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Honors Thesis

EYE FOR AN EYE: RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN THE HORNET'S NEST

by
Amelia Scott

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

EYE FOR AN EYE: RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN THE HORNET'S NEST

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Bachelor of Arts

Rooted in Greek myth and Himalayan culture, *The Hornet's Nest* is a high fantasy novel revolving around two women; Lady Nesta, a stepmother set on avenging her family, and Ambrosi, the youngest daughter of the husband Nesta plans to kill. Told through Ambrosi's eyes, *The Hornet's Nest* is based on Aeschylus' famous *Oresteia* trilogy and is a study on moral relativism, justice, and the bloody cycle of revenge. This thesis contains 100-pages of the novel and a critical analysis that deconstructs its relationship with the original plays. It focuses on the parallels between Nesta and Ambrosi, and how their inspirations (Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Cassandra) push against the modern interpretation of heroes. The purpose of this project is to challenge audiences to examine the revenge script to determine when retribution is justified and reevaluate how morality is portrayed in Western fiction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If the House of Atreus was locked in an endless cycle of blood, then I was trapped in a perpetual slog of revision. *The Hornet's Nest* started nearly six years ago as a sketch of two characters lost in an endless maze. It is thanks to my committee that it has transformed into the story it is today and doesn't exist as an abstract idea in my head. I would like to express my gratitude to Spencer Hyde, for supporting and challenging me throughout the revision process, Stephen Bay for his knowledge of *The Oresteia* and Greek history that shaped so much of the novel, and Aaron Eastley for his support and expertise throughout my thesis, as well as his contagious love of literature. Lastly, I'd like to thank my friends and family for supporting me from draft one and encouraging me to write a story true to myself. I couldn't have done it without you.

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INTRODUCTION

The last thing I expected was to write a book inspired by a play. Not only a play, but an ancient Greek murder drama. It's not even my favorite play (that privilege goes to *Medea*). Yet, as I considered what to write my thesis on, my mind kept turning back to *The Oresteia*. Aeschylus' story resonated with me, and I needed to find out why.

The short answer is moral relativity. As a person raised in a religious household, I was always taught clear right and wrongs. Good and evil were absolutes, and a mark of integrity was learning to distinguish them. Even outside religion, Western society is built on preconceived notions of justice; human rights, freedom of speech, and the power of the individual. Regardless of political or personal identity, there is a shared surety in morality that carries over to our literature. There is an expectation for Hollywood heroes to populate books; characters must be good, likeable, and heroic. Originally, heroes were not paragons of virtue, but modern media wants everybody to be a white knight. Even anti-heroes need to be relatable. Our definition of heroism has shifted from a doer of great deeds to someone who stands up for good, usually in defiance of a corrupt system or powerful foe. Superheroes, chosen ones, and defenders of truth and justice populate modern fiction at every turn, but their prevalence raises the question; what *is* "good?"

This is a question that has been in conversation for millennia. Socrates, in Plato's *Republic*, applies every philosophical tool in his arsenal to figure it out. How does one measure whether a soul is good or evil? He settles on the allegory of a city. A "good" city is governed by laws that allow it to function at an ideal state, whereas a bad one cannot

operate efficiently. Depending on the location, the city will have different needs and alternate methods of reaching them. That suggests that morality is based around the framework of laws we live in, rather than an absolute, universal rule. Good and evil, therefore, are relative to when, where, and how they are developed.

Moral relativism acknowledges this, and puts good and evil in context of how different cultures build societies. Under its umbrella, right and wrong can be complete opposites depending on your point of view. Thomas Hobbes put it well in *Leviathan*, by reasoning that good is “the object of any man’s Appetite or Desire,” and evil as his “Contempt.” In his words, “Good, Evil, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them.” (Hobbes, ch vi.) Simply put, our definitions of good and evil are intrinsic to our point of view, not an objective and absolute right or wrong. Using superhuman powers to justify their ends does not endow a hero with morals. Whether said hero uses their abilities for good or evil is up to them. Moral ambiguity, on the other hand, is uncertain what good and evil are. They are nebulous and impossible to untangle, much like the heroes in Ancient Greece. They exist as contradictory characters, justifying their actions in pursuit of their goals. Often, they were distinguishable from villains only by the story’s perspective.

That is what I found in *The Oresteia*, which follows the House of Atreus, arguably Greece’s most cursed family. For generations, members of the house murdered, cannibalized, and raped their loved ones in an endless cycle of blood. The constant battle for power is intertwined with both revenge (Themis) and justice (Nemesis), but the line between them is blurred, leaving the floor “drenched in blood,” and the family constantly

at odds (*Ag.* 1092). *The Oresteia* is a trilogy that follows the final cycle of revenge before the curse is broken. Its principal characters, Queen Clytemnestra, and her son Orestes, each thirst for vengeance for loved ones slain at a family member's hand; Clytemnestra, for her daughter, Iphigenia, and Orestes for his father Agamemnon. Both claim to wield Justice's sword, even as it condemns them to become the villain in somebody else's quest for vengeance. As long as someone holds a grudge, they can justify any and all actions to obtain revenge. In their pursuit for an eye for an eye, the House of Atreus cuts itself into pieces, leaving Themis blind as Nemesis guides her blade.

Reading *The Oresteia* was liberating because it showcased a disparity in fiction I had been unable to articulate. That often, morality has become the defining characteristic of a hero in modern literature, but in real life our roles are never so cut and dry. Aeschylus reflects the complexity and double standards of our biases about justice, and forces those watching the play to reflect on their world views. After reading this story, I wanted to see more narratives where good and evil were ambiguous. I wanted the hero to be a "doer of great deeds" instead of a white knight, and I wanted the antagonist to escape that condemning tag of "villain." In short, I wanted moral ambiguity.

From the beginning, *The Oresteia* is an exploration on how one can justify revenge. Both Clytemnestra, the titular "villain," and her son Orestes, pursue what they consider justified vengeance. In the first play, *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra wishes to avenge her daughter, murdered at her husband Agamemnon's hand as a sacrifice to the gods. From the outset, her desire is tinted with sinister imagery. The chorus (background characters that provide exposition and act as a sounding board for the main cast) and

secondary characters are horrified at her bloodlust. She is described as “a deadly serpent, a venomous viper, poison to the touch, leaving her prey unbitten . . . an evil, audacious mind” (*Ag.* 994-6).

Orestes, on the other hand, is framed as a hero. He returns in the sequel, *Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroi*), seven years after Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon. He gets revenge for his father by murdering Clytemnestra and her lover, stating that he did so “with justice at [his] side” (*Cho.* 1025). However, despite committing the same crime as his mother, Orestes is praised for his actions. “You have done well,” says the chorus. “. . . You have liberated the entire city of Argos by beheading two snakes with one good clean stroke” (*Cho.* 1044-47). Although Orestes must flee the Furies and the ghost of Clytemnestra for his actions, the audience and chorus are on his side. The outsider reactions to their pursuit of justice could not be more different.

Clytemnestra’s villainization stuck with me, because it highlights how a character’s presentation determines whether we romanticize or condemn them. The chorus demonizes Clytemnestra from the start. Without them, it’s likely those watching the play would not have such an immediately negative view of her. In *Medea*, for example, Euripides uses the chorus to sympathize with Medea’s plight, showing her in a vulnerable, human light. Despite Medea’s horrific actions at the end of the play, she is not categorized as a villain to the degree Clytemnestra is. Her chorus loves her, and they convince the audience to as well.

Part of the problem with Clytemnestra is point of view (POV). It determines the lens in which we see the world, and Aeschylus has crafted a camera made of the eyes of

everybody but her. The chorus in *The Oresteia* is made up of elderly men oppressed under Clytemnestra's reign, the "hero" is her son Orestes, and the gods themselves have no love for her. The effect is that any kindness or sympathy on Clytemnestra's part is washed away. The only one who stands up for Clytemnestra is herself, as she demands for the Furies to avenge her. "I have no place, I am shunned in shame, they indict me with the harshest blame, I who suffered the cruellest pain from my closest kin. There is no angry god to avenge me . . . Even suppliants have allies, I have none . . ." (*Eum.* 98-101).

Another reason it's so easy to villainize Clytemnestra is because modern readers are taught to see themselves in heroes. Our need to connect with characters is a driving force behind why we read books. Writers such as Carl Jung, James Fraser, Otto Rank, and Mircea Eliade believed that stories followed a universal pattern with a hero at its center. Joseph Campbell popularized their idea of the monomyth, which has since been dubbed the hero's journey, and is the basis for the modern novel. Those familiar with the hero's journey recognize the traditional markers of a Campbell hero; their existence is disrupted by an opposing force or enemy, compelling them to leave on a journey. On the road, they face trials that lead them to an epiphany and eventual victory over their adversary. The final point of their journey is to return to their starting point as a better, more self-aware individual. Despite differences in plot, setting, and so on, Campbell and his predecessors believed that these plot points are commonalities between all stories, myths, and legends. The purpose of these narratives, therefore, is to insert their audience into a situation and allow them to experience and learn from it. Campbell was also of the mind that "a hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." In essence, that

whatever narrative they are a part of, it goes beyond their individual needs. Certainly, *The Oresteia* does this. The fate of the House of Atreus extends beyond its family members. How Clytemnestra and Orestes are punished (or avoid punishment) is reflective of the Greek justice system and how it evolved.

In my mind, this trilogy is one of the most interesting of the Greek Tragedies because there is no clear “good guy.” Clytemnestra and Orestes both have blood on their hands. Despite that, Orestes is eventually acquitted for his actions, while Clytemnestra remains dead and unmourned. They create an interesting parallel between justice and vengeance. It’s socially wrong to leave one who has harmed a family member unpunished, yet paradoxically it’s also a crime *to* harm a family member, even in retaliation. This contradiction in the law trapped the House of Atreus in a never-ending cycle of bloodshed, spurred on by their society’s need for retributive justice. As Marek Oziwicz, in their book *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*, puts it, “this basic form of retributive justice script is . . . defined . . . by its tragic inevitability. There is no alternative . . . Retribution is meted out on behalf of Gods, family, kin, or tribe, but it is never the last word. Those who win at a given point are doomed to lose at another” (Oziwicz, 119).

The Oresteia is noteworthy for addressing this. Indeed, its entire plot revolves around putting an end to the retributive justice script. It does so by ending the trilogy with a murder trial between Apollo, Athena, and the Furies over what punishment Orestes should have for murdering his mother. Due to a technicality, the vote ends in Orestes being acquitted so that both justice and vengeance can be satisfied. Orestes is free, the

Furies are appeased, and a new justice system is created—one based on communal punishments rather than an individual getting even. As long as one doesn't think about Clytemnestra, dead and condemned for committing the same crimes as her son, it's a happy ending.

Going back to Campbell, I believe he is right. Stories follow patterns, but the trouble with this catch-all formula is that modern readers ascribe other rules to it. Namely, that in stating that “we” are all heroes, that the hero must also be good. Even narratives with an antagonist as the central character humanize their chosen POV to be palatable for audiences. After all, who wants to be the bad guy in their own story? Because of how Clytemnestra is framed by the chorus, the audience rejects her on moral grounds; she kills her husband and is shown to be heartless and evil, ergo she deserves to die. But Clytemnestra capitalizes on the same motive that Orestes has for killing *her*, and he is lauded for it. Her reappearance as a ghost in the final play, *The Furies*, as she summons The Kindly Ones to hunt down Orestes, seems evil, but is in fact a cry for justice. If she must pay for avenging her daughter, should not Orestes also pay for avenging his father? Thus, she is evil not because of her actions, but how they are perceived.

