first date.

"It is unpragmatic," argued Ceto. "Especially when none of our daughters plan to stay here."

"I disagree. Once they all witness the magnificence of it all, they'll never flee my domain. Mark my words, you all shall Marvel." He returned to his ornaments and decor, and found, oddly enough, a portrait of Charybdis. "And you, you little scourge of the water, you shall tremble."

Ceto sighed. "Yes, I suppose we shall all marvel. All except Medusa."

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Only four of Phorcys's daughters were available for the dinner party. The rest had jobs or marriages to attend to. The Grey sisters were understandably absent; after a unstoppable riot at the circus maximus, the ferry to the underworld was booked, so they had to sort the life threads of those waiting their turn from those already aboard. The Hesperides weren't there either, ever vigilant of Hera's garden. They deserved a vacation, in Phorcys's mind.

Then there was Thoosa. Her husband, Poseides, also ruled over aquatic territory. He was distant enough to keep himself on good terms with Phorcys, though. He didn't wreck boats willy-nilly, unlike the abominable slouch seated accross from him. Charybdis hadn't trembled at Phorcys's almighty wealth. He was probably on drugs. A fine malinfluence on my daughter, thought Phorcys, with an especial lack of wit or discernment on her part.

"Do regail me with your exploits," he encouraged. The invitation was directed at Scylla, but his eldest daughter, Stheno, seized the offer for herself. "I have snatched for myself a man from the immortality club. Euripides is his name. He is sturdy of mind and strong of arm, and a pleasure upon the eye." She said the last with a sideways glance at Cribby, who was not easy on the eye. He wasn't easy on the nose, either. Phorcys had emphasized the standards of erudicy he planned to exhibit; from the glistening, golden orbs that orbited the chandeleire to the slow-roasted leviathan with olives and seasonings, it all should have indicated that he was not supposed to show up covered in rotting seaweed, blasting his own brains out with an MP3 player.

Euryale spoke next. "Well, I have snatched a man for myself, too. Many men, in fact. I plan to dump them all in an arena and have them duke it out over me. I bet YOU never had men duke it out over you."

Stheno laughed. "Oh, what a lie you spin."

"I don't know what you two are fighting over," said Scylla. "Poor Medusa can't even join the immortality club, blindfolded all over the place."

"Keep your observations to yourself," mumbled Medusa. As the only cursed member of the family, she seldom left the grotto. She petrified those she looked upon involuntarily. Her first victim was her lover, Neptune, whose immortality wasn't enough to save him from turning into a statue. So the youngest gorgon sister was blindfolded for the sake of everyone she interacted with regularly. Even the snakes that her hair had become were blindfolded. An antidote had yet to be discovered, but Medusa speculated that something out of Hera's garden would do the trick. She tried to remind the Hesperides to bring home some herbs or fruit, but they were flakey and forgetful. She would kick them if they'd stay in one place long enough for her to do so.

Ceto thought the topic was a sensitive one, so she redirected the conversation towards Scylla and Charybdis.

"Now, Charybdis, tell us what joys you reap from your excursions."

"Yes," said Phorcys, "I trust that the two of you profit handsomely from each sea-fairer you sink?"

"I gotta say," said Scylla, "Cribby gets more out of it than I do. It's the perfect set up: sail too close to the Sicilian border, you're mine. Lean towards the Italian border, and that's Crib's dibs."

"I got a load of dudes out of the deal." Charybdis picked his nose and wiped it on the table cloth, specifically on an embroider of a flexing Phorcys. "I keep 'em in a cage. They all got some chicks back home, who they wish'd live forever. That way, the sailor dudes don't come home to some saggy old hags."

"Ah, you take prisoners." Phorcys himself would have taken slaves. "You take all the men prisoners, I presume?"

"Yeah, dad, we get it." Scylla rolled her eyes. "Cribby keeps all the sailors because you don't allow pets in this house."

"Lest it spawn from Medusa's scalp!" cried Euryale. Hoots and laughter erupted around the table, and Phorcys brought his fork down to silence it. "Wise gods enslave sapient mortals. They don't adopt them."

Ceto, who'd grown weary of her husband's blow-hardness, bowed her head. She had little time to pout, however, because a slave interrupted the dinner.

"I beg thy divine forgiveness, my liege, but Hera requests his sacredness's attendance. Perhaps that of her sacredness's as well."

The master of the house excused himself, leaving Ceto to chaperone any unlawful interactions between the junior couple at the table. He suspected some complaint of the Hesperides's performance. She'd put a one-hundred headed dragon in there to monitor their labor, and she was probably here to parrot their tattling.

Hera stood at the grotto mouth, holding captive a burly mortal lad of about twenty. "I bring sinister tidings and a heretic." She encouraged the man into the cave. His trembling and shivering was reminiscent of the way Charybdis should have reacted upon setting foot in the grand cave. "There has been a breach in my garden," said Hera. "An unnamed menace has frozen your daughters and my sentinels into brittle statues and stolen three apples from my orchard."

Phorcys stood rooted to his spot, all but blocking the threshold between his daughters' employery and the remainder of his family. He himself shivered when a hand touched his scaly shoulder; it belonged to Ceto.

"Husband? Your flesh whitens so."

"Ah, Hera, and what of the young man?"

"He is a recruit of the local Hercules."

