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THE ACID THAT DISSOLVES IMAGES

by Loren Rhoads

You throw the magazine into the jumble of makeup heaped beneath the mirror. “Pretentious gory poseur,” the critic called you, “bastard love-child of Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson, and the whole 20th-century shock-rock scene.” You draw a (hopefully) calming breath. The critic obviously hadn’t stayed for the whole show.

Obviously. Medusa is an angry itch inside you, mixed in the bile that creeps up the back of your throat. You suck miserably on a beer, but the bitter taste won’t go away. How long can this sane front hold?

Your hands shake as you load the gun. The first bullet shatters the mirror, your reflection; the second silences the digiplayer. As Medusa rises, you feel the hardness returning. It feels *good*.

Medusa wonders: if she shot the body you share in the shoulder, could you still go on stage — despite the pain, despite your arm hanging incarnadine against the shiny black latex bodysuit? You wish there were some way to shoot her. Instead, you hold the magazine at arm’s length and blow it to confetti. It snows down around you, smelling of cordite.

Over the dressing room intercom, Carl asks, “Are you ready, Rachel?”

In response, Medusa laughs. Her low, cruel cackle has become your trademark.

To invite him in, you promise, “I won’t shoot you.” Still, the creature inside you might, just to see how Carl would meet death. He is one of the few young men you know, a conscientious objector. A couple of months ago, he claimed he would rather report to prison — with all that entailed — than join the Army. But the night his draft notice came, Medusa plucked out his eyes on stage. Carl fainted before she finished the first one.

He can’t afford cybernetic replacements, of course, and the Army won’t lay out that kind of cash for a grunt they don’t expect to see again once they dump him in the desert.

You’ve been wondering why Carl stayed in the band. Maybe, in a twisted way, he is grateful to Medusa. He’s as friendly to you as anyone dares to be these days.

Carl opens the dressing room door. He seems to regard you through the gauze that covers his empty sockets. “Did you read the review in *Modern Image*?” he asks.

You decide to be honest. “Why did our first national publicity have to be a slam?”

“Any mention is better than no mention at all.” Carl crosses his arms on his chest and leans against the doorframe. “Sounded to me like she made up her mind about us before the show started, then left after the first song. They call the magazine *Image*, not *Substance*.” He smiled. “It hasn’t affected the size of tonight’s crowd. Maybe it helped.”

You wish he hadn’t told you that. Medusa has gotten really wild on the nights she’s had a big audience. Last time it was Carl. How can she top that? Feigning calm, you jab the pointed nail of your little finger at your eyelashes, forcing the mascara to spike still more. Finally you say screwit and pull the bone-white shock of bangs into your face. These normal gestures do not faze Medusa. She shows you white hair clotted with crimson. Behind it, your reflection wears

Medusa's smile.

You follow Carl from the dressing room. The cinderblocks of the hall are covered with the graffiti of a hundred bands. Most of the names are unfamiliar. When you reach the wings, the effluvia of spilled beer and hair mousse washes over you. You envision the crowd: witch bitches in their black gowns and silver talismans, knots of mohawked punks, a tourist or two in bondage gear. Desperate women, wanting a spectacle to make them forget how lonely they are, how long ago their men disappeared into the desert. Carl gets laid every night. So does the computer jockey, Ann. It seems forever since you've had anybody but Medusa for company.

The band stands in a clump, passing a joint of Lydia's one-hit weed. Though excluded, you bask in their camaraderie. Again you are glad to have answered their ad for a singer. The performances allow you respite from Medusa, when you don't need to clutch her leash so tightly. Now that she's grown abusive of this freedom, perhaps you *should* quit.

"Poseur," Medusa murmurs. "*You* would quit after one scathing review. I don't need you holding me back any longer."

You realize Medusa still holds the gun. You thrust it through the back of your belt and hope she will forget about it. How likely is that? Still, she can't kill you. She needs you to move around in. And she needs the band, to do whatever it is she's come to do. You promise yourself that they'll be safe.

The houselights dim. The audience rustles, a thousand-eyed beast whose attention is suddenly focused. Your fingertips are icy as you slip the microphone over your head, switch on the box of effects at your hip. "I'll show you gore," Medusa teases. You wish you knew what she has planned, but you never do.

The machines kick on, spewing pale smoke that smells like myrrh. In the gloom, Ann's computer lights glow a malevolent red. Lydia leads Carl to his drums, waits solicitously for him to find the controls. Then she lifts her bass from its cradle and turns up the volume.

A moan begins, like a graveyard wind. Lydia weaves in a rapid bass melody.

When the fog reaches your knees, you pace slowly to downstage middle. Thus ends the rehearsed part of the show.

"Is ecstasy possible in destruction?" Medusa whispers through the effects box. The reverse reverb repeats each word, clarifying it before biting it off. "Can one grow young in cruelty?"

Fear becomes a chill rock in your stomach.

"Do you desire to see the Truth?" Medusa asks.

A stark white spotlight pierces the smoke to strike harsh reflections off the shiny latex bodysuit. With one hand, Medusa forces your head back, caresses your throat, cups one breast, hugs your bony ribs. Yes, she is killing you. You shiver, though not altogether in fear.