However, by the time the Furies rouse themselves to action, the play is almost over. At the trial, they are unable to sway Athena into punishing Orestes, and are removed from their role as bringers of vengeance in exchange for a new position in the Pantheon. Clytemnestra's only allies leave, and her plea for vengeance goes unanswered.

If we're looking at *The Oresteia* from a moral foundation theory, it shows a change in how the Greeks viewed justice. When Aeschylus put this play on papyrus,

justice changed from an individual right to one administered by a larger body. Revenge was transitioning from “an eye for an eye” into something more judicial. However, the first time I read the ending of this trilogy, history was the last thing on my mind. From a creative standpoint, I was dissatisfied.

There is a double-standard we hold our characters to in media, where violence and sins are forgiven if we agree with their goal. Condemnation only comes when the action is out of proportion with the goal they are in pursuit of, or if the person committing it is in opposition to our POV character. Life is a messy ordeal and justice is never fair. *The Oresteia* captures that well, but the fact that the similarities between Clytemnestra and Orestes are ignored irks me. When I read it, I wasn’t looking for anyone to be heroized. Far from it; if mother and son were character foils, then I wanted Orestes to be as much a villain as a hero, and for Clytemnestra to be shown as a human, rather than a vengeful villain. In short, I wanted greater acknowledgment that someone “good” is just as capable of evil as anybody else. Orestes may be written to be a hero, but his hands are just as bloody as his mother’s.

This desire led me to unbury a story I had shelved years ago. It revolved around a girl lost in a labyrinth, accompanied by a shape-shifter unable to remember his original face. The girl was seeking revenge for her family, murdered by her stepmother. That girl, Ambrosi, became my personal Orestes as I wondered how far would I go to get even with someone who wronged me. Would my grudge rationalize my actions? Would a sense of duty be enough to pay the higher price of justice? Is revenge ever worth it, and would anyone regret pursuing it?

The Hornet's Nest is not a scene-by-scene retelling of *The Oresteia*. Rather, it takes themes, characters, and elements from the original and reimagines them in a new story. Much like an echo distorts with each reverberation, I wanted my novel to incorporate the source material without being overtaken by it. This allowed me more fluidity with plot and characters. Originally, the novel took place in three parts, beginning with the family's murder. However, my plans to begin in the labyrinth were nixed when I realized the story needed to begin earlier—back when Ambrosi first meets her new stepmother, Nestra, and uncovers her dastardly plot. I needed the reader to see what Ambrosi had lost, and understand who she was as a person before revenge consumed her. This revelation forced me to slow down and change the outline for the entire book (which is now a trilogy, just like *The Oresteia*). Essentially, I needed to do as Stephen King advises, which is to “create sympathy for my characters, then turn the monsters loose.”

The consequence of my choice to turn back the clock is that Ambrosi is younger than the industry standard YA protagonist. At twelve-years-old, she's on the precipice of childhood and adulthood, trapped in the awful “almost” I found infuriating at that age. Readers, especially during my first drafts, urged me to make her older—both to make the book more marketable, and the themes more palatable—so for a substantial amount of time, Ambrosi became fourteen, which ruined everything.

Matt Bell states that time narrated versus time of narration is a critical element of fiction: “A ten-year-old telling a tale in real time is necessarily constrained by their limited experience . . . A hundred-year-old person looking back on the events would bring a lifetime of experience . . . on the telling” (Bell, 50). Aging up Ambrosi destroyed the

nuance of her narration. As a preadolescent, she offers a more innocent perspective of Altala, her homeland. Ambrosi is aware of imbalances in power, limited opportunities for women, and the possibility of becoming a child bride, but is still naive enough to believe she can be the exception to all of that. Her goals, while lofty, are still tinged with childish simplicity. Ambrosi believes she can do anything, even become the ruler of her clan, but pursues them with simple ploys to win favor rather than effective intrigue. Nestra's arrival marks the end of this delusion, and the end of Ambrosi's childhood as well.

My plan was to make Ambrosi Orestes, but the more I wrote, it became apparent that she is also Cassandra from *Agamemnon*, the seer whose prophecies are never believed. Ambrosi is the baby of the family, dismissed and not taken seriously. The main conflict in the narrative isn't even her and Nestra's relationship. Rather, it is Ambrosi's fight and ultimate failure to be heard and listened to. Aging Ambrosi to fourteen took away the believability of this plot point and complicated other areas of the novel, such as her emerging anxiety about marriage, which would already have been a concern if she were older. Her father, after years of forbidding his daughters to marry, now must start selling them off, Ambrosi included. Being sold into marriage at such a young age, while uncomfortable for modern readers, is both a common practice in my fictional world and Ancient Greece. Ambrosi, despite a growing awareness of evil, is still innocent at her core, and desperate to avoid this fate. Her hero's journey starts when she begins to lose her naivety, and faces these issues head on.

However, choosing to write Ambrosi at such a young age had its challenges, even outside of market standards for YA protagonists. A constant struggle I encountered while

writing this book was the expectations of readers regarding her characterization. This is a consequence of genre, age-group, and modern societal norms, but I received multiple comments from readers about her being unlikable, unrealistically ambitious, and problematic.

- “She’s not a good person,” because she is a girl with ambition.
- “I don’t understand why she needs to care about having power,” because that is not something girls are supposed to want.
- “Her family owns slaves, which is wrong,” because Ancient Greek and twenty-first century American culture are, shockingly, different.

All these comments revolved around how the book made readers uncomfortable for containing topics and character traits they are unused to confronting. An interesting thing to note is that all the comments about Ambrosi’s ambition being “unlikable,” “strange,” and “unrelatable” came from men. Female readers saw themselves in her and enjoyed having a female character shamelessly pursue her dream for power. There isn’t room here to discuss gender norms in genre fiction or stereotypes in perceived patriarchal hierarchies, but the negative reception male readers gave Ambrosi affected how I approached revisions.

Nestra was challenging as well. My desire to create ambiguity clashed with her role as an antagonist. In early drafts, readers cheered for her. In later revisions, she was the caricature of an evil stepmother. Finding the line between her dangerous intentions and the reader’s sympathy was difficult, especially since in the retributive justice script she is justified for seeking revenge. Her backstory, hinted at in my draft, differs from *The*

Oresteia. Nesta is not avenging a daughter murdered, but her entire family, who Ambrosi's father killed in a raid twenty years ago. The sole survivor of her family, Nesta proposes a marriage between her and Ambrosi's father, Agaman, to orchestrate the murder of his family, down to the last child; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Upon arriving in Altala, Nesta singles Ambrosi out as someone to terrorize, knowing that even if the princess discovers her plot, nobody will believe her.

Because the novel is framed through Ambrosi's eyes, many of these details are garnered between the lines. The story is the inevitable crawl to Nesta's coup, and Ambrosi's efforts to warn her family before it is too late. The two of them are character foils who ultimately experience the same tragedy. Nesta is the self-realized woman Ambrosi yearns to be; powerful, independent, and respected. But Nesta's obsession with revenge has consumed her, and as Oziwicz stated earlier, dooms her to lose in the end. Although Nesta is slow to appear, she is a shadow that covers the book, and a warning for what Ambrosi may become if she walks down the same path. It's impossible to tell Ambrosi's story without Nesta. Likewise, the reader won't understand the cyclical nature of the revenge script unless Nesta and Ambrosi are put side by side. That is the beauty of Greek tragedies; they are stories of endless repetition and lessons learned too late. Incorporating a similar inevitability to *The Hornet's Nest* was in exercise in exploring that.

Often, incorporating Greek mythology comes with sanitization as stories are refitted for a modern audience. Problematic elements, such as misogyny, slavery, and child brides, are minimized or forgotten. Series such as Percy Jackson have

sensationalized the magic and adventure of mythology, but skirt around the unsavory parts of the stories, or justify actions with modern morality. Although this is due heavily to the fact these books are marketed to young readers, it creates a misconception that the Greeks shared our values when, in fact, there are many differences between them. However, our society is not Ancient Greece's society, and as authors adapt its mythology to appeal to modern audiences, they overlook, ignore, and twist aspects of the stories to make them more palatable. In an attempt to create more marketable, moral stories, Greek Mythology in pop culture has become divorced from its source material.

This tendency to modernize Greek myths ties into a criticism I have with YA and Western fiction, which is the lack of diversity in worldview. Popular YA series such as *Maximum Ride*, *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Red Queen*, and anything dystopian, play with everything from secret government bodies to authoritarian dictators, but do so from the light of these organizations being flawed or "bad." That is not to say these stories don't have value, or that there aren't any complex, interesting narratives in publication. G. R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is known for its complex world building and gritty moral complexity. YA and MG authors such as Ursula Le Guin and Diane Wynne Jones are masters at crafting rich fantasy worlds, and there is a rising demand for darker Greek Myth retellings, such as Madeline Miller's *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*. However, many protagonists in YA are written (whether dystopian, urban fantasy, high fantasy, etc.) through the lens of a twenty-first century teenager, not as someone raised and immersed in different ideologies. Often, their call to action is to topple corrupt regimes and pursue the Western, individualistic dream of self-

actualization. New is better, and the enemies are always unquestionably evil and immoral. The prevalence of these narratives creates shallow worlds, bland characters, and formulaic plots revolving around American values—freedom, individual rights, and equality—without justifying why this rhetoric exists in the fictional world they inhabit.

The Hornet's Nest is my attempt to reject these tropes: For that reason, there is hardly any magic. It is a backdrop to the characters' conflicts as they fight for power and revenge. There is no morally correct hero or happy ending, and modern-day worldviews are purposefully rejected. Its protagonist, Princess Ambrosi, is an ambitious girl fighting against the possibility of an arranged marriage. She is religious, power-hungry, and uninterested in altering her society. My challenge was finding a way to present her as someone who is a product of her time, rather than a self-insert, feminist chosen-one from the twenty-first century dropped into a fantasy world. Evil is not a word in her vocabulary, and good is relative to how it benefits her and her people. In the real world, our morals are a sliding scale based on where we grew up and what we've learned, and fiction should be no different.

The Hornet's Nest started a push-back against fantasy tropes and pet peeves. However, upon completing this draft and preparing my manuscript, I realized that what I wanted to portray and what my final product are, are very different. Audience expectations forced me to reevaluate my characters and rework plot points. The pace of the novel is slower, and Ambrosi has more "likeable" qualities in response to criticism. Some, such as expanding on her backstory and giving her more soft moments, I agree with. Others, such as aging her up, I eventually discarded.

Additionally, the moral ambiguity is not as flexible as I'd hoped. Ambrosi fights for traditional religious values, but pushes back against her culture's patriarchal tradition rather than embracing it, so the story is not a true opposite. Her lust for power is in contrast with the world around her, which threatens to pigeon-hole her into a stereotypical female power trip. Additionally, her political stance—the equivalent of a conservative—does not reflect the complexity I'd hoped. Ambrosi's attempts to overcome her societal constraints clash with her yearning to preserve the cultural standards her father is trying to tear down, and require more revision before I find a balance I am satisfied with.

One of the biggest lessons this novel taught me is how much audience shapes a work. The first draft is for yourself, but the finished project must be digestible for others. Problematic elements that I purposefully added (such as Ambrosi's age, and the prospect of her becoming a child bride) put off readers who approached the novel for escapism rather than critical thinking. In my search for moral ambiguity, I ironically found myself at the mercy of everybody's morals, including my own.