"Yes, why did you bring him?"

"He was careless with the removal of Aigle."

The mortal civilizations had their athletic sorts, and some of these sturdy young men were part of clubs to voluntarily move heavy objects. The local Hercules -- or Herc Hunks, to certify the plural noun -- were the very group Minerva had called on to carry Neptune out of her temple. It took eight of them just to tilt him over, and sixteen to carry him out. Apparently, the bones, muscles, and organs in his body had become stone too, and that added to the burden of relocating him.

"I swear," said the Hunk, "She was just lighter than I expected her to be, as is natural of a young woman." He fell to his knees. "Have mercy, I didn't mean to throw her up into the air."

"Be silent in the presence of your celestial superiors," ordered Hera. Phorcys looked from the Hunk to Hera, and then at his wife.

"Hera, what has become of our precious daughter?" Ceto's lip wobbled. Phorcys feared an onslaught of tearful femininity moreso than the unspoken autopsy. He permitted the hunk to confess.

"It is only... the fellows were scorning me. I'm a new recruit and they taunt me for a relevant weakness of arm." Phorcys's fears shifted to the ungainly, simpering sobs of this pitiful toot.

"Don't snivel, lad, and expectorate the sinister tidings."

"What have you wrought on my daughter?" bellowed Ceto.

"I... I thought if I lifted an immortal statue on my own, I'd earn the respect--"

"Here is what you earn!"

A cuccoon of bubbles encased him, distorting his anatomy. When they popped, a limp jellyfished flopped on the floor. It was certainly no substitute for a sturdy statue lifter, but at least the transmorphic punishment prevented any crying. Ceto scooped up the prisoner with a spatula and plopped him into a bowl. "Now, ponder ye the consequences of divine treason." She departed, presumably to mourn Aigle and the other two petrified princesses.

"Then Aigle lies shattered in the garden?" Phorcys spoke before he noticed the footsteps behind him, signifying the dropped eaves of his daughters and nemesis. "Ah... is this true of Erythia and Hesperathusa?"

"No, they remain a uniform whole, but as I said before, their assailent has taken spoil. The tree of immortality lacks three apples its annual quota. Ladon's hundred heads hold a stone each, so they are inactive vocally."

Phorcys hardened his stare. "I will thank you not to burden me with details of your own agricultural loss, let alone my late daughter's voyeur."

Under no circumstances was Hera invited to join the feast. She didn't force the issue, but upon leaving, she turned back and shouted, "You always were a heartless man. It's a wonder you found a wife."

It was a wonder to him that this "Cribby" Scylla admired so much had even found a girlfriend. At any rate, dinner was a bust. Charybdis slumped through the thing like a mound of Earth and drooled. His ambitions must be spectacularly low to drift along unaffected by the grotto's rich atmosphere, which frightened Phrocys. He dismissed his guest and family so he could undecorate the table in peace. Meanwhile, his daughters congregated in the plaza to juice the news of its candor.



"Oh, a burglary!" Squealed Euryale. "Might we scour the garden ourselves and look for mortal fingerprints?"

Stheno waved away the suggestion. "Do not vocalize your ignorance. No Earthly power could petrify a goddess."

"Yeah. I still want to go over, though," said Scylla. "I've never been in Hera's garden. Erythia says it's mystical. She did when she was alive."

"She's not dead, she's immortal," Medusa pointed out.

"Yeah," said Charybdis. "It's that Aigle chick who got all smashed up."

"Yes, but it is a curious affair, isn't it all?" Stheno whirled around in the excitement of it all. "Stolen apples, deicide, whatever they did to Ladon! Ooh, Euripides will shiver when I tell him."

"You're bringing him here?" Asked Euryale.

"Tomorrow night. He is away on weather duty, but he comes home tonight. I shall await him at his cloud. I should depart now. I want to be there in his chamber when he arrives!"

The other girls sneered at her boastfulness when she left.

"I'd bet she'd love to get her hands on a golden apple," said Euryale. "Just so she could show it off."

"Oh stop it," said Scylla. "It's too early to point fingers. But I'm going over there first thing in the morning with a bottle of glue. Whatever happens can't make it any worse."

"Well, whatever you say. I have my own business," she left for her bedroom.

"Careful, Scyl," said Medusa. "If Hera catches a family member of her former employees snooping around, she might come up with an incintive for YOUR stealing the apples."

Charybdis had been picking his nose, but now he was alert. "Heck, I don't know what incintive means, but it sounds crashy and smashy. Hey, Scyl, you wanna stay up all night at my place and sling boulders at ships?"

"Oh no, I couldn't. I really do want to take a look at those gardens."

"Suit yourself."

"Scylla," said Medusa, "lead me to the nearest chair."

The nearest thing to sit on was a treasure chest, where Charybdis had recently sat. It smelled like fish mucous, but Medusa tried to maintain quite a bit of her own autonomy as Scylla tried to assist her, so leading her to other objects was far from easy or practical.

Medusa sat down. "I can only sit through Stheno's 'my love life's better than yours' schtick for so long."

"Well, you know how uptight Minerva is about people using her temple as a mosh-house."

"But she didn't have to do THIS to me." She tugged at her snake hair with her claws. "Ever since I lost Neptune, I've been thinking of ways to go back to normal. I mean, who would ever ask me out when I look like this?"

