

Μέδουσα

My snakes float gently around my head, bobbing up and down in the waters of a thousand colours of the Aegean, my sea. Most are asleep. Physis is awake, gently licking my ear with her thrice-forked tongue, nudging herself against my right temple. With my index finger, I caress her triangular head, feeling her smooth essence. She is one of my favourites. My ten tender lovers. Or daughters. Or pets. I do not know what they are to me. I no longer detest the gift of their permanent companionship.

I do not miss the silken golden waves that preceded them. **My hair was my finest feature, they say.** With a bristle brush I tended to my locks daily, stroke by stroke, until they were tamed. My sisters used to mock me. I thought it was envy. I am wiser now. **They had all the time, I did not.**

Opposite Physis, Nomos is stirring. My legless lizards tend to their prey, as I float among the kelp, my body submerged, my eyes on the shore, on the city of Athens. They snap at the waters with their delicate mouths, here and there, hunting translucent life, hissing with pleasure.

I came to say farewell to my sea. I draped my snakes in a sack, put the fold of my peplos over my head, and walked the long way down the hill and past the water's edge. I came to cleanse myself in salt water. Salt fizzles in the deep wounds of the soul. But the wounds heal. With salt, with oil, with time.

Soon my red blood will fall on the wind-beaten beaches of Northern Africa. **New daughters will spring forth as each blood drop from my decapitated head touches the sands. Amphivena, with her two heads at opposite ends of her body. Uroboros, forever eating her own tail. And others.** Each will tell her own story that has no beginning, and no end. But not yet. For now, I simply swim.

I leave the waters and drape my head once more. I begin the long walk back to the temple atop the square hill. A visitor seeks me. **With Athena's guidance, he will sever my throat in**

a smooth sweep of his sickle-shaped sword. He will take my head. In time, he will bring it back to my Athena. Then, we will be closer than ever. A happy end.

Make no mistake, she will have had many before and after my time, but I am one of Athena's favorite lovers. Of course she is a virgin. That has nothing to do with the éros between women. I am not a virgin. I lost it. As if it can ever be found.

A mortal daughter of lesser sea gods, my parents left me to be raised by my older sisters. More of a pet, or even a pest than a person to them all. She'll soon be gone, what's the point.

My sisters offered me to Athena, to serve at her temple. I was old enough to take the role of an arrephoros—weave her peplos and tend to her sacred olive oil at the temple's mouth.

I was not of the city's nobility, who send their daughters to serve at the temple for a year. In exchange, they're ensured the best marriage prospects for their neat and proper girls. I had no such qualities at nine years of age. I was all limbs, muddy fingernails, hair aflame. A wild child raised by wilder sisters.

Yet, Athena accepted the offer. Family is family. She is, after all, a first cousin, once removed. Perhaps Athena took pity on me. Perhaps she didn't care. One more girl-child for the menagerie of virgins at her service, each with their sacred duties and secret aspirations.

I arrived at the temple, thrilled by the prospect of meeting the goddess. I approached a girl, a kanephoros judging by her age, on the cusp of womanhood. Where might one find Athena? She looked at me, surprised. Her friends laughed.

At Arachne's weavery, I learned to attend to my duties. Arachne was always there, industrious, roaming from one loom to the other on her many legs, instructing, advising, guiding. Often chuckling to herself for no apparent reason. With one of her many arms I sometimes received a pat on the head for a demonstration of clever weaving.

I knew Arachne had many stories of Athena, having resided in the temple for longer than anyone could remember. At the end of each day, I would ask Arachne to tell me such story. She would wince, cackle, and hush me right out of the room, closing the door behind me.

I had neither charm nor manners, but I had grit. Perhaps she grew tired of my daily nagging. One evening, she gave me a story.

“Olive oil and saltwater do not mix well, child,” she began, “Poseidon was fond of the city of Athens, and never liked his niece, Athena, daughter of his brother Zeus. When Poseidon came to know Athena was chosen by the men and women of the city, he challenged, made a claim. The citizens asked each god to bestow the city with a gift. The more welcomed gift would determine the patronage.