There is no one way to write a story. However, there are many ways to become discouraged throughout the process. It's only with the support of my friends and family that I learned to drown out external voices and focus on the story I wanted to tell. *The Hornet's Nest* is an experiment in how our definition of goodness is as paradoxical as *The Oresteia's* view of justice. One person's point of view can turn any hero into a villain, and any villain into a saint. Perhaps it isn't everybody's cup of tea, but it is honest. As Hemingway puts it, "No subject is terrible if the story is true, if the prose is clean and

honest, and if it affirms courage and grace under pressure.” Truth becomes muddy when it’s colored by perspective, but if we can wipe away our expectations and hangups, we can perceive it again.

CHAPTER ONE

The Jack-Jaws buzzed in the nest under the overhang, a tapestry of obsidian clattering in a sleepy haze. Ambrosi clung to the rock face, breathing through a damp cloth. The torch in her spare hand wafted thick smoke into the hornet's nest, its herbs inducing a drugged haze that made the otherwise deadly hive safe to approach. Her fingers ached from where they were wedged into the cracks of the cold cliff face, and a fresh scrape throbbed on her knuckles. Below, an endless vista of shattered mountains stretched across an ocean of fog, jagged peaks bleached red in the unforgiving sun. The wind slapped against her body, wrapped only in the thin white shift she wore under her usual robes. Her world was the air, the cliffs, the hornets, and a thousand feet of free fall.

"Ambrosi, are you there yet?" Tala called from above. She was on the ledge, holding the other end of the rope tied around Ambrosi's waist. "We only have a few minutes."

"I've almost got it," Ambrosi said. She pictured her sister's pinched face; pale skin framed by walnut hair the texture of silk, lips chapped from constant biting. Tala, always worried and always concerned, but never brave enough to come down the cliff herself.

"You said that five minutes ago," Brita, the eldest, said. "Quit stalling."

"I'm not stalling!" Ambrosi said. She flinched as the hornets keened. Each one was as large as her thumb and had stingers like bramble thorns. Their carapaces were the same color as Brita's eyes.

“No more excuses,” Brita said. “Hurry up, or I’ll do it myself.”

One hand holding the torch and the other on the rock face meant Ambrosi couldn’t gesture to Brita the way she wanted. Ambrosi gritted her teeth and inched further up the granite slab. The Jack-Jaws droned in her ear. The sound reminded Ambrosi of chanted prayers, murmured rituals, and the tolling bells of the temple she’d grown up in. It soothed her despite the danger.

She uncovered her face and put the torch in her mouth. The smoke stung her eyes. She closed them, but it coated her tongue, tasting like a campfire. Hopefully, Brita hadn’t lied when she said the herbs only worked on insects.

Ambrosi reached inside the nest. Her fingers brushed against its waxy walls as she slowly penetrated its belly, her other hand white-knuckling the cliff. It was hot inside, humid too—the texture of flesh.

The hornets had infected a hive in a cleft on the rock face, mimicking the resident *Laboriosa* bees in order to remain undetected. When Jack-Jaw colonies settled, it was only a matter of time before they infected everything within reach. This once thriving honey cache was now a gutted hive teeming with venomous hornets. If left alone, the Jack-Jaws would soon devour the rest of the bee colonies. The shepherds had no choice but to burn the hive.

However, doing so would waste the rare Madness Honey the *Laboriosas* spent the summer gathering, and that was a steep price for the shepherds to pay. Madness Honey was a delicacy. Traders gave everything for it — gold, silver, people even. It was sweeter than anything, made out of mountain brambles and rhododendron flowers that dyed it a

bright, bloody red and opened one's inner eye to the mystic planes. The Delfi herself used it in rituals every solstice. Madness Honey let her talk to the gods, although neither Ambrosi nor her sisters planned to use their share for that. Brita agreed to steal it because she loved the thrill of danger, Tala because she was a pushover, and Ambrosi because she saw an opportunity.

Ambrosi's hand bumped into a Jack-Jaw. She froze and waited for the prick of its sting. One jab was enough to purple her skin and rot it from the inside. Earlier that summer Kra, one of the goat boys, had thrown a rock at a Jack-Jaw hive and got fourteen punctures on his face. He was dead now, but it hadn't been quick. Luckily for Ambrosi, the Mountain Goddess was in a good mood. The hornet on her hand didn't budge. The herbs were doing their job.

Once she was sure the Jack-Jaw was still asleep, Ambrosi pinched it between her fingers and placed it back in a wax cell. She felt around for the honeycomb, elbow deep in the crevice, knees knocking against the cliff face, until her fingers brushed against a cache of Madness Honey. She grinned, teeth bared around the torch in her mouth. The wind shifted and smoke stung her eyes. She closed them again, choosing blindness over tears.

Ambrosi's mouth watered as she scooped a fingerful out of the honeycomb, remembering the time her father had given her a taste of it when she was younger, sitting on his lap, face sticky with the spoonful he'd shared. It had been the first month since she'd been brought home from the Mountain Sisters temple. He had smiled down at her,

face still unfamiliar, looking almost loving. *“This is the only taste of divinity we can savor, daughter. Don’t waste it.”*

Ambrosi teased her arm out of the hive, careful not to startle any Jack-Jaws. Honey dripped from her fingers like saliva, sweet and enticing. It smelled like the end of summer, tinged with the aroma of burning herbs and spent youth.

It had been years, but she still ached for more. Just not too much. Never too much. The wrong dose could kill as effectively as a Jack-Jaw, but slower. For every cautionary tale about the labyrinthine trenches of her homeland, there was another of greedy mortals drunk on Madness Honey poisoned by their own indulgence.

Above her, Tala and Brita talked, tucked safely on the clifftop as they kept watch for the shepherds and their hounds. Their words, hushed and serious, were an indistinct murmur distorted by the wind, but Ambrosi knew what they were talking about; Father, again. Ambrosi also knew that if she climbed up now, they’d eat all the honey, so she didn’t tell them that she’d succeeded. Instead, Ambrosi took advantage of their distraction, like she’d intended to from the start.

She purposefully dropped the torch from her mouth. It clattered down the rocks and vanished into the trenches, swallowed by the fog. She waited for a sound, but there was none; however far down the ground was, the impact was too distant to hear. The remaining smoke turned into a thin gray ribbon as it was swept away by the wind. The hornets would wake up soon.

Ambrosi flexed her jaw and swallowed the saliva that had pooled in her mouth. If she hadn’t known she was working against an hourglass before, she was all too aware of

it now. If Ambrosi was still there when the hornets woke, she'd join Kra in the afterlife. It left little room for error and less for doubt, but she needed her teeth for the next step.

She adjusted her balance and pulled a small vial out from under her shift. It was attached to a leather cord roped around her neck. Ambrosi bit off the cork. Honey smeared across the glass, but she was careful to balance the empty vial in her fingers so as not to spill the Madness Honey pooled in her palm. It was a delicacy fit for a king. She'd be a fool not to save some for later.

Filling it was difficult with only one limb. She dug her heels deeper into their footholds, remaining steady even as wind tried to tear her off the cliff face. One hand clung to the rocks, trembling from the strain. Honey dripped down her other arm in a messy trail. Her hair, a rusty red, tangled and stuck against it. When the vial was two-thirds full Ambrosi used her mouth to stuff the cork back on and slipped the bottle back beneath her clothes. The off-white shift was dirty with dust and sweat. It would have to be washed again.

Ambrosi considered the remaining honey on her hand, then licked it off. It coated her mouth like a solstice prayer, sweet and lacquered in flavor as it dulled her senses into a pleasant smear of color. It reminded her of simpler days, happiness, and the weight of her father's hand on her shoulder.

"Brosi, what's taking so long?" Tala called.

Ambrosi blinked; the memory turned to mist.

"You should have it by now," Brita added. "You better not be eating any without us."

“Harvester tax!” Ambrosi replied. The wind warped her voice, but not enough to hide her glee.

“You’re worse than a limp rabbit. If you don’t bring me any, I’m cutting the rope,” Brita said.

“At least I wouldn’t have to see your ugly face again,” Ambrosi called back. “Be patient.”

“Be quicker,” Tala said. “I see smoke, the shepherds are almost here.”

“Alright, alright, just give me a moment,” Ambrosi said, and licked the last bead from under her fingernails.

Her head buzzed. One spoonful hadn’t seemed like a lot—she could still speak and move of her own accord, which was better than a full dose—but colors were starting to blend together, and the world was tilting. It was nothing she couldn’t handle, but now she had to pick between two poisons; braving the hive again, or facing Brita’s temper for coming back empty-handed.

In the end, it wasn’t much of a choice at all.

Ambrosi slowly put her hand back in the hive. This time there were no herbs to keep the hornets sedated. They stirred at the invasion, stingers arching and antennae fluttering. Ambrosi sent a prayer to the Mountain Goddess as she fumbled for the honeycomb, but when she found the cache from earlier, her fingers pressed against its warm, waxy walls, but didn’t touch honey. It was empty.

She chanted a verse of curses and forced herself to stay calm; deep breaths and pursed lips. Panic never helped anybody. The easy-to-reach honey was gone, but this was a large hive. There would be more farther in. This wasn't over yet.

Ambrosi sunk her arm in up to her shoulder, face flush against the rocks. They smelled so chalky she could taste it. Her arm snaked through the hive's tunnels, its slumbering hornets, and the slimy texture of larva. When she couldn't go any deeper, she began to panic, but then she felt it; more honey. Fistfuls of it tucked almost out-of-reach behind a jut a stone. Ambrosi allowed herself a grin. She wouldn't be going back empty-handed after all.

As she scooped honey into her palm, she felt a hornet crawl onto her hand. Ambrosi froze as it settled on her wrist. Its feelers explored the contours of her skin like a kiss. Her ears pounded to the rhythm of temple chants, and she mouthed the words of a childhood prayer for protection.

"Ambrosi —" Tala said, but the rest of her words were stolen by the wind.

"Shut up," Ambrosi said.

She teased her arm out of the hive. Every inch felt like a mile. Memories of Kra's purple face played behind her eyes. The Jack-Jaw on her hand buzzed experimentally, mandibles chomping on air. The honey in her mouth began to sour.

How long were the herbs supposed to last?

Her arm exited the hive like an arrow from a wound. Once her hand was free, Ambrosi laid eyes on the hornet. Its stinger was the color of lava glass and just as sharp,

poised over the veins in her wrist. The Jack-Jaw stretched its wings as it breathed the fresh air.

“Hello, you,” she whispered, and wondered if it would be the last thing she saw.

There was a tug on the rope, followed by two pulls and a whistle. Ambrosi barely registered it—and the distant sound of baying hounds—before the tug became a yank.

“Wait, Brita —” she began, but the rope snagged against her underclothes and rubbed a burn onto her skin as she was torn off the rocks.

Her arm flailed; the Jack-Jaw on her hand hurtled itself against the cliff face. Ambrosi saw it catch flight, wings reflecting a rainbow of color as it caught an updraft, then was gone.

She didn’t have time to feel relieved, because Ambrosi almost hit the overhang. Her palms scraped against the rocks. Her hands, calloused and scabbed from years of climbing, found niches in the stonework as she steadied herself. Her bare feet slid across granite for a foothold. Any foothold. There wasn’t time, but even so, she couldn’t help but look down.

Altala, her homeland, was a tapestry of color. Its trenches gaped like teeth, partly obscured by the thick fog that hung over the Lowlands like a shroud. She swore something in it was looking back at her. Ambrosi shivered. The honey was more potent than she remembered.