Fearing he might be cornered into initiating that invitation, Charybdis scuttled off into the night. Scylla thought it was rather standoffish of him, but she didn't fabricate any goodbyes. "I'd better hit the sack if I want to get up early."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life with my eyes closed. And unlike everybody else in this house, I don't have numberless years."

There was a coldness in Medusa's voice. Scylla went to bed wondering what she might find in the garden. She could repair her sister, couldn't she?

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The next morning, on her way out of the grotto, Scylla passed by Praxiteles. He said he was there to collect his wages. He nervously turned down her invitation to check out Hera's garden. "Oh, not like we're going on a date." That's when she became coy. "But you have seen my boyfriend, haven't you? That's why you're turning me down, right?" He excused himself to take some wages, and Scylla congratulated herself on her masterful tastes in boyfriends.

She'd never been in Hera's garden, largely because the Hesperides did not like to mix work and family. All night, she nursed the idea that once she glued Aigle back together, the garden fairy sister would change her mind and allow her full access. However, once she got to the garden, she was less eager to list it as one of her regular hangouts. Unlike the casual disorder of Charybdis's home basin, Hera seemed to be competing with her father over who had the more luxurious estate. As she walked in, daffodils howled celestial sounds at her like siren mermaids. Tall sapphire grass blades parted for her as she walked, or maybe they were snubbing her. Rose bushes spat out silvery glitter, which landed in a nearby brooke. More formidable were the many stone statues of naked Greek heroes; Scylla couldn't name one of them. She didn't pay much attention to history. She supposed that at least a few of them might have been sailors aboard a ship she or her father wrecked.

She followed a cobblestone footpath to the middle of the garden, where Hera sat tying bandages around Ladon's heads. She looked like she was halfway done with the job; behind the tree of immortality lay a pile of slobber-ridden boulders, likely used during the theft. Poor Ladon. Having chewed on large rocks, their chops were apt to be on the swollen side.

Hera heard her approach and looked up. "I would have thought you'd be at the circus maximus right now. It is free-for-all week at the circus maximus, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but Cribby and I aren't into that kind of thing. Say, the Hercs haven't moved my sisters yet, have they? I was hoping to glue Aigle back together."

"I'm sorry, but I had them removed before visiting your father last night."

"Aw, drat. Missed them by that much." She squeezed a drop of glue as her estimate. "What's with toothache-zilla?"

Ninety-nine heads turned to Scylla, their shimmering compound eyes trying to glare her out of the garden.

"Whoever the thief is made certain to distract Ladon as ruthlessly as possible," explained Hera. "They appear to have coated those bolders with honey."

"Rough." Scylla had never felt much affection for Ladon. In spite of having the regular number of other body parts, the number of necks and heads on his body presupposed an unfair numerical advantage over her sisters. Granted, she only saw him in person for the first time now. "I guess if you can turn immortal goddesses into stone, you can botch up their dental work, huh?"

"Not necessarily."

"Hmmm... maybe Cribby and I should have gone to free-for-all week after all. Why'd anybody want to steal these apples anyway? I mean, sure, that'd make sense if a human being wanted to live forever, but why?"

Hera pondered the question a moment.

"Motives may vary depending on whom you ask, but I'd guess the most capable person would be a god with a fantastical ailment, thinking that an apple bite would restore him."

"But they DO grant immortality, don't they?"

Hera shook her head. "Child, sampling the fruit and flora is forbidden to god and man alike. What the apples -- or anything in this garden, for that matter -- how they affect the body is as much a mystery to me as it is to everyone else."

"Still," muttered Scylla, "I'll bet Medusa would chow down if she got her hands on one of those apples. By the way, where are my sisters now? I still want to try to repair Aigle."

"I moved them to the shed of Callypso for safe-keeping, at least until we discover a remedy. Tell me, do you suppose the missing fruit could be somewhere in your grotto?"

"Nah. I mean, there's a ton of fancy stuff in there, but... why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just wonder... you say that Medusa would taste of the apples if she thought it would cure her..."

"Oh, that? I was just guessing." Scylla backed away, hiding the glue behind her back. No repairing any recently shattered sister today, she thought, and ran out of the garden. Glad to be out of there, she thought of the rumors that might now circulate. Still, that fruit did look familiar. Where had she seen it before?

\*

Stheno brought home her "catch" from the immortality club. He was a sturdy-built aquatic mystic from the caspian sea, likely to win Phorcys's approval for his lack of business competition. He dove headlong onto Stheno's bed upon arrival into the grotto, but instead of beckoning his hostess, he grimaced and felt around the mattress. "Pray tell me, beloved gorgon, cushion you your mattress with stones?"

It wasn't exactly the come on that melted her butter. When she realized he was serious, she felt the bed for herself. "What a peculiarity." Her boyfriend lifted the mattress. While his intentions were to remove whatever had poked him, the petrified nudes that lay beneath concluded the relationship there and then. Stheno fought for their love, pleading with him all the way to the door to stay, insisting that she didn't know where those stone men came from, and that she had no petrifying powers. Nonetheless, he disregarded all her tears and squeezed his way past Phorcys, who was too caught up in an argument with Hera to assist his daughter.

"After what happened to my own Aigle under your supervision? Perhaps you should reevaluate your bond with your employees-in-law."