“Rolling his eyes up and heaving, with a great grunt Poseidon flung his trident down, splitting open the ground into a new saltwater river that began coursing through the city. So crass, shoving himself in, semen and all. So useless, for all the reasons freshwater rivers through cities are useful.

“Athena looked at the deed, said nothing, showed no disdain. She simply gave us our very first olive tree, and calmly outlined its many gifts.

“The women all voted for her, the men for Poseidon. There were more women than men, the vote held, she won. Resentful, the men revoked the right of women to vote from that day forward.

“She is a gracious one, our Athena. She extended Poseidon a peace offering, an olive branch if you will,” Arachne cackled at her joke, “and allowed him to share this temple with her. No misbehaviour of any form was her only request. He pledged. She shouldn’t have believed him.”

I was rewarded for my hard work and skill of weaving. I was granted the honor of being the chosen arrophoros to attend the sacred rites at the year’s end festival. With trembling hands I took the basket holding secret offerings to the caves below the temple. There, I left it to Athena’s snake child, and brought back secrets given in return.

“Pallas and Athena were best friends, growing up,” Arachne told me not long after I graduated to my next temple role, no longer required to weave. I kept returning for the stories. I still have not seen the goddess. “Triton, Pallas’s father, took pity on orphan Athena when she was born. True, she came out of Zeus’ head. fully clothed, fully formed, so they say. But they also say Pallas was Athena’s friend in childhood.

“Child, myths love to mangle and fold. The fabrics of stories become worn, torn at places, twisted inside and out. Let me unriddle you this one, then. Yes, fully clothed and formed.

No, not an adult. A girl. Lost, frightened, motherless. Her father raped her mother and then devoured her. Athena arrived to the world young, alone, and queer.

“Triton, gentle merman that he is, truly thought this strange little girl, wise as a whip, unmatched with a spear, his daughter’s best friend, was simply just a tad awkward. Nevermind she liked sparring and horse-riding, cared nothing for dolling up, ignored the young men around, gods or otherwise, and brushed aside their flirtatious attempts to woo her. Nevermind she wanted to spend all her time with his daughter: in school, in bath, and in bed. They are good companions, these cousins, once removed, he thought. How lovely to have a best friend.

“They were lovely indeed. Lovely as only young lovers can be. When they weren’t in bed, or bath, they liked most to spar together.

“Zeus and Poseidon came visiting, to see their kin in a friendly match. Poseidon, with his nose for sniffing all manner of lust, immediately noted what Triton his son did not. He didn’t like it one bit.

“The girls sparred to entertain their elders. Pallas was excellent, but Athena was undefeatable. Athena, who loved Pallas, wanted her to win that day. It will not matter if I held back this one time, she thought. It was just a friendly match.

“Friendly, as long as you parry.

“Zeus, who never cared for anything but his own glory, grew irritated seeing his daughter lose round after round to his great-niece. Like an obnoxious child, he turned his chest here and there, as if casually, playing the sun’s reflection off his golden aegis, his breastplate of protection. He aimed the rays into Pallas’s eyes. Athena struck another deliberately clumsy blow for Pallas to deflect. Pallas, temporarily blinded, did not see the spear arching towards her. In it went, breaking in half.

“Pallas dropped dead.

“While she never speaks ill of him,” Arachne said, as she gently nudged me out of the weavery, “I do not believe Athena ever spoke to her father again.”

In my third year, I was shown into the secret rooms of the palace, the ones whose entrances I did not know existed, hidden with mageia.

There, I finally saw her for the first time, my Athena.
I fell in love with her.
And she, with me.

“Athena dropped the broken spear,” Arachne continued where she left off, after I begged her again and again to finish the terrible tale, knowing little of the horrors lying ahead in my own future with Athena. “She looked at her dead lover, turned around and began running. She ran for days and days.