Her sisters tugged the rope again. Ambrosi lost her grip, and her foot collided with the hornet’s nest. The hardened wax crumpled on impact and the wind blew any remnant

of smoke out of it. The Jack-Jaws' shrieks were the only warning Ambrosi had before they started crawling out of the hive, wings unfolding like daggers.

"Shit!" Ambrosi said. If she died, she was going to kill her sisters.

She climbed faster than a mountain goat. She threw her leg around a jutting rock, clenched her core to clear the overhang, and rammed her fingers into the nearest fault to haul herself over. One of her fingernails tore, but Ambrosi kept moving. There were no thoughts in her head, no sense of caution, only the sound of hornets growing louder and louder.

Tala and Brita came into view. Their skin shone with exertion as they hauled the rope hand over hand, ringed fingers glinting in the sun. Ambrosi barely remembered to grab the anchor rock when she cleared the ridge. Dirt and sweat clung to her sticky skin, and the rope around her waist was so tight she couldn't breathe. Her torn fingernail throbbed. A drop of blood dripped from it onto the ground. Ambrosi's midriff was rubbed raw from the rope. She pressed a shaky hand against her stomach and glared at her sisters.

"Are you two crazy?" she said. "You could have killed me!"

"We warned you," Tala said. She hoisted Ambrosi up with one arm, muscles flexing. "Weren't you listening? Can't you hear the dogs?"

"I was busy trying not to die," Ambrosi said. "I almost got stung."

Brita undid the knot and tore the rope off, ignoring Ambrosi's hiss as it scraped her belly. "If you were, we'd never have heard the end of it from your ghost, so stop whining."

Her eldest sister blocked out the sun. There wasn't a shred of sympathy in her eyes; Ambrosi almost wished the Jack-Jaw was still on her wrist so she could throw it at her.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Ambrosi replied, brushing the hair out of her face.

Brita put a hand on Ambrosi's head and shoved her backward.

"You—" Ambrosi's devastating insult was interrupted by the hum of hornet wings. Thousands of them, droning like a choir.

"What is that? What did you do?" Tala said, but Ambrosi was already running. "Ambrosi!"

The hornets rose from the cliff edge like a cloud. Sunlight glinted off them as their wings thundered. Brita swore and threw the rope back around the anchoring rock; she and Tala bolted after Ambrosi.

They easily took the lead, long legs lopping over the rocks while Ambrosi's small ones tripped and stumbled. There were several goat paths that led to the hives—the one they'd marked for their exit lay hidden behind a jigsaw of canyon teeth. Ambrosi stood a head shorter than both her sisters, too small to leap over obstacles, and her vision blurred as the red and purple rocks smeared together in a kaleidoscope of color.

Too much honey and not enough air. The only thing worse would be if the Jack-Jaws caught her, but the three of them could make it. They had to.

The wind changed and Ambrosi smelled the burning animal fat the shepherds would douse the hive with, along with the musk of juniper and pine from their torches. Their dogs bayed, the sound echoing off the rocks and pitched downwind by the gales.

They were here.

Tala and Brita rounded the hidden path and vanished behind the rocks.

Brita's dark mane was the last thing Ambrosi saw before her sisters completely outpaced her.

Ambrosi reached the fork just as the shepherds arrived on the opposite side of the cliff. They were carrying torches, herbs, and wearing leather to guard against Jack-Jaw stings. Their dogs were muzzled and mangy, ribs stark against their fur.

"Thief! Thief!" One of the shepherds yelled.

He was an older man in an undyed wool chuba, hair loose and wild, beard a tangle of braids knotted with gold. The brass bells on his wrist chimed as he pointed a jagged finger at her.

Ambrosi scrambled over the last boulder and disappeared along with her sisters. She could hear the Jack-Jaws swarm protectively around their stolen home, distracting the shepherds from giving chase. She allowed herself a smirk. Perhaps kicking the hive had worked in her favor after all?

The goat trail cut a winding path through the rocks. Ambrosi's feet stung from slapping against granite and marble, but she didn't stop. Tala and Brita let Ambrosi catch up eventually, but only after they all ran upstream through a shallow, ice cold river. The water would confuse the dogs, but it burned and turned Ambrosi's toes blue. She tripped over a rock and fell into the water, soaking her shift up to her waist.

"Hurry up, scab," Brita called from ahead. "It's getting late!"

Ambrosi pulled herself from the water and limped onward. Scarlet dirt clung to her dry arm and the rest of her was covered in red mud. Red like honey, blood, and the iron they built their lives around. Altala's metals were its lifeblood, and the mountains its bones. It was so rich with it that even a shepherd could decorate themselves like a king.

The three sisters ran. Their lungs burned and their ears popped as they followed the goat paths home. Ambrosi shivered as the wind caressed her wet skin. She caught glimpses of Virita, the capital of Altala, in the distance, but paid the city no mind. Ambrosi knew what home looked like. Her focus was on the brittle underbrush snagging her clothes, the throb of her torn fingernail, her aching ribs, and the sky—a pale, cloudless blue—extending forever upwards.

They stopped at the crevice where they'd hidden their outer robes and caught their breath near a clump of cairns called the Three Sisters, named after a famous myth. Tala considered it a clever place to hide their things. Ambrosi thought it tacky, especially since in the story two of the sisters died.

Ambrosi didn't grab her burgundy outer robe yet, choosing instead to bend over and take deep, gasping breaths. Her hands shook; she curled them into fists.

"Did you see their faces?" Brita said. She laughed as she pulled her clothes out from behind a rock and threw them over her tall frame. The fabric was ash gray bordered with deep blue. "They'll be beating off hornets all day."

"Do you think they recognized us?" Tala asked, slipping her own robe over her shoulders—pine green with white borders.

“Who knows?” Brita said. “We’ll be lucky if the dogs don’t track us back home. Father will be furious if they know it was us.”

The embroidery on Brita’s sash was gold and silver, woven into symbols Ambrosi didn’t know the meaning of. Nobody did, except the other Mountain Sisters who had been initiated into the sect. Ambrosi knew many of the temple’s customs but she’d never taken the vows. Many of their rituals were still a secret to her. Brita tied it in a brocade knot with a vicious grin.

“You said the river would help with that,” Tala said, fixing her hair. “Were you lying?”

“Didn’t seem helpful to me,” Ambrosi said, wringing out her shift. Water puddled by her feet. “Just an excuse to make us miserable.”

“You’re just lucky I didn’t make you rub goat piss on your skin.” Brita said. “Next time.”

“No next time. It’s too close to winter. We can’t keep doing this.” Tala said.

The honey cliffs would soon be crawling with shepherds anxious to harvest the last of their honey before the frost set in. It would be impossible to outsmart that many of them, and Ambrosi wouldn’t risk being caught. There was a chance they could avoid the worst punishments for theft, but chance was a fickle thing to rely on. Father taught her better than that.

“You’re just scared,” Brita said to Tala.

“Who cares if I am? I care about my reputation. We don’t all have the luxury of throwing our futures away.”

Ambrosi looked up, surprised Tala would bring that up; she hated stirring the pot.

“You say that like it was a future I wanted,” Brita said. She shook her hair out of her face. It hung in thick, coarse ringlets down her back, the color of tar. That and her dark skin made her amber eyes shine like gold. “Ambrosi, did you get any honey? You better not have wasted our time.”

“Leave her alone. You’re always too hard on her.”

“She’s lucky I even let a scab like her come,” Brita said. “She’s too young for this, and useless besides.”

“I didn’t see *you* hanging from the cliff face—” Tala began.

“How’s this for useless?”

Ambrosi held up her hand, still smeared with honey. Some dripped off during their flight, more was lost in the river, and dust coated the rest, but that didn’t matter. Honey was honey.

Brita barked a laugh. She roughly patted Ambrosi’s head, then shoved her away again. “Good girl. We’ll make a proper person out of you yet.”

Ambrosi caught her balance on the loose dirt, grinning wildly. Tala smiled as well, but with real pride instead of Brita’s brusque satisfaction.

“Like you’d be able to teach me about that,” Ambrosi said. “Help yourselves. It’s not getting fresher.”

That was all the signal Brita needed. She grabbed Ambrosi’s arm and licked it. Ambrosi squirmed but didn’t pull away. Tala rolled her eyes before following suit. Their

tongues were rough like a dog's, and their leftover saliva chilled in the wind, peppering Ambrosi's arms with gooseflesh as her sisters lapped the honey off her skin.

Ambrosi bit the inside of her cheek as they licked everything off, dirt and all, to get a taste of Madness Honey. There were people who had begged to see her sisters on their knees. One man offered a hundred rams for Brita's hand, yet all it took Ambrosi was a drop of honey. It was enthralling.

She wasn't just the youngest sibling anymore, or the unwanted hanger-on. Right now, she held real power; bloodred and rarer than gold. She could demand anything and they'd say yes. And yet, they couldn't give her what she wanted. Only one person could, and she had a vial of honey for him hidden under her clothes.

Her white shift billowed in the wind, thin and undecorated. Her burgundy robe, embroidered with rhododendron flowers, lay untouched on the ground. Ambrosi had chosen it to blend in with the red canyon rocks, but she liked standing out. Loved how her undyed shift drew all eyes to her and pinned them in place like a Jack-Jaw's sting.

As her sisters sucked the Madness Honey from her fingertips, enraptured by the taste, the chorus of Jack-Jaws echoed in Ambrosi's ears. She closed her eyes and soaked in the sound. What would it be like to have more people on their knees for her?

CHAPTER TWO

The honey wore off after an hour. Brita and Tala laughed through it, words slurred and voices sultry. It was rare to see them so relaxed, even rarer for them to get along. Ambrosi wished she could join them in their easy smiles and inside jokes, but the honey ran through her faster. The pleasant dullness was already fading. All she was left with was her throbbing finger and soaked clothes.

When the wind cut into her again, she pulled her outer robe tighter around herself. It wasn't winter yet, but it was frigid. Ambrosi looked up at the sky as time passed, watching as the blue turned yellow, then gold. She felt tall enough to caress it. Would it burn her if she did? The honey made anything seem possible.

Tala laughed again, more carefree than she ever was at home. Brita grinned at her, and Ambrosi felt like she was intruding on a private moment. She wiped her tongue with the back of her hand to get the bitter aftertaste out. Her sense of euphoria set with the sun, and by the time her sisters were themselves again, Ambrosi's victory had set as well.

"It's getting late," Tala said, rubbing her temple. "We've lingered too long."

"I told you the honey lasted a long time," Ambrosi said.

"Either way, it was worth it," Brita said.

They wiped their sticky hands on the insides of their robes and pulled on their goat hide shoes. Ambrosi trailed behind her sisters as they made their way back to civilization, balancing on thin ledges and goat paths as the last of their dizziness faded.

The honey cliffs were an hour's walk from Castle Virita, but they made good time from the cairns. The weight of home soon wore on them again.

The world fanned out below them as they walked, pinpricks in a tapestry of colors, mist, and sky. Now that she wasn't running, Ambrosi's eyes lingered on it; the horizon aflame with afternoon sunshine, the expanse of gentle slopes where the mountain's jagged edges gave way to terrace farms, grazing pastures, small huts made from discarded quarry stone and tanned animal hides, and the shadow of the Mountain Sister's temple perched on the highest, loneliest peak, standing even above the castle itself.

"I liked it better when I couldn't see it," Brita said, eyes on the temple, fingers curled into her palms.