"Our bond doesn't exist yet," observed Hera, "which is why I wish to welcome you and your wife to my palace."

"What concern is that whilst Euripides makes his untimely retreat?" Cried Stheno. "What is the grand inspiration, father, stowing your failed ornaments beneath my mattress?"

"I will answer you presently," said Phorcys. "Reside in my office until I do so."

Stheno did not go quietly. After laying the blame on both her father and Hera for failing to obstruct Euripides' escape, she attempted to curse them to be swarmed by box jellyfish. Phorcys was left to usher his angry eldest into a room where he locked the door until her fumes dissipated. This gave Stheno recourse to punch holes in the walls. She had, before doing so, planned to tell him, "See the cavities in your office walls? Capacious, aren't they? Next time you find yourself with an overabundance of uncovered men, lay them in there." However, the power punches she landed broke more bones in her wrist than stone in the wall.

Phorcys came in stealthily. "My failed ornaments lay beneath that desk until I may safely dispose-- what troubles your wrist?"

"Nothing so much as my heart and my will to survive!"

Phorcys sighed. "Condolences are better sought from your mother, if buyer's remorse over the immortality club burdens you."

"Oh, I do not lament my immortality, nor any social institute surrounding thereof." She magicked her wrist back to normal. "My grievance is over the dozen or so nude men stacked beneath my mattress."

"Obscenities abound!" Phrocys stormed from the room down the hallway towards Stheno's bedroom. "Whomsoever possesses these abominations of masculine anatomy may be thrust from my property!"

He flung up the mattress to inspect the offending figures. Between Stheno's latest exboyfriend and her father, the latter got the better look. There were twelve or so naked men, mortal judging by their underwhelming height but wealthy considering their overwhelming girth. They seemed to have spores growing on them, and that, Phrocys could not tolerate.

"Who the devil brought these into my home?"

"Not I," declared Stheno. "I did not pad my bed with stone figures. I did not desire to reenact some Princess and the Pea scenario to test my lover's sensitivity."

Phorcys shook his head. "I shall contact a team of Herc Hunks. I may depend on them to remove large statues from where none are wanted."

Stheno was so distraught over the sudden breakup that she forgot she had sisters. After Phrocys's last sentence, though, she not only remembered she had sisters, but that one of them had the power to transform people into objects much like the ones piled in her bed.

"Medusa!"

Phorcys, who had been preoccupied with faxing a message, paused to bestow a bit of attention on his daughter. Ceto said he needed to practice listening. "Did you say something, Stheno?"

"This is all Medusa's plotting!" Her countenance adopts many verdant shades when the subject of immortality or romance arises! Oh, vile sister, you stole the apples from the apple tree! You entertained thoughts of freeing yourself from Minerva's curse, you you sacrificed our sisters three, the Hesperides, that you might take that golden fruit, and when no curse fled from thy guise, you sought to drive off Stheno's guys, and laid eyes upon the most unsightly males you could possibly stuff into her mattress. I mean my mattress."

Phorcys hadn't the nerve to send out his fax quite yet. Stheno had expressed her animosity with such energy - knocking plants and perfume bottles off her dresser and tossing books through her mirror - that he hardly dare ask permission to speak.

"Ah, are you talking to me?"

"I speak to one given to fits of rage."

"The mirror shattered, love."

"This misdeed shall not go unpunished! Justice will be held!"

Stheno stormed from her room. To where, Phorcys couldn't quite fathom. He supposed she'd pick up another boyfriend on the way home, so her feelings were not of grand worry to him. No, his worrisome daughter walked right in.

"What's with 'Thene? Did someone set her curling iron on fire? I've never seen her so angry."

Phorcys wasn't one to encourage discord among his daughters, so he kept the crime as candid as he could. "Apparently, someone stole into her bedroom and tucked many an unwelcome man where she alone was meant to sleep."



Scylla leaned over and looked at the moldy statues of naked men.

"Eww, I'm glad nobody's done that to MY mattress. I'd never want to sleep in a bed with those guys hiding under it."

Phorcys patted her head. "You have your father's wisdom." Then he remembered who she was dating, and realized how fat a lie that remark was. "How fairs your relationship with Charybdis?"

"Cribby's fine. Those mortals from the last ship he wrecked aren't so happy, though. They wish their wives were immortal so that they could reunite some day. I told him he should just go snatch the wives."

"You have a good head on your shoulders, except when applied to mate selection."

"Yeah... hey, what's that supposed to mean? I can't hand over my head like a wedding ring. But whatever. You haven't seen any golden apples around here, have you?"

Phorcys frowned. He was disappointed that, as "smart" as his youngest daughter was, she couldn't catch the stealth insults directed at her boyfriend. "I doubt that you'd locate anything like that around here."

"Oh. I'm a little disappointed in how my ship-wrecking business is going. I mean, Cribby and I have a deal--he gets the survivors, and I get their food. But it's just not fresh, you know? I was in Hera's garden today--"

"For the first time, I presume?"

Scylla shrank beneath her father's stern glare. "Well, yeah. You don't think I nicked those apples, do you?"

"I am a very busy deity, Scylla. I suggest you run along, and not to Charybdis's underwater lair."

It wasn't like Scylla to be manipulative with other peoples' emotions. That ballpark belonged to Stheno and Euryale. And that was why the tear inching down Scylla's cheek was nothing short of sincere.