“She found her way to Hephaestus caves. Her lame half-brother. Perhaps he was not even a half-brother, just a son of her step-mother. Who can tell? She did like him, for his craft and ingenuity when it came to the silent working of shiny metals. Otherwise, he was not the brightest of the lot. But still, a god.

“In her befuddled, bleeding mind, she needed to mend things, make them whole again. Within the illogical logic of grief, she reasoned the first thing she needed was a new spear that she would ask him to make.

“Not announcing herself, she ran straight into his forge, and caught him masturbating. He looked up, and saw her, cheeks flushed, panting for air. Hepha was not a bad soul, child. Just slow-minded unless at his anvil. To his simple mind, she appeared filled with lust mirroring his. He ejaculated right then and there, on her leg. Some say he tried to rape her. That is not so. He is just a graceless second-rate god.”

In time, with the passing glorious years I became Athena’s high priestess. I saw little of Arachne, but she did tell me the end of that story.

“Athena turned around and ran out of Hepha’s cave. Tearing a piece of her peplos, she wiped that foul semen away, tossing it on the ground. Gaia, your incorrigibly fertile grandmother, that great grandmother of Athena and Hepha, immediately birthed baby Erchithonius. Not that anyone asked her to.

“Athena wished to adopt him, and babe in arms she took refuge at the temple of Athens. She swore off all dealings with gods and their games. She wished only to be there for the mortals. They loved her in return, and made her their deity. It would be many years before Poseidon’s challenge. And many more years before you would be brought to her, mortal girl.

“Who came first by name, Athena, or Athens, you must wonder. You’ll never know. Though I do. Names have power, a power I choose to keep. It is time for you to go back to her. The time will come when you will visit me once more. I will then weave for you the last story, child”

Arachne never stopped calling me that. I, who held the most powerful position in the city of Athens, the bearer of the goddess’s words and desires, did not mind.

They still talk of how I was raped, in Athena’s temple, yet the tale is all twisted, its fabric all torn and up in knots, like my snakes when they are having a fit. Some say I was punished for letting him in. Fools. That temple belonged to both gods. Some say I was punished for claiming to be prettier than her. Twice fools. She was not pretty in that passing sense of the word, and I was. That was never a question and never her concern, nor mine. Some say I was punished for being raped. Thrice fools. A goddess of wisdom and war does not indulge in the lazy game of victim-blaming.

The truth is far simpler. Poseidon remembered Athena’s early days at Triton’s court. He knew she took no male lovers, had no children of her loins, kept female company, a harem, one could say. A woman who needed no man.

He couldn’t hurt her. But he could bring her rage and remorse.

It was quick. I was penetrated, desecrated, impregnated. With my blood still drying on my thighs, she found us. She lunged at him with fumes and frenzy. He laughed and walked away, his job done.

Athena composed herself. She was a regal goddess of wisdom, after all. She lifted me up as if I was lighter than Arachne’s finest weaves, and carried me to her private chambers. She wiped my blood away, removed the torn and soiled gown, and dressed me in one of her own, an arrephoros-woven peplos.

She kissed my brow and said, “We have a long history, my love, Poseidon and me. He despises me, for I am the offspring of Zeus, his brother-rival. It matters not to him I despise my father just as much, for what he did to my mother. He hates me for killing my Pallas, and loathes me for having loved her. I defeated Poseidon in our battle for Athens, my city, who I fiercely love, who cherishes me for all that I am. For that, his pride suffers still.

“My love, he did it not for lust, but for power. I can thwart all mortal men, and many gods, but not this one. Yet, I have powers of my own. To console you, I grant you three wishes. Name them.”

I cannot blame myself for the horrid state I was in. What had happened. What was to come. I knew - soon I would be required to leave the temple. From the youngest acolyte to Athena’s high priestess, we were all virgins. I was no longer one.

Had I waited to ponder, to consider, I might have been more cautious about Athena’s boons. Had I taken the time, I might have remembered that wishes granted by gods are cut from a different cloth. For them, it is all the same weave. They cannot see the difference. But I was rash, angry, and greedy.