"It looks pompous," Tala said.

"You're both pompous," Ambrosi said. "The temple is prettier than you'll ever be."

"Then *you* live there." Brita said.

"I did."

Conversation died at the reminder. Ambrosi spent the first eight years of her life at the temple. It was their father's choice, just like it had been to take her back home nearly four years ago. Ambrosi's wishes had never been discussed. Her whole life was made up of his decisions, his mistakes, his dreams. It must be nice to have that kind of power; lord and master of all he surveyed and enemy to any who disagreed. Ambrosi curled her fingers around the honey vial; someday, she would have it too.

They walked in silence until the capital came into view, shining brilliantly in the sun. The girls paused to stare at it, feet coated in red dust and hair disheveled by the wind.

Castle Virita perched on the mountain like an eagle, its walls chiseled from the cliff face, and glass in its windows stained the color of blood. It was over a thousand years old and built to last an eternity. Unlike the temple, ornamentation came as an afterthought; murals and mosaics were scattered across its walls as a distraction for how thick they were. The keep loomed in the center, keeping a watchful eye on everything its shadow touched, and a moat carved its way around the outer wall, merging with a river nearby that fed into the distant trenches below. Soldiers patrolled its parapets, spears and swords glinting like stars. A drawbridge and three thin bridges were the only thing connecting the castle to the outside world, splayed outward like granite fingers ready to cast a spell. Even when the gates were open the castle felt separate, stern, like a cage.

“Home sweet home,” Brita said.

“Not for you, not for much longer,” Ambrosi said, eyes on the north tower where no lights were lit.

“Thank the Mountain Goddess for that,” Brita said.

“Quiet, you two,” Tala said.

They hopped from the goat path onto a paved road. It was made of slabs of rough quarry stone, and worn down after centuries of walking. Tala put her hand on Ambrosi’s shoulder as they headed toward the north side of the castle, as far from the crowded

drawbridge as they could get. It was the only way back inside without attracting attention, but the north tower loomed large. Its windows looked like eyes.

When they had left, the three of them had snuck out through the kitchens. Their robes, brighter and more heavily decorated than anyone else's, had still caught attention, but nobody had followed them. They had laughed about that, confident they'd gotten away undetected.

Now, a guard stood at the gate, dressed in a chuba made from lambskin and goat hide. He tapped his machaira sword with a gloved hand, foul-faced and unshaven, a scowl twisting his swarthy face.

All of the girls grimaced; Laosh.

Why did it have to be him? Of course, Laosh knew all their escape routes, which was one of the reasons he was their minder. That and his skill with swords, which made up for his personality. Dealing with Jack-Jaws was preferable to spending time with him. Ambrosi wished they had a more likable guard, but Brita's dalliances with anything that moved meant their father only trusted someone with their safety if they weren't at risk of being her next distraction. Laosh, old, ugly, and bitter, was perfect for the job.

"Vanishing is hardly a respectful act, Your Highnesses," Laosh said when they reached him. "I've been waiting here for hours."

Tala hid her face behind a curtain of silky hair. Ambrosi and Brita glared at Laosh, and the sun hid behind a cloud. The bridge's red stonework turned gray in its shadow.

"We aren't children anymore," Brita said. "We come and go as we please."

Laosh's eyes flickered to Ambrosi, looking pointedly at her small stature.

“I’m not a child,” she said with a glower.

The cloud moved on, and everything was red again.

“Your twelfth birthday was last week and you’re still as feral as ever. When you act like a lady, I’ll treat you like one,” Laosh snorted. “You have dirt on your face.”

Ambrosi wiped it off and spat on the ground. Spit dribbled down her chin.

Laosh’s lips curled at the sight. He turned back to her sisters.

“Your absence has made today tedious. The Anax requests your presence at the banquet tonight. Feral or not, you need to be presentable.”

He cast another pointed look at Ambrosi, this time at her dirty feet and filthy clothes. She pulled her outer robe tighter, but refused to let her cheeks turn the color of her hair.

“Thank you for your concern for us, it is much appreciated,” Tala said, lying for all of them. “Lead on.”

Laosh ushered them through the door and latched it behind them. Brita and Tala were stoic, but Ambrosi snapped her teeth at him as she passed, happy to act like the animal he thought she was.

The kitchens were full of noise. The princesses were hit by hot air and the smell of mountain herbs: rosemary, cilantro, ginger, and salt. Crowds of servants worked the ovens, sweat beading off their brows as they slathered goat meat with herbs for the night’s meal. The low ceilings, stained with black soot, trapped them all in a pit of toil.

“What does Father want with us?” Brita asked as they maneuvered around the prep table where a woman peeled the fat off a goat. The discarded pieces lay on the floor for the dogs to eat.

“Maybe he heard about your late night with Killa,” Ambrosi said as she snagged a plum from a basket and hid it in her sleeve. “Old wine, thin skirts. That sort of thing.”

“Ambrosi,” Tala hissed and slapped her arm. “Don’t speak so loudly. Even the goats are going to hear you.”

“So what? Everybody already knows. They made so much noise —”

“Brosi!”

“Quiet. Laosh, why does Father want us?” Brita said. She was never shy about her exploits, nor the reputation they gave her. It made her impossible to tease.

“Toss me into the trenches, I don’t know,” Laosh said. A boy carrying eggs bumped into his shoulder and Laosh shoved him aside. “He’s announcing something, wants you all there to hear it.”

The three of them exchanged blank looks, their confusion louder than the clatter of cookware.

“All of us?” Tala asked. “Even Brita?”

Their father and Brita hadn’t spoken in weeks, and before that they’d only shouted. Requesting her presence was beyond strange.

“Do I look like a courier?” Laosh said. “You’re lucky he’s in a good mood. Or *was*, before you ran off.”

He stalked out of the kitchen. Brita, Tala, and Ambrosi gathered their robes and followed. The noise from the kitchen cut off as the door swung shut, and the ornate corridor they exited into yawned before them. Granite tiles stretched from wall to wall and stained-glass windows painted the floor a thousand shades of red.

Ambrosi knew closer to the main gates the castle would be full of politicians and soldiers, servants and merchants, and crowds of travelers seeking sanctuary for the night. It was a whirlwind of life, but here in the guts of Castle Viritia, hidden in the corners where the shadows rested long, it felt old, and their footsteps echoed like the beginning of an avalanche.

The sound of shoes scuffing on tile should have been the only noise, but as they passed by a stained-glass window Ambrosi thought she heard a gentle hum. She frowned; it sounded like Jack-Jaw wings.

“Ambrosi, what are you doing? Come on,” Tala said.

“Sorry.” Ambrosi shook her head. She must have been imagining things.

The sisters had separate chambers, but the need to dress quickly had them all gather in Brita’s room. It was beautiful with its high ceiling, arched windows of red granite, and meander patterns carved into the walls, but Brita’s personality made it her own. Spare robes were strewn over the backs of chairs while a small mirror lay discarded on a vanity covered in jewels. The bridal veil she’d abandoned halfway through weaving was torn to pieces in the corner, and an open trunk with a few stray garments inside was the only sign that soon Brita would be gone, taking her mess with her.

“Clean up and be quick about it,” Laosh said from the door.

Brita slammed it in his face.

“He’s one thing I won’t miss,” Brita said, “aside from the scab, anyway.”

“Say it louder, I don’t think everybody in the trenches heard,” Ambrosi said. She hated that nickname.

“Please, you two—” Tala began, then tripped over a robe. She stooped to pick it up, but dropped it when a blur of orange fur shot out from beneath the fabric and bolted under Brita’s bed. “Ambrosi, your pet is back.”

“Herakles!” Ambrosi said, darting over to scoop the cat out from its hiding spot. He yowled as she dragged him into her arms. “What are you doing here?”

“Being a menace, no doubt,” Brita frowned. “My door was locked. How did it get in?”

“It’s a talent.” Ambrosi flattened the cat’s ears. He hissed lazily and swatted at her hands. “He’s too smart for doors.”

Once, Ambrosi had seen Herakles walk across the marble molding on the wall outside her window. It had been a hundred-foot drop into the moat, but her cat hadn’t been scared. He was almost as good at climbing as she was, which was why he was an excellent pet.

Tala gave a supportive smile. “He is a very independent cat. You take good care of him.”

Herakles was an eighth-part mountain cat, and a dull orange as if his fur had been dusted with pollen. Ambrosi had saved him from the servant quarters a year ago.

Herakles had been the runt of the litter, born with a warped leg that made him limp, but he had a fierce hiss as loud as war drums and a temper like Ambrosi's to make up for it.

"He ripped my favorite chuba's hem to shreds," Brita said. "Little beast should be thrown into the lower town to survive. Or the moat, just to be rid of it."

"Don't listen to her, Herakles," Ambrosi told the cat. "She's bitter and old."

"I'm seventeen, hardly ancient," Brita slapped Ambrosi on the back of the head, but that didn't dampen Ambrosi's grin. The truth hurt.

"You two need to stop fighting," Tala said, wiping the dirt off her face with a wet towel. "Father does enough of that in battle, let's not bring it home."

"No one asked you to be a nag," Brita said as she threw off her robe. "And we fight out of love."

"Angry love," Ambrosi said.

Tala gave them a look that said she was contemplating throwing Herakles at them, but before she could Laosh knocked on the door and demanded they hurry up.

"Go away, we're naked!" Ambrosi yelled back.

"That's not going to make a man leave," Brita said as she picked a new robe off the floor.

"Shut up. It's Laosh, not Killa," Ambrosi said. "He hates looking at us *with* clothes on."

Tala threw a wash cloth at Ambrosi. "Enough, please. Let's not make this more unpleasant than we have to."

Ambrosi tossed Herakles back onto the floor and marched to the mirror. She grimaced as she scrubbed the dirt off her face. “Fine.”

Brita nodded as well, equally reluctant.

Changing didn’t take long. They combed their hair and swapped their robes for formal chubas made of lambskin and wool. The borders of each were decorated with maze-like patterns embellished with beads. They shone in the dim light, gold, red, and purple like the mountains. What took longest was their jewelry. Brita’s vanity was piled with every metal that could be mined and several that were imported. As princesses, they were required to drench themselves in wealth.

“Why does he want us here tonight?” Ambrosi gripped, wrapping a metal wire into her curls. Her ears ached under the weight of opal earrings. “He never cares whether we show up or not.”

“Calm down, it’s probably just another new policy,” Tala looped a gold ring through her nose. “You know how Father is. You need to hide your irritation better.”

“What’s the use of having it if I don’t flaunt it?”

“Ambrosi.” Tala sighed, her name a lecture unto itself.

“Don’t bother, Tala, she never learns her lesson,” Brita said as she finished dabbing blots of red paint on her eyelids. “Just watch, she and Father will be at it again tonight, like a pair of old cats.”

“That’s not true, we’ve been getting along better,” Ambrosi said.

Marginally. With much self-control on her part.

“You’re both too similar to do anything but hate each other. The sooner you stop pretending otherwise, the happier you’ll be,” Brita said. She threw her mane back, now beaded with gold and gemstones. They clattered like the bones soldiers gambled with, swaying as she moved. Unlike most women, Brita didn’t bother to braid her hair into knots or buns. The sash on her waist, marking her as an initiate of the Mountain Goddess, made her exempt from things like that.

“What, like you’re any better?” Ambrosi said. “You won’t even look at him.”

Brita put an iron circlet on her head; a smoky quartz crystal shone in its setting. Against her dark skin it looked like a star plucked from the sky. “You know what he tried to do to me.”