Phorcys sighed. "Beloved daughter, the scope of nuptial vision you embrace is so narrow. I beg you to broaden your selection of suitors."

"Daddy, I LOVE him!"

There was no getting through to her. He sighed, and recited a mantra he'd invented when Thoosa started dating. "At least he's not mortal. At least he's not mortal..." Although, come to think of it, why would he invent such a mantra for an in-law he wouldn't mind having? Something in his heart had changed, and he didn't know why.

"Oh, you're a biggoted beast!"

She knocked over a lamp on her way out. Left to his paternal solitude, Phorcys thought of ways to convince Scylla of Charybdis's louse-like ways.

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If you could find Charybdis in his personal abode, then you should be able to find just about anything in the world. Among the ingrediants to a Charib Crib Clutter were a pile of empty CD cases, a boxful of plastic hamster cage tubes, a collection of abandoned musical instruments, the inevitable laundry pile of six-month unwashed boxer shorts, and a few disassembled stereo speakers.

At the northern end of this unnavigatable maze was a hamster cage, with the shrunken survivors of Scylla's and Charybdis's team sabotages. They were shrunken because Charybdis

didn't have enough room in his bath-tub. Besides, they were way more manageable when they were no bigger than his middle finger.

However, as was natural with small men, these sailors contemplated a feisty demeanor. Whenever their captor entered the room, they jeered and smeared insult on the cage walls. Not having the intellect of a two-watt lightbulb, Charybdis had a speaker installed inside the cage to open up the pathway of communication. All the prisoners were interested in communicating were witticisms regarding his profound body odor and lack of a love life (they hadn't seen Scylla yet). But Charybdis left the speaker alone, largely because he had no idea how to interpret the mortal men's words. Then came the day when they catapulted something shiney at his forehead.

He fell from his hammock in a style similar to the fruit above Isaac Newton's head. The sailors gathered around the microphone. "Dim titan, why must you torment us with gold we may not spend?"

The titan, dim as he was, would not have handed out gold to his prisoners. He would have gone out and spent it himself, leaving it in the hamster cage was likely to invite the sailors to urinate on it.

But the gold in question was an apple, the thing that had woken him. He discovered it on his way to give what-for to the wise guys who assaulted him in his sleep. The projectile lay in his line of marching. He stepped on it and fell backwards into a pile of clothing.

When he recovered and checked his stumble, he saw that the sailors weren't lying. Someone had put a large golden apple in the cage. It probably wasn't worth as much now as it once had been. It had bite marks on it.

"What's this? Fruit? I don't remember eating it."

The reason it took him so long to recognize it as food was that it didn't come out of an aluminum bag or a beer can.

"It is the fabled fruit of immortality," explained the alleged captain of the cage. "We do not wish to outlive our wives, so we chose not to eat from it."

"Yeah," said the supposed first mate. "Besides, if we know what it is, and we're not even divine, then you've got to be a REAL chump not to recognize it."

Charybdis thought of chucking the apple at the cage, but then he had second thoughts. All of his living shipwreck survivors might make a run for it. And if he became Charybdis minus pets, then the only girl he ever loved might turn into Scylla minus Cribby.

"Oi, take caution, mate," said another sailor. "That be stolen goody!"

"Aw man, and this was, like, the only shiny thing in the room. I could've used it to propose to my gal."

"No, feed it to our wives!" shouted the sailormen. "We shan't outlive the women!"

He thought he'd pocket the apple while he decided between his own woman and women he'd never met. He discovered he wouldn't have to, for tucked within his pantaloons were two identical apples, only these were untainted by bite marks. They were exactly what he needed to propose to Scylla with. They would hold the apples up, wrap their arms around one another, then take a bite out of the apple the other one was holding. It was a certain way to seal the deal. The sailors' wives could have the used one. First thing in the morning, he'd pay a call on his wife-to-be.

Stheno sat in the weight lifting room of the Hercules club, chatting with the one they left behind. He was a reluctant Herc, much less willing to help now that the last time a goddess required Herc Hunk aid.

"Um... you're not the one who turns people into stone, are you?"

"That would be my sister, the treacherous Medusa. I am the fairest of the Gorgons, Stheno, and that is why my treacherous sister seeks to disrupt my betrothals."

The guy shuddered. "As far as it concerns me, I would choose to avert any individual given to fits of rage and the power to alter the morphology of others."

She didn't quite recognize him, but his feeble disposition, belied by his impressive musculature, struck some note of familiarity.

"You set foot in our grotto once before, didn't you?" queried Stheno.

"Uh... no, through what means does such an idea present--"

"Oh don't prevaricate, I hold no grievance with you. It is Medusa at fault for the supposed 'death' of Aigle."

The jock's timidity subsided to make room for distrust. "Begging they divine pardon, but thou seemeth endowed with a constitution far greater than they old lady's."

Stheno beamed. She was rather fond of her constitution. "Yes, it is rather steadfast, if I say so myself."

"So steadfast that ye did not transfigure me into an invertebret, like Ceto did."

"Who set you free?"

"Phorcys. Thy father is gracious, an attribute sorely seperate from his wife."