"Do you desire essential satisfaction?" Medusa purrs. "I do."

With a savage tug, she rips an earring from your left ear, throws it to the stage, and mashes the silver nude beneath her boot. Blood drips on your neck, warm, sensual. Medusa touches her fingers to it, brushes it across your lips. Delicious.

"Let us enjoy ourselves to the full. 'Tis Nature's law."

Medusa steals lyrics from Rimbaud, Crowley, Huysmans, everyone you've read. She has an incredible memory for cruelty.

Women crowd around the stage. Someone thrusts a black-gloved fist into the spotlight. You wonder what they derive from Medusa, why her fury attracts and binds them, mothlike, as it does you. Medusa only smiles.

A flashbulb dazzles your eyes.

Medusa stalks toward the flash, hissing lines from *The Torture Garden* into the microphone. The crowd washes after her, waves against the breakwater of the stage.

She halts, swaying on stiletto boot heels. Anger pounds like a bass drum inside your skull. You have to fight her to see.

The fortyish woman holds a camera at arm's length over her head and snaps another picture. Trendy gold fans shield her ears. Her painstakingly ratted hair glows plum in the lights. You recognize her as the critic from *Modern Image*. *Why could she be here, Medusa demands, unless to see if she has destroyed you?*

Now that she has your attention, the critic shouts something. Sandwiched chest-high against the stage by the crowd, she is white-faced. You can't hear her over the Berlioz melody Ann's computer is generating. As you bend close to the footlights, Medusa switches on the flanger.

"I can't breathe," the critic gasps. Your microphone Doppler-shifts the words, giving them a ghostly echo.

Like a bird of prey, Medusa's laugh spirals up over the effects. She strides across the stage to Carl, drapes her arms over his shoulders, pinches his nipples through his black T-shirt. He freezes, rigid against your chest. "Count yourself lucky, bitch," Medusa snarls. "Some people can't see."

Abandoning Carl, Medusa adjusts the effects control slightly. When she speaks, a Medusan chorus speaks with her. "I don't recommend leaving tonight's show early. That pisses me off."

You pray that Medusa is smart enough to leave the critic alone.

Someone shimmies over the edge of the stage. The girl has the angular hips of a voluptuous figure starved to thinness. Her clinging black velour jumpsuit is a cheap imitation of your latex. Like yours, her bangs are bleached bone-white. With a jolt, you recall the vision in the dressing room: the bloody white bangs.

Ann kicks in some heavy trumpets, guiding Carl into a dance beat. You near the girl to find her quoting de Sade's *Juliette*. Medusa embraces her so that she can be heard over the microphone.

The girl falters, more interested in kissing the blood from your neck. Medusa trumps the quotation with more de Sade. "To judge whether love be madness, is not the lover's distraction sufficient proof of it?"

She yanks the girl's head back by the hair, then kisses her. The sound, multiplied by the chorus, becomes horrible, obscene. Ann has recorded the quote and feeds it through her sampler, breaking the words apart and reordering them.

You turn your back on the girl and dance to Ann's infectious music. Lydia grins with relief.

The girl rips the handgun from your belt, rattling the delicate effects box in the process. You spin. She is taking exaggerated aim across the footlights at the critic. Lydia's fingers stumble on the bass strings, but Carl's drumbeat is steady. "Sufficient proof?" asks the computer.

Medusa walks into the firing line.

Had she been serious in the dressing room about shooting you, about seeing your blood against the latex? Inside her, you are shrieking: *Don't be stupid! Killing me won't convince the critic you're not a poseur.*

"I'm not a poseur," Medusa says. "*You, of all people, should know that.*"

The girl gazes at you with confused eyes the heart-stabbing blue of a mountain lake. Medusa quotes Crowley again: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." Through the shaken effects box, her voice sounds masculine, infinitely jaded, alien.

Panicking, you try to throw yourself out of harm's way. But Medusa is stronger, has always been stronger. Your body only sways. Death stares at you with the circular bore of the gun.

"Do what thou wilt," Medusa repeats.

The girl smiles as if Medusa has blessed her, given her something she never hoped to have. You struggle to speak the words to take back the gift, words that could save her, that would save yourself. You hear Medusa's cackle.

For an instant, you see Medusa through the girl's adoring eyes. You find Medusa as beautiful as fresh blood against white porcelain, as a drop shimmering at the tip of a hypodermic, as a star-filled breeze through a penthouse window. She is final. You are obsolete. Awestruck, overwhelmed, indebted, you embrace Medusa for the first time.

The change is instantaneous and merciful, like the bullet the girl puts into her own heart.



Medusa lifts the dead girl in her arms, smearing blood against the latex suit. In her own voice, without effects, Medusa paraphrases Artaud, speaking in funereal time over Carl's drumbeat. "It is I who have committed suicide today, torn myself from my body, battled against myself, wishing never to come back to myself."

A flashbulb goes off, then dozens of them, like heat lightning.

Elemental, primal, unleashed, Medusa regards her worshippers and considers what she will do next.