“You’re a coward,” Ambrosi said. “I wouldn’t have run.”

Brita had everything; an inheritance, a legacy, a future. All that was thrown away now because she refused to fight for it.

“I’m tired of playing peacemaker over this,” Tala said, slipping on her own circlet. It was bronze and set with a topaz. “It doesn’t matter if Father wanted to marry Brita off, it didn’t happen. You both need to lay it to rest.”

Ambrosi finished wrapping wires into her hair. She turned her head and watched them glint in the fading sunlight. “Of course you would say that.”

Tala never fought for anything. If Father had tried to marry *her* off, she would have gone, rumors about the fiancé or no.

“Just be nice,” Tala said. “That’s all I ask.”

“I’ll be nice when Father isn’t trying to shut the temple down. Until then, civil is all I can manage.” Ambrosi said. “That goes for you too, Brita.”

“I’m not the one defunding the priestesses,” Brita replied. “Leave me out of your spat. I have my own grudges to nurse.”

“Enough,” Tala said. She brushed Ambrosi’s hair back and flicked her forehead. “Father is waiting. We’ll behave for him.”

Brita and Ambrosi exchanged mulish expressions, but nodded. Ambrosi put on her own crown, the silver circlet cold against her skin. The lapis stone in its center was rough and uncut, nothing like the one Brita wore. It was the least decorated of the three, the most easily overlooked. Ambrosi hated wearing it; it was the wrong color, the wrong stone, the wrong crown.

“Let’s get this over with. I’m starving,” Brita said, flinging open the door.

“Finally,” Laosh grunted. He pushed off the wall he’d been leaning on and stalked down the hall, leaving them to catch up.

“Father is probably furious,” Tala said, a hand on Ambrosi’s back as she pushed her gently forward.

“Probably?” Ambrosi muttered.

“If he isn’t, he’ll find something to be angry about soon,” Brita said. “Just don’t mention the honey.”

“Sure,” Ambrosi said, the Madness Honey she’d smuggled home warm against her skin.

The halls became more ornate the closer they got to the throne room. Tapestries hung on the walls, the eyes of their ancestors judging them from on high. Ambrosi looked away from the one of her mother out of habit and kept her eyes fixed on the back of Brita's head. The band of her crown showed through her dark locks, beautiful in its roughness.

Dark iron and quartz were powerful materials that bowed to nobody, fitting for the first in line to the throne, although Brita wouldn't wear it much longer. Ambrosi couldn't imagine throwing away the chance to have everything. To be Anax was to be free, powerful, untouchable, and theirs was one of the few clans that let women wear the crown. But Brita's decision to join the Mountain Sisters forbade her from ruling, and now everything was a mess.

They were a small family. Brita's marriage was supposed to change that, but now that she was being struck from it, it was even smaller. Father hadn't said which remaining daughter he'd name his heir, but everybody assumed it would be Tala. Sweet, shy Tala with her quiet laugh and gentle hands, who never fought and couldn't hate. A disaster in the making.

Anaxes couldn't be gentle. Altala was too unforgiving a land for that, and Ambrosi knew Father knew that. Putting Tala on the throne would be a mistake.

Her hand curled around the vial again. All she needed was to prove to him that she was the right choice—the better heir, the daughter to do him proud—and disaster would be averted. If she played her part right, then Altala would have a strong ruler, and everything Ambrosi wanted would be hers.

CHAPTER THREE

They walked through the castle's empty corridors, their shoes padding across the cold stone. A crisp breeze with the faintest hint of autumnal decay ran through their hair as Ambrosi and her sisters entered the main hall.

The ceiling was three stories high with balconies wrapping around the perimeter. A dozen stained-glass windows on the west wall shone patchwork rainbows over the marble floor, painting the already vibrant stone brighter than the sunset outside. A crowd of counselors, soldiers, and guests was already gathered for the evening, laughing raucously around the long tables set out for the evening meals. Their manners and dress varied, but the scent of turmeric, cilantro, and ginger soaked the air as the sisters wove between the crowded tables, so thick Ambrosi could taste it.

Their father, Anax Agaman, sat on his grand throne. It was built on a tall dais far above the rest of the room, making him the most visible person in the sea of humanity. He was a big man; years of fighting left him with more scars than wrinkles, and on his head was a crown made of a hundred shards of Samadhi Quartz. It was the only known object to contain true magic, and its crystals glowed with power. Legend had it that it was a gift from the gods, proving that Virita's royal family was blessed to rule. Agaman certainly looked imposing as he loomed over his subjects like a mountain, the cut of his frown visible even from across the room.

"Brace yourselves," Brita murmured. "It's into the fire for us now."

“He doesn’t know where we were,” Tala said. “We’ll be fine as long as we don’t mention the Jack-Jaws.”

Ambrosi fingered the vial of honey, which she had kept tucked under her dress on its cord. The outside was sticky. She hadn’t had time to clean it in the rush to get ready, but now she wished she’d stalled longer. Father’s temper was unpleasant at best.

The three of them kept their eyes lowered and shoulders rounded as they took their seats beside Agaman. Tala and Brita sat on his right, but Ambrosi always took the seat on his left, by his good ear.

“You’ve grown complacent in your duties, daughters,” he said. “When I call, you are expected to come immediately.”

“Forgive us Anax,” Tala said. “A pressing matter occurred. It won’t happen again.”

“It must have been urgent indeed,” he said, tapping the side of his head. “Though perhaps you would do better to clean up after these ‘important activities.’ Ambrosi still has honey on her ear.”

Brita scowled at her. Ambrosi frantically wiped it off, a blush coloring her face.

“Sorry, Father,” she mumbled. “We came as soon as we could.”

Agaman flexed his right hand, slowly folding each finger inward, then out again. His large, hairy hands were strong enough to crush bone. She held her breath, keeping her hands hidden in her sleeves. Their father cast a critical eye on them before returning his gaze to the floor below.

“It was not soon enough. Ambrosi, you are old enough to wear your hair high, I expect you to stop acting so childishly,” Agaman told her. “You are a daughter of Virita, one of the last of our house, and I expect you to do that breeding proud, not indulge in childish mischief with your sisters, who ought to know better. Do not disappoint me again.”

“Yes Anax, I understand.” Ambrosi squeezed the hem of her sleeve between her fingers, focusing on the feel of embroidery on her hands instead of the loose hair on her back, which she had only done in the simplest of knots. Now she wished she had been like Tala, carefully tying it into a braided bun instead of wearing a childish collection of wires. Beside her, Brita stood stiff and straight, eyes focused ahead.

Father grunted in reply, then began to berate Brita for leaving the castle unchaperoned. Tala looked at Ambrosi with pity, even when it was her turn to be chastised.

“No matter, I suppose it’s of little consequence,” Father said when his rant was done. “Tonight has more pressing concerns than your disobedience.”

Ambrosi exchanged another look with her sisters, but their father didn’t elaborate.

Dinner was goat meat and herbs, with a side of flat bread that left a sour aftertaste. The vintage was diluted wine that stained everyone’s teeth. Ambrosi ate more than her fill, starved after a day of climbing rock faces and outrunning shepherds. A slice of lemon pricked a cut on Ambrosi’s finger; it felt sharper than glass.

As they ate, Agaman watched the floor with calculating eyes.

“When it is full dark, I will make my announcement. Go greet our guests,” he told them.

Ambrosi’s seat scraped against the tile as she followed her sisters back off the dais and into the throng. Their father loved a captive audience too much to break any news before then.

The next half hour was miserable. Events such as this made Ambrosi feel small and overlooked. Part of that was because she *was* short, and still young enough to escape most people’s interest. That came with many benefits when Ambrosi wanted to disappear, but was a curse when she needed to be seen.

A contingent of soldiers had returned from the terrace farms recently, and were still celebrating their victory over a band of raiders; Ambrosi was forced to mingle with a hundred men, all determined to find a way to get drunk off watered-down wine.

“I promise with my waking eyes, princess, there were hundreds of them!” One of the warriors said. Ambrosi ducked so his hands wouldn’t slap her as he gestured wildly. “All filthy, wretched barbarians from the trenches, armed with rocks and hatchets, set to steal our winter crops. I killed at least thirty of them myself.”

“Been strange movements down in that godforsaken maze,” another said. “I swear the fog was looking right at me. I’ll be happy if I’m never sent back.”

“The landmarks moved again,” a third man said. “We almost went to the wrong peak. My grandmother says it’s the magic down there that does it, but your father believes otherwise, doesn’t he, princess?”

None of them bothered to let her answer any of them remarks, so Ambrosi edged away as soon as socially acceptable. She wouldn't mind these events if people spoke *with* her instead of *to* her, but that was a vain wish. The servants she usually spoke with were too busy to hide with her behind the pillars, and Brita and Tala were wrapped up in conversations with Father's counselors, so Ambrosi was friendless for the night.

She sipped her wine. It was fine. She was used to it, though it did make her wish her father would get on with his announcement already. For all the joviality among the soldiers, the court was tense. Nobody was truly relaxed, not the least because the Anax and his eldest daughter were in the same room for the first time in over a fortnight. Brita had her father's temper; when they fought, it was fierce, and even seasoned generals did not like to be part of the spectacle.

Worse was the *reason* they were at each other's throats. Succession troubles were not good for anyone's nerves. At least the feast was peaceful for now; Brita kept to the far side of the room, and Father to his throne. As long as they didn't interact, everything would be fine.

"Ah, princess Ambrosi, it's been too long," A familiar, but unwelcome voice said. "You certainly have grown since I last saw you."

Never mind. It was *not* fine.

"Meleus," Ambrosi scowled, grip tightening on her cup. "I thought you had been transferred."

The young warrior smirked as he approached, stopping to stand close enough that Ambrosi smelled the garlic on his breath. Meleus was twenty-eight and the son of

Counselor Ibas. His long hair was slicked back into a snakelike braid, and he'd draped himself in jewelry. Ambrosi had seen him and Brita together in several dark hallways last year and vowed to have nothing to do with him. The vow was hard to keep, since Meleus decided to do the opposite.

"Yes, but didn't you hear?" He leaned even closer, bending to her eye level. "We killed all the nasty trench dwellers to secure your father's harvest. They're like rats, always crawling out of the ground and making pests of themselves. It takes a strong man to handle savages like them. You're lucky I can protect you from them, even from afar."

He attempted to pat her cheek. Ambrosi stepped back. Her back pressed into the pleated pillar behind her.

"I've killed plenty of rats in my time," she said. "Your assistance is appreciated but unwanted. You should leave, I'm sure there's a brothel upset at your absence."

Chasing mice out of the storeroom had been a game she and her friend Nalii played when Ambrosi was first brought to the palace as a child. Extra points were awarded for stomping on their heads.

"So rude, Princess! There's no need for that, I won't bite," Meleus said, making no move to leave. "Unless you ask me to."

"I would rather eat a scorpion." Ambrosi scanned the room. In her attempts to escape conversing with anyone, she'd cornered herself near the edge of the hall. Now she was backed into a corner with Meleus looming over her, all broad-shouldered and cocky. She knew what he wanted; it was the same thing *all* men wanted, that Brita was happy to

give them. Ambrosi didn't like being looked at like that. It made her stomach tie itself into knots.

Meleus chuckled. "You only say that because you haven't had any real romance yet. The gods know why your father is so stingy with his daughters' hands when they're so eye catching. I'd even take yours."