The sudden topic of wifehood reminded Stheno that she lacked it, and she whisked away to the windo to ponder what a life dedicated to her last boyfriend would have been like. She also

wondered what a lifetime domestic partnership with Charybdis would have been like, even from dim-bulbed Scylla's point of view, and this she wondered because the slouchster in question was walking around barefooted in broad daylight, holding the incriminating evidence that should have been on Medusa's hands.

\*

Charybdis checked the address chiseled on the cuneiform. This was the place -- the home of a sea captain he'd captured long since. Doorbells weren't around in those days, so he had to knock extra loud to disrupt the chanting within. The door flew open, and an imposing matriarch who could have single-handedly sunk an entire fleet materialized before him.

"What do you want? Do you not regard the emergency prayer meeting on behalf of Sorephone's missing husband? The man hasn't been seen since he took a bath two days ago."

Charybdis ignored all that because he didn't care. "Wazzup, lady. I'm the guy who sunk your man's ship. Now I'm keeping him in a hamster cage underwater. He can breathe and everything. That's possible when you're immortal."

The woman, Mrs. Sarcophenes, sized him up. "Are you certain of your godhood? You're awful skinny for someone of such proclaimed divinity."

"Hey, lady, I could take you on. I took on your Captain and won. Anyway, I'm here to feed you this." He proffered the used apple. The misses analyzed it, but she didn't accept it. "I doubt you could take me on, as you put it, but I do not wish to pursue the matter. I also do not wish to pursue the consumption of your suspect produce. It looks as though you already pursued a bite."

"Look, lady, will you just take the apples so Captain Eight-pack will quit bugging me?"

The woman swelled with inexpressable fury. She expressed it this way. "Referring to any man as a 'captain eight-pack' is evidence of his starvation at your hands. Instead, why don't I bring you inside for all of us to throw stuffed olives at?"

He almost chucked the apple at her in defiance, but on the other hand, he was rather peckish. He followed her into the sacrifice room. Mrs. Sarcophone clapped her hands to borrow her guests' attention. "Gentlewomen, allow me to introduce the creature that has marooned our husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers at sea." Women of varying stature and occupational opportunity sat with their numerous things to sacrifice. Among them was Scylla, who'd come seeking support against her father's drastic disapproval.

"Oh, Cribby," she fell upon her beloved one, earning a suspicious look from her new mortal friends. "I knew you'd come--well, no I didn't, but Daddy's such a crab. He says he doesn't want us dating anymore."

"That reminds me." In spite of the girly setting -- there was so much perfume and sewing equipment around that he could have sworn he'd walked into a mall or something -- this was the perfect opportunity to kill two birds with three apples. He'd already delivered his promise apple, and now he displayed his engagement apples.

"Scylla Avalon Phorcys, will you marry me?" He put one apple in her hand, and that caused her to screech.

"Stanley Jay Charybdis, how could you!" She ran from the room, wailing. Charybdis was so flabbergasted that he forgot how hungry he'd been earlier. He left behind a roomful of half-widows, who felt cheated due to their latest member being involved romantically with the person responsible for their widowhood.

"I don't know what just happened," admitted Mrs. Zopheriti, "But if they are on bad terms now, I just might vouch for her entrance back into the club."

The hostess examined the fruit; She dare not taste it, having seen it in the possession of the enemy, so she cursed it to Hades and threw it into the furnace, where it vanished in a puff of iridescent smoke.

\*

Scylla lay weeping into the crook of Phorcys's armpit. "Fate said it was meant to be. Deino said it was meant to be."

"And I say that my Grey daughters are colored so because of their slender, paltry horizons. I swear an oath, tender girl, an entire troupe of willing men await your courtship. Although this division of kindred souls - yours and Cribby's -- might be tumultuous in the moment, your wedding will banish the memory of any alluring bachelor you met before."

Inwardly, of course, he was celebrating the breakup. In his mind, the dumping of Charybdis called for champaign and fireworks. No more would a retracted sacrifice tumble down the chimney with a notice of a job past completed. Now, he simply had to tend to the matter troubling his wife and Gorgon daughters.

An assembly line of hercs carried out the maurading statues; Ceto was mercifully absent. The sight of any more of these hunks might make her lose her mind and transform them into eels or plankton. She was in her bedroom, calculating the mathematics of immortality, still wondering how her precious Aigle could be petrified so easily.



Euryale was nominated to supervise the assembly. She made certain that the only thing they'd leave with were the statues themselves, and not important valuables.

Then there was Medusa, sulking in her bedroom and denying any impugnties against her. Stheno hadn't come home yet. Phorcyes suspected that, with her elegant charm and extrovertivity, she was out playing ultimate with her immortal peers, looking for the right one to bring home.

The doorbell rang. Euryale answered it, and led Praxiteles in to her father.

"Hey... what's happening here? I just came by to pick up my wages."

"We are escorting some mystery men from my daughter's bedroom."

"That would be Stheno's bedroom," explained Euryale. "I do not want you thinking that I of all people collect adiposent nude men."

Prax gagged. "I'm sure glad you didn't ask me to sculpt anything in THEIR likeness."

Another ring of the doorbell, and Hera intruded.

"Scylla... there you are. I wonder if you could explain this to me." She presented her with the golden apple that had been bitten from. Phorcys thought it was a terrible disgrace for Hera to barge in and offer them leftovers.

"Now see here, Hera, it is bad enough that I lose my daughter to your incompetant management, but here you come to relocate the blame upon this poor, divorsified girl."

Yet a third individual stormed in; Stheno, with vengeful intentions flickering in her eyes, she launched into a renewed incrimination towards Medusa. With a reassuring pat on Scylla's shoulder, she told the teenaged rabble-rousing sea goddess that Cribby was not evil, just stupid, and that Medusa was somehow all behind it.

"Well, Medusa is certainly behind something," boomed a new self-appointed houseguest, and all the hubbub and legit business came to a halt, with about ten or so men remaining in Stheno's mattress.

One of the hercs looked up from the statue he carried. "Hey, look, its the goddess of lawful combat! How ya doin'? Could you step aside so we can do our job?"

The goddess in question was Minerva. She usually kept out of people's way unless she found out someone was playing dirty. And it was evident by her refusal to make way that she smelled some dishonest dealings.

"Phorcys, may I confer with your wife?"

\*

Everyone gathered in the living room. Charybdis showed up to reunite with Scylla, and to perhaps name some other method of sealing their relationship, to which Phorcys responded with threats and anger. Nonetheless, the royal family of the sea plus Hera, Prax, and the slobby exboyfriend sat beneath the scrutinous glare of Minerva, who stated her purpose thusly.

"I am here because of a few shattered figurines that once adorned my mantelpiece. The mantle is now gone, as is a coin that helped to pay for it."

"That's hardly anything to do with us," said Euryale. "If your tithes can be stolen so easily, you ought to consider changing the place where they are offered to you."

"On the contrary, it does have to do with you. One of you, at least. You see, I know exactly who that very coin came from, and the likely reasons for its retraction."

Medusa folded her arms and tutted. "I Know where this is going. Well, get on with it. I may be blindfolded, but it is not a cheap shot if I can retaliate with the very curse you put on me."

Minerva was a little less given to spout threats, but she stood firm in her purpose.

"I'll thank you to let me complete my assessment. All of you. It's only fair." She presented the unsightly naked stone slob. "For your family's sake, I won't ask you to remove your blindfold. I'm certain, however, that if you did, you would recognize the girthsome man. At least from the waist down."

It was Phorcys's turn to fume. "Now see here, Minerva, I've already dealt with one undesirable son-in-law--"

Ceto interrupted the outburst by inserting a snail into his flapping maw.

"Now, why would I want to petrify some stranger?" said Medusa. "I have no grievance with any of these mortals or the baths they take."

"Yet how did you know they were bathing, unless you saw them in the act of so doing?"

Euryale interjected. "None of us spy on the local bathing house. Besides, how would you know if anyone went there?"

"Because the sacrifices offered to me just so happen to lie at the bottom of that bath. I am the goddess of righteous warfare, as you know. It is often army generals and captains who come to me, asking to balance the odds or frustrate cheaters. So when a woman offers a sacrifice unto me, I pay especial attention to what she asking. I look for details in this kind of exception. In this case, it was to heal a wound between a sister and father, one whom married without the other's approval."

Phorcys gaped. He had all but forgotten his hatred towards Poseidon, seemingly on a whim. Was it because of a sacrifice made by Medusa? The mortal girl wept. Tears dripped also from her serpentine locks.

"It's true," she admitted. "I took back the coin I gave you."

Minerva continued. "Of course, it would not have been necessary if the apples of immortality did what they are advertised to do; that is, grant immortality and freedom from all paranormal ailments, which is what you suffer from. You have reason enough to go snooping around there, even at the cost of your sisters' lives. But what if the apples disappoint? What if they deliver no such remedy? What if their cure comes only to the truly mortal?"

Hera stood erect. "I hope this is not a surprise critique of my gardening experience."

"No," said Minerva. "It is the evidence we need."

She snapped her fingers, and the family trembled as the stone body of Neptune was hauled into the room.

"Sheesh, he's as heavy today as he was ten years ago," said a Herc. "What have you been feeding him?"

"A Golden apple, if this bit mark is anything to go by." Hera held up the ruined fruit, and now gave Medusa a cynical glower.

"Don't pass your own verdict just yet," advised Minerva. "But tell me, did the Hesperides at all resemble the statue before you?"

Prax shrunk back into his chair while Charybdis thought of how glad he was that he never dated Medusa.

"There is no resemblance, except for their inanimation. The Hesperides were lighter, and ostensibly more fragile. Not to mention, a single Herc could hoist one into the air, as I recall."

"What are you saying?" said Stheno. "That Medusa did NOT partake of the legendary golden apples?"

"She is not the sole person who could have done so," said Minerva. "I wouldn't put it past you, in an earnest attempt to push Euryale out of the immortality club."

A snarl crept across Stheno's lips. "Why, you have no proof of that!"

"None, except that the he-nymph you last brought home was a past lover of your sister's. The case could be made that in order to nullify your sister's membership in the immortality club, you stole into Hera's garden to snatch some flora, ANY flora, then leave them in Euryale's room? Then again, it was you, Euryale, who ordered the local Herc hunks to carry the naked bathers to Stheno's bedroom, was it not?"

Now it was Euryale's turn to cry out in objection. She had not cared so much about bedding Euripedes as she had stopping Stheno from doing so. She, like Stheno, had coveted lone membership apart from her sister, yet hadn't found opportunity to do so until Medusa's dive into desperate vengeance.

"But the apples landed in Charybdis's possession. How could you think I'd try to get Stheno thrown out of the immortality club when he ended up with them?"

"Ah, yes. And now we come to you, Charybdis. You are genuinely thick in the skull, and schemes come not easily to you. I should say that they come rather easily to those men you captured, however. What is it they desire more than anything in the world? To return to their wives the way they rememberd them? After all, you WERE seen delivering an apple to the captain's wife, weren't you?"

Charybdis, dull and irheaded as he was, understood the stakes of the case. It would mean bidding Scylla forever farewell, and perhaps a few millenia spent in afterlife prison. He opened his mouth to confess his idiocy, when his ex stood up with a confession of her own.

"The theft was my own. I mean," Scylla cleared her throat. "I stole the apples. I was sick of the rotting fruit those damn warships carry around all the time, so I got with my sisters -- the Hesperides, I mean -- and I worked it out, and I stole a few apples. When I found out what had happend to them, I thought they'd been punished. I tried to feed them the apples. That's why there's a bit missing from one of them." She then pointed at Hera. "You cursed them, didn't you? You thought they did a sucky job of guarding the apple tree, and that's why you turned them into sculptures, isn't it?"

Hera was not so taken aback. She had her countermeasures ready.

"Now why would you venture into my garden a second time if you knew the apples didn't work?"

"To displace the blame. I'm sorry Medusa. I tried to incriminate you."

"Fool confessions, all of them," scolded Minerva. "I know the culprit. I have consulted the greys for a small fee, and I am ready to point my finger conclusively.

Prax slunk out of his chair. "You know what, Phorcys? This...eh, past week's business, forget about it. It's on the house."

"I wouldn't depart so immediately if I were you," warned Ceto. "For you see, I have been calculating the power of transforming immortal spirits into clay sculptures, and what I have found is that the act is impossible. Turning them into stone, well, that is another story altogether."

"But constructing clay replicas is a feat even mortals can undertake." Minerva snapped her fingers, and in twirled Aigle, Zerathustrea, and Abergeno, as lively and animate as a babe ordered to take a nap. "Oh, father thank you for such a blissful weekend! I pray solemnly that Hera never found out--" but their boss was obviously in the room. Phorcys sweated like a candle, awaiting the rest of Minerva's assessment.

"I am the goddess of righteous warfare, and I deduce that there has been some foul play going on in this household. This week was free-for-all week at the circus maximus, ideal for couples and singles alike, not to mention, nymphs with a terrible case of burnout. Of course, they couldn't leave the garden without leaving behind a facsimile for Ladon to hit on. That IS why you hired Praxiteles, isn't it?"

Prax twiddled his fingers, cautious to avoid locking guilty glances with Phorcys. When the sea god refused to speak, Prax blurted out, "You have no idea how bad business has been for me, lady."

Minerva sighed. "Well, that much is true. I did not inquire into your business affairs when I met the Greys. Nevertheless, what is more important is the theft of the apples. Phorcys, you have made your disapproval of Scylla and Charybdis as a couple no secret. You are the one who picked the apples, promising one bite to Praxiteles so that he would not starve throughout the winter, and you were the one who played fetch with Laydon, that his jaws may close upon a boulder, thereby abolishing his tattling, cat-calling voices -- at least until you could frame someone else... namely, the one you despise the most, the one you wish to divide from your daughter.

"But you knew, because the golden apples were there from the start, were they not? A little something hanging from the chandelier above the dinner table to intimidate Charybdis. But if you couldn't intimidate him, you could incarcerate him, couldn't you?"

"Well, we all certainly know who our enemies are now, don't we?" Stheno bared her fangs at Euryale, and the middle gorgon sister harrumphed as she trotted from the room. Stheno chased after her, hoping to spoil any love she chanced upon.

"Now then, I shan't regret this decision," said Hera. "You are all discharged from my employment. Fly willy-nilly wherever you wish, but don't dare come near my Garden."

The hisperides all hid their eyes, lest they should awaken to a brighter future. Ceto escorted them away, muttering something about a written apology to the local Hercules.

Scylla and Cribby left afterwards, but beyond the threshold, Scylla turned back to her father and said, "Go stick your head in a chamber pot. It's like a mirror for smells." Then she ran away cackling.

"You are going to afterlife prison for this," said Hera to Phorcys and Prax. "And if they offer to let you work off your debt by public service in my garden, then I'll throw boiling water over you both and make you the laughing stocks of the Louisiana crawdad boil, 3000 years from now. Yes, that is a thing that will exist. Don't think I've never consulted the greys."

Hera took a whip and encouraged the crestfallen Phorcys and his magnificent sculpting stooge from the room, leaving only Minerva, Medusa, and the Statue of Neptune in the room. Medusa, quite frankly, was in no mood to listen to Minerva's peering, crackly voice.

"That's not really Neptune, is it?" She took off her blindfold, and saw that, yes indeed, it was old Neptune. It was also Minerva, newly petrified because Medusa saw her. All she could do was sit there, complacent in her ignorance of Medusa's next move. Technically, she would have been



wisely served if she'd just left after solving the mystery, but she was the kind who liked to stick around to see the aftermath of her labors

"Well, only time will tell if someone comes along and shoves an apple your throat, for I certainly don't want to."

She left without curing Neptune, since making out in Minerva temple was his idea in the first place.