“I want no man to dare as much as look at me, and go unpunished,
I want to be with you forever, always close to your heart,
I want to be immortal.”

“Your wishes will be granted,” she replied, and placed her palm along my cheek, caressed my face once, and summoned me into sleep.

I awoke by her olive tree. She leaned over to give me a soft, long kiss. Her breath the freshness of olive blossom. It was, I knew, a last kiss.

One by one she undid my hairpins. She pulled up my thick, golden hair. I lifted my hands to touch the white, luscious curves of her strong arms, and she shook her head in disapproval. She watched me intently, eyes of a thousand shades of the Aegean, and whispered in a language I did not know.

I felt a rustle and heard a hiss, and then another. Ten sharp faces surrounded me from all directions and began to lick my face. I touched my scalp shrieking and recoiled from what I found.

“Those are your new guardians, Medusa, dearest. They are for you, a gift. They are companions, they are lovely, they love you already. Do you like them?”

Undisturbed, perhaps unaware of my shock, she cooed for them. Then, she pointed at each, telling me their names and proclivities, caressing each in turn. They half-closed their eyes in genuine pleasure and I felt it, rippling deep within my own body.

They were magnificent, indeed. For a brief moment, I forgot I had just been made into a monster. Then, I stiffened, breathing hard, stifling fear and rage.

“Dearest, the gaze of your snakes will turn any man to stone. Like me, you now are mother of snakes. Your first wish, granted.

“I have summoned my young half-brother Perseus. He is full of pathos and for glory will do as I ask. Soon, he will be here. Make your farewells.”

I found Arachne, and wept upon her shoulder. “Yes,” she said, “I know, child. She gave me my wish as well. I asked to weave the most beautiful, the most delicate, the finest of threads. I asked for weaves that glimmer in the sun with gold and many thousand colors. She gifted me many legs so I can push and pull more pedals than any. She gifted me more arms and only I can work the double shuttle. She gifted me eight eyes so I can keenly see these finest threads I spin. She gifted me a room I know not how to leave. She cannot see the difference.”

Arachne told me her own story then. Not the fable of a jealous and petty Athena. That goddess exists only in myths written by resentful men. The true story is of a goddess exalted by the perfection of mortal Arachne’s weaves, things of both beauty and purpose, by far Athena’s favorite combination. Moved so, that she gifted young Arachne the finest threads in the world, forever and ever.

Before I left her weavery for the last time, Arachne, who knew to thread stories into both past and future, told me that last tale she had promised. I learned what was yet to come. The end of my story. The story of my end.

I climb the hill, heading to my temple chamber to slumber among my snakes. Perseus will soon find me there. My story will end.

And my story will begin.

He will carry my severed head across land and seas. He will use me, without my consent, for all manner of killing. For his deeds, he will be a sung hero, I will be branded a monster.

In time, Perseus will return me to my beloved. She will attach my head to her aegis. A wise goddess of war always wears a protective breastplate. Those who doubt Athena loves me can look for me and my snakes right there. For I am with her forever, my head upon her heart. My second wish, granted.

I will be dead. Of the curious weave of my life, all that will remain will be my rape, my death, the havoc wreaked by my severed head, mouth agape. But my story will not end.

Immortal and immortalized: first cousins, once removed of this incestuous family. In time, my legacy will rise. **Women will reclaim me as their fierce protector, as my name foretold.** I die, my story lives. My third wish, granted.

With salt, with oil, with time the wounds heal. The scars remain.

I am the Medusa, hear my snakes hiss, hear me shriek to you across thousands of years, hear me tell you our tale.

That of our story. Mine, and yours. No longer a fresh peplos. A story twisted and torn.

Go now, go smooth the fabric with love and clever hands. Go mend its tears with the glimmering, finest of threads,. The scars, in their golden sheen, hold a secret beauty. That of a life, lived. The blessing in the curse.

I am the Medusa. I protect, and I love, and I tell.
Go now, go weave your own story, as you wish it to be.