It was easier to be angry than acknowledge the dread curling in her stomach at the thought of marriage, or the way Meleus' eyes moved down her body as he suggested it. Her chuba covered everything from Ambrosi's neck to her toes, yet it might as well have not been there at all.

Anax Agaman's reluctance to wed his children was well known, and Meleus was an idiot if he didn't know the reason. The Virita royal family had shrunk to only four people—the Anax himself and his three daughters—so no matter who Ambrosi and her sisters married, infighting and political maneuvering would turn the court into a kicked hornet's nest. That was why Brita's engagement had been so important, and why things were so tense now that it'd fallen through.

Ambrosi looked for a way out again. She locked eyes with Tala across the hall. Her sister glanced between her and Meleus, and pursed her lips. Moments later, she shoved her goblet at a passing servant, and began marching over.

"I have places to be," Ambrosi told Meleus. "Move."

"Don't be coy, you've barely talked to anyone all evening." Meleus said. "I've been watching."

He reached for her face again. Ambrosi slapped his hand away, but before she could run he grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer.

“Already a woman, the years fly don’t they?” Meleus said into her ear. The garlic was cloying, but the sweet scent of watery wine underneath was just as strong. Apparently it *was* possible to get drunk on it. “Now that your sister is becoming a priestess, I’m in need of a new evening companion. Perhaps you can keep me company when she’s no longer available?”

“In your dreams,” she snapped.

“Only for now,” he said.

She had not stuck her hand into a Jack-Jaw nest *twice* to put up with this. Ambrosi yanked her hand away with a growl, sick of minding her manners.

Before she could bite him, however, a hairy hand grabbed and slammed Meleus into the nearest pillar. Ambrosi stumbled as she caught her balance and looked at her savior in surprise.

Laosh was a thundercloud of annoyance. He loomed over Meleus with a look of revulsion on his face.

“Last I checked, you weren’t supposed to be here, Ibas’ boy,” Laosh said. “You don’t have permission to touch that one either.”

Tala appeared from behind Laosh and planted herself between Meleus and Ambrosi. Her care-worn face was as sharp as a hot knife. It was only times like these that Ambrosi noticed how similar her older sister looked to their father. Anger brought out the family resemblance.

“I don’t want to see you near her ever again,” Tala said. “Nobody touches the royal family.”

“Tell that to your sister. Brita was more than willing,” Meleus said, wiping a strand of spittle off his cheek. A bruise was forming on his face from where he’d hit the pillar.

“Brita would kiss a frog as long as it was moving,” Ambrosi said. “But that’d still be a step up from you.”

Meleus’ face twisted. He lurched forward, but Laosh began to unsheathe his sword. “Easy, boy, if you want the little rat badly enough, go talk to her father. He’ll be more than willing to hand her off if you can pay the price.”

Laosh didn’t have a drop of noble blood in him, but the level of scorn dripping off him put most of the court to shame. The curl of his lips said that he very much doubted Meleus could pay a bride price that high.

Meleus seemed to realize this was more trouble than it was worth. He stepped back with a shrug. “Fine. What do I want with a brat like that, anyway? Her sister is better looking, and much less feral.”

He stalked off, already demanding a servant fetch him more wine. The strong stuff, none of this watery sludge. They all watched him go; Ambrosi’s wrist throbbed from where he’d grabbed it. She was glad her skin was darker than Tala’s. If it bruised, it’d be hard to tell.

“Want me to throw him out?” Laosh asked, hand still on his sword.

“No, you know how Father is if we make a scene,” Tala said. “Just keep an eye on him.”

Their guard shrugged and vanished back into the crowd. A few people saw the altercation, but they were already going back to their conversations as if nothing had happened. In a way, nothing did, but Ambrosi still smelled garlic all over her face, and her wrist stung.

Tala turned to her, looking troubled. “Are you alright? I’m sorry I didn’t see sooner, I hadn’t realized those soldiers were part of his contingent—”

Ambrosi rubbed her wrist, feeling phantom touches from Meleus’ fingers. “I’m fine. I don’t know how Brita stands him though. He’s worse than Killa. Anyway, I had it handled. I was going to bite him.”

Tala’s face pinched. “No biting, we’ve talked about this. It wouldn’t have done any good, anyway.”

“Says who? He would have let go, then I could’ve run.”

“Where?”

“It doesn’t matter. *Away.*” Ambrosi said. “And next time he approached me I’d be ready.”

Tala shook her head, looking far older than her years. “That would just make him angrier. If you fight back, that just gives them more of a reason to be rough. You need to find other ways to protect yourself.”

Ambrosi’s hands twisted into her chuba. The hallway seemed a little more red.

“Well, what was I supposed to do? Let him touch me more?”

She wasn't Brita, she didn't know how to turn unwanted attention into something good. She didn't *want* to, especially not against a pillar in the feast hall with a man obsessed with her sister.

“No, of course not. Just stay near me or Laosh in the future,” Tala said. She wrapped her arm around Ambrosi’s shoulder. “Make sure there is someone with you at all times. I can talk to Father about getting you a personal attendant. You’re old enough that —”

“No!” Ambrosi said. “I’d rather take my chances with the biting.”

Nothing was more dangerous than saying that she needed a chaperon. She’d be followed everywhere, forbidden from leaving the city on her own, and have her actions reported back to Father. Besides, if Ambrosi was old enough to need a chaperon, it meant she was old enough to get married, and the last thing she wanted was Father thinking about that. They’d all seen how well that ended for Brita.

“Alright, fine, no attendant,” Tala said. “But you’ll need one someday. Putting it off won’t help anybody.”

“It’ll help *me*,” Ambrosi said.

She didn’t want to get married yet. Lots of girls her age were, but Ambrosi had plans. A husband would only get in the way.

“Fine, we’ll wait a few more months. Now let’s get you back to Father,” Tala said. “He’ll keep an eye on you tonight. It’s almost time for his announcement anyway.”

Ambrosi looked around. The windows were pitch black and the hall was lit with lanterns. The sun had set without her realizing. That had been happening more often; the days felt shorter, her perception of time shrinking. Each day felt like an hour.

“Fine,” Ambrosi said. “I needed to talk to him anyway.”

She shook off her sister’s hand and marched back toward the dais. Agaman was talking to a counselor, mouth turned into a deep frown. Ambrosi sighed in relief; it looked like he hadn’t seen the spectacle with Meleus.

Her fingers curled around the honey vial under her robe again, the only trophy she still had after today’s adventure. Despite being only two thirds full, it was worth more than a herd of goats, and Ambrosi had earned it herself. Not even a prince could claim to have done that.

The honey heated against her skin, warming the glass.

It was time for her to make her move.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Ambrosi was four-years-old, she learned she had a mother. Calips, the head priestess, said Ambrosi looked like her. Until that moment, Ambrosi had never wondered whose blood flowed through her veins. She'd simply been a ward of the Mountain Sisters without care for her past. She remembered the awe she felt when Calips said her mother's name, tongue pausing on each syllable to taste it as if it were honey: Helena of Sparti, a woman without peer. It was a name of power, and Ambrosi wanted to hear it again and again. However, Helena's name was buried in grief, only uttered on accident by Calips on blue moons.

Details of Agaman, Ambrosi's father, were intimidating, but much easier to find.

"You're like him, too," Calips told her once. Her milky eyes were hooded.

"Proud, determined, ambitious. Be careful of that, Honeybee."

Now, years later, Ambrosi hid her face behind her hair as she flitted through the crowd, weaving between soldiers and politicians. The air was thick with herbs and warm bodies. If she didn't get to higher ground, Ambrosi would choke on it. She still found it galling that Calips would compare her to the most powerful man in the mountains, but only as a warning.

Father sat on his dais, on a high-backed, marble throne. His crown shone, even in the fading light. Ambrosi swore it glowed with magic, buzzing with power normally only found in the trenches. He was tall as a mountain, while she was as small as a wisp of candle flame. Even still, he and Ambrosi *were* similar. It was in the shape of their noses,

the grind of their teeth, and the set of their eyes. Ambrosi saw his ghost in her reflection; she wondered, sometimes, if Calips had lied, because Ambrosi looked more like Agaman than Helena—at least, from what Ambrosi had seen of the woman’s face, immortalized in its tapestry. But that was just another reason for him to cast his eyes from her.

Reminders of the past were rarely welcome in Virita’s halls. Despite their long history, Agaman hated the tapestries, the stories, and the memories the castle contained. So, Ambrosi rarely spoke of her mother. Instead, she looked for ways to impress her father.

Ambrosi wasn’t much of a plotter. She tried, but she was more suited to action than complex webs. Forethought took patience, and Ambrosi barely had the attention span to darn a frayed sleeve, much less make a tapestry of contingencies. Unfortunately, that made her current situation all the harder.

Her father ruled Virita with an iron fist. He’d wrestled control of it from his father, Atreus, in a bloody coup forty years ago. All that was left of their family line was him, Ambrosi, and her two sisters. Any remaining relatives had long ago been severed from the bloodline in a ritual by the Mountain Sisters and had no claim to the crown. Because of this, all of Virita was faced with the question of what to do when Agaman died.

Traditionally, the crown would go to a son, but Agaman had none, so a daughter would be chosen instead. Brita, the eldest, had spent her entire life under Agaman’s wing, dutifully learning politics, negotiation, and the art of war. For seventeen years, people rested easy knowing she would reign, but the thread had since snagged and frayed.

Because Brita had gotten engaged this last summer, and she had been *mad*.

Ambrosi was friends with the servants. Like her, they were ignored, but they saw and heard everything. One of them had been Brita's handmaiden at the time, and told Ambrosi everything. Agaman had his eye on the Themebean clan for over a decade; when their Anax's son's wife suddenly died, it was an opportunity to join their houses. After all, who was more fitting to wed his eldest daughter than the son of another Anax? The man would be welcomed to Altala and keep their line strong and Virita would be all more prosperous for it.

But the man's wife hadn't just died, she'd been murdered. A month after Brita's engagement was announced, a Themebean servant fled to Virita for sanctuary, babbling about how the wife had been torn to pieces in her bed by her husband. He had a history of things like that, and that should have been warning enough for them to cancel the engagement. Agaman didn't.

Ambrosi didn't know what happened behind the closed door of her father's study or what words were spoken between him and Brita. Her guess was that Father wanted her to murder her future husband once their vows were sealed. Either way, he had no plans to save his eldest from the marriage.

So Brita fled to the Mountain Sisters, throwing away her birthright in the process. Nobody could stop her, because not even the Anax could interfere with temple callings, and suddenly, Altala was short an heir.

"He'll declare the new heir on the solstice," Tala said when it happened. "Don't worry, Brosi, you're young. You'll be safe."

Except Ambrosi *wanted* to be chosen. Tala was scared of power. She hated the spotlight, and ordering people around made her nervous, but Ambrosi was different. If she wore Brita's crown, people couldn't push her around. She'd be *respected*. The Anax was the most powerful person in the Spine Back Mountains; there was nothing they couldn't do, and Ambrosi had a thousand dreams to fulfill.

Tala was too timid for the role, too used to bending backward for other people. She was good at diffusing conflict, but she shirked from raised voices and looming men. She couldn't handle being Anax, but Ambrosi could. She'd gone into the hornet nest twice; there was nothing she couldn't do. So why was proving that to Father so hard?

Ambrosi climbed the steps and sat beside Father. The crowd was a buzz in their ears, indistinct yet raucous.

The councilman he'd been speaking with bowed and departed. Father sipped his wine and leaned back in his seat, eyes fixed on the crowd below. Ambrosi wanted to ask about his announcement, but experience taught her he'd be irritated if she pried.

"Daughter," he said, "I thought I told you to mingle."

"And I thought you were done with petitions for the day," she replied, sitting beside him. "What did Councilor Dionne want?"

Father leaned back. It was impossible to tell if he was amused or irritated. Ambrosi and he had the same scrunched expressions that made them look perpetually moody, but she thought her glib might have paid off.

“He received a report from several scouts,” he said. “There have been Largess sightings in the trenches. Something has them spooked, and our attempts to map the terrain have stalled.”

Ambrosi swallowed. Things were never good when the snake wolves were moving. Calips said it was an omen, the same way the movement of bees was. Ambrosi wondered what a Jack-Jaw meant in a portent, and if that had anything to do with the Largess.

“I told you it’s pointless to scout down there,” she said, slumping in her seat. “The passage ways shift and there are too many monsters.”

“Monsters, we can handle. As for the shifting passageways, that is a legend. Landslides are to blame.”

Of course Father would think that. He hadn’t been in the trenches in years, what did he know? Ambrosi’s room overlooked the endless maze of ravines that fed into the valleys below. It was a wasteland of rocks and gorges populated by monsters like the Largess. The fog obscured most of it, but Ambrosi knew from tracing its lines every day that the passageways didn’t stay in the same place.

“This will make constructing the road much more tedious,” Agaman grumbled. “We may not even know where to start until the spring.”

Virita was a castle perched above a never-ending labyrinth, cut off from most of the world. Only a few spindly bridges across chasms and some well-trod trader trails connected them to other clans. It took over a week to reach Neneli and another four days to beyond that to Themebes. The distance wasn’t far, but the terrain made travelers pay

dearly for each inch gained, which made sending soldiers anywhere difficult. Other places, such as the Lowlands, were downright treacherous to hail to.

The road would change that, allowing for quicker trade and better relations with the surrounding clans, but constructing it was its own battle. The trenches didn't like being meddled with.

"Is the wait that bad?" Ambrosi said.

"We cannot get reliable conveys from the Lowlands without it," Father said.

"We've already delayed twenty years, another five is too long."

Ambrosi pursed her lips. The Lowlands again. Its people were wild nomads with no cities and scattered lineages. They were barbarians that lived in the shadow of the mountains, hidden by the mist. They weren't as uncivilized as true trench folk, who dwelled in the maze itself, but after generations of war with the Lowlands, Ambrosi viewed them with wary anger. A faceless enemy she wanted nothing to do with, even though Father wanted open trade.

"No matter," Father said, "we will leave those cares for the morrow. No doubt you will stick your nose into it, daughter, as you are wont to do."

Ambrosi ducked her head, smiling despite herself. Her sisters were older, but Ambrosi was the one who attended each council meeting with Father. She wasn't strictly allowed, but as long as he didn't forbid her from it, Ambrosi wormed her way in. She loved hearing the councilors talk, and the arguments turn to agreement as the sun orbited the sky.

“Maybe I can help you with the bridge problem,” she said. She didn’t understand everything that was said in those meetings, but there was something addictive about watching those with power use it, and dream of herself doing the same.

Father appraised her. “I’m sure my councilors would appreciate that. Wisdom from a child.”

Ambrosi wrinkled her nose. She was twelve, hardly a child. Plenty of girls her age were already married. If she could be wed, she could ne taken seriously.

“Leave the worries to my council. It’s an Anax’s duty to care for his people,” Father said. “You should concern yourself with your lessons.”

“What, learning to weave?” Ambrosi muttered. She hated that; she always tangled the thread in the shuttle. Her joy came from loping across sloping hills, feeling the wind in her hair as she climbed sheer cliffs, and gazing out at the vibrant, iron vistas of Altala from as high as she could reach. Not fussing over making blankets and wedding trains.

“One day, you will stop this childish protest against your lessons,” Agaman said. “Don’t think I don’t know about your wanderings.”

Ambrosi may or may not have skipped more lessons than she attended over the summer, but that was hardly an issue. In all the upheaval surrounding Brita, nobody had even remarked on it. Besides, everything Ambrosi needed to know, she learned in the council-room. Everything else (weaving, manners, propriety) was unnecessary.

“While we are on the subject of wandering,” Father continued, “a shepherd came to the gates earlier, asking about a girl with sunset hair. It seems his beehive was plundered by her. He demands recompense for the damages.”

“Pity,” Ambrosi replied. She rubbed her wrist again; the pain had faded to a dull ache where Meleus grabbed her. She’d press it against one of the walls later and let the chill numb it properly, but for now she ignored it. “Did he ever find her?”

Father clinked his fingers against his ceramic mug. “Depending on my mood, he may.”

He wasn’t an easy man to read, but Ambrosi didn’t think he was truly angry, which meant punishment could be avoided if she chose her words right. Despite what her sisters thought, Ambrosi *could* use tact. It just happened that Father didn’t respond well to it, which was why Ambrosi preferred to be bold.

“I bet the shepherd didn’t tell you which hive was stolen from,” Ambrosi said. “Didn’t you hear? There’s a Jack-Jaw infestation in the cliffs. They burned the south section today to clear it out.”

His eyes sharpened, and he set his cup down. “It has been mentioned, yes.”

“Hypothetically, it would be a waste of resources not to salvage an infected hive,” Ambrosi continued. “Whoever went there would have been doing a good deed.”

“Is that so?” He said. “It sounds reckless to my mind.”

Ambrosi’s heart drummed a steady tempo in her chest. Her hands were sweaty in her sleeves, and below the dais, the crowd buzzed like honey bees. “Don’t you always tell me risk is the better part of valor?”

Father barked a laugh, short and guttural. A few counselors glanced over at the unfamiliar sound; Agaman rarely laughed, especially not with amusement in his voice. Ambrosi felt ten inches taller.

“Do you really think a thief can have valor?” her father asked.

“Why not?” she shrugged. “If it’s for the right reason, then anything wrong can be right. Didn’t our ancestor steal the Mountain Goddess’ heart to give us fire? She traded him your crown to get it back. He was a thief, but we treat him like a hero.”

The amusement in Agaman’s eyes died. Ambrosi bit the inside of her cheek, realizing her misstep.

“Do not mention the gods around me, girl,” Father said. “Those old stories are nonsense. I taught you better than to repeat them.”

Ambrosi resisted the impulse to snap back that he *hadn’t* raised her. Calips did because he couldn’t stand the sight of his own daughter for nearly eight years. A familiar, simmering anger rested in her bones, never banking and never stopping. Ambrosi didn’t understand how one moment she loved him but hated him the next, but something in her demanded to be released—for her to demand an answer from him—but she resisted. Using her acid tongue with her sisters was one thing, speaking back to her father in public was another. Anax Agaman was clever and cruel in equal measure, but if there was one thing he hated, it was being disobeyed in front of his court.

“Sorry, Father,” she said, twisting her fists into her robe. She swallowed any other words that wanted to escape.

“As you should be.” Agaman snapped his fingers. Temri, one of the senior servants, appeared at his elbow. Agaman spoke to him in a low voice. “I’ll speak soon. Stop serving for now.”

Temri nodded and vanished. Agaman glared at the crowd. Tala always said Ambrosi looked just like Father when she glared. So much for Helena's likeness.

"You're mistaken about the thief, daughter," Agaman said. "A thief is like a Jack-Jaw. It lies unnoticed until it is too late to root out, then devours its victims by degrees. There is no valor in a thing like that, nor any hope of changing it. A hornet is a hornet, no matter how well it hides."

Ambrosi raised her eyes to meet his. They were shadowed by his brow, dark and focused. His mood was indecipherable; she couldn't tell if he was angry or calm, vindictive or attempting to impart wisdom. Perhaps all of them, or perhaps none. It left her wrong-footed, and unsure of how this conversation would go.

"Well, what about the honey thief?" she asked. "If someone steals from Jack-Jaws instead of honeybees, does it make them a hero?"

"You speak as if a hero is something noble," Father said. "But they are simply someone with power."

Ambrosi wet her lips. "Well, in that case, aren't we Jack-Jaws too?"

The Virita family was born into an inheritance of blood, defending their halls from everything from the barbarous trench-folk to the distant, looming threat of the great empires beyond the Spine-Back Mountains. For a thousand years, Ambrosi's ancestors warred and slaughtered their enemies to turn their lonely peak into a thriving metropolis. Their castle was a hive of sweet treasures, ripe for taking. Ambrosi didn't know which was worse; being a defenseless honeybee, or a poisonous, thieving hornet.

“You are a philosopher, daughter,” Father said. “Not one score, and already theorizing. To your earlier point, stealing from a Jack-Jaw is not valorous, but reckless.”

He looked down at a ring on his hand; sapphire lined with red gold. It had belonged to Helena. “The risk would not be worth it, not unless the hive was full to the brim.”

“But if it was, would it have been brave?” Ambrosi asked.

Below, a man laughed at a joke Brita told him, Laosh was playing bones with a few other soldiers, and the scent of herbs wafted up like mist from a lake. The night wind billowed against the windows, ushering in a bone rattling chill. Father narrowed his eyes. He looked at her with consideration, as if he were stripping away her skin to see what lay underneath.

Ambrosi knew it was now or never.

She pulled the vial of Madness Honey out and placed it in his palm. The glass was warm from resting against her collarbone, and the bloodred liquid was as thick as sap.

“Hypothetically,” Ambrosi said, “how much honey is a lot?”

This was it, the moment of reckoning. Father already knew about their jaunt outside the walls. Women weren’t allowed out without chaperons, but Ambrosi was still considered a child. She could get away with more, even though it was tempting fate to do so. If she was lucky, he’d be impressed by that instead of angry. Ambrosi never got lucky, but she had two tablespoons of Madness Honey plucked from the most dangerous hive on the mountain. Even Agaman couldn’t refuse a gift like that. Punishment was a risk she was willing to take if it meant showing him that she was brave enough to succeed him.

She couldn't wield a sword or enter a duel, but she could prove her worth in more unorthodox ways.

Father's eyes flashed as he inspected her spoils. The vial glinted in the torchlight as he held it up. "Of this type? A fingerful is a fortune."

She ducked her head to hide her grin; Ambrosi had collected almost a whole vial.

The pride in Father's eyes was rare but coveted. Often, when he looked at her there was a frustrated sadness that meant he was thinking of Helena, but then sometimes, like tonight, he'd look down and see *Ambrosi*. When that happened, the anger in her bones ebbed, and Ambrosi felt loved. That mattered more to her than the honey ever could.

"It is most impressive," Father said, "but this is hardly hypothetical. How large was that hive?"

"I couldn't tell, it went too deep into the cliff," Ambrosi said, giving up her ruse. "My arm fit all the way inside—up to here."

She tapped her shoulder and grinned. Her yellow teeth looked wolfish in the dim light.

"Brita was always my honey thief, but she never stole something of this caliber." Father murmured, caressing the vial with his thumb. "It's been a long time since we had Madness Honey in our halls."

"I know," Ambrosi said.

Agaman had burned the rhododendron flowers three years ago. He said it was to punish the Mountain Sisters for teaching what he considered to be outdated traditions;

festival days, regular worship, and the idea that the gods cared about humans at all. The Laboriosa bees hadn't been able to make red honey until this year as a consequence.

"It felt wrong to waste our first harvest of it after so long," Ambrosi said. "I wanted it to be memorable."

"You've certainly ensured that." He said.

Ambrosi attempted another smile. "What do you think, Father? