**Medusa Phase**

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It’s a night of dark shadows. I scrunch into myself, witness his hand sway and dip as he searches for the lamp. His hand contracts, floats through currents of memory.

When I was a girl, I was obsessed with monsters. I remember standing in an aquarium while my classmates fidgeted and whispered. A woman in a blue blazer pointed to jellyfish and used the term *medusae. No brain, no blood, no heart*, she said. Poison-laced cords fine like hair and a jelly-like exterior. They could halt a human’s heart; could cause a power outage; could congregate together like ghosts, igniting the ocean with their light. I pictured medusa in my mind—woman and tentacled creature converged—red tresses undulating in marine snow. My insides spiraled, sweaty palms clasped together.

Long after the rest of my class moved on, I stood before box jellies. Translucent bodies unrestrained. Some of the jellies in another enclosure glowed fluorescent orange, leaving watermarks of tangerine slices in my vision. Blinking, I touched my forefinger to the glass, feeling as if I, too, could one day glow.

My hometown was a hive of monsters, so I tried to glow in the city. I wafted in shadows, listened to movement. I closed my eyes, thought of medusae. I channeled translucent veils, poison within.

I didn’t think the real monsters would come for me if I lingered in shadows, but they found me. I heard them calling, telling me what they wanted to do to me. Things I didn’t understand yet made my stomach turn. I thought of stone—of stopping their hearts. When one touched me, I conjured up my orange glow. I was but a polyp, yet I imagined myself a wasp of the sea. I kicked and clawed and screamed and even though they hurt me, I saw raw skin on eyebrows, bloody arroyos carved by my nails on lips and jaws. *I hurt them too.*

I limped into the room I shared with three other girls, showered, and hid the wreckage left on me—wreckage in the grottos where my heart once beat. Nobody noticed as I begin a slow transformation: emerging, bulbous shape, spine-free and elastic—armed with venom.

Tonight, I study his hand in the lamplight. He thinks I’m capable of love. I know he’s a monster in disguise.

I whisper, *You’re a mere fleck in this ocean of predators*.

He doesn’t hear me. He doesn’t see the medusa-phase ignite the depthless, dark seas of my body. No blood, no heart: the things taken from me. My mind’s not like his; it’s a muscle that contracts as I glide under layers of skin, lacerating through façades of strength.

I can make a city go dark. I can capsize a ship. *I can stop a heart in seconds.* So, I will let his current take me until I decide to let my tendrils unfurl, toxic beads unsheathed. Until I decide to petrify. Until I decide to sting.

And when I watch the morning sun from his window, I’ll tell myself this is just a phase. I’m not the monster reflecting back at me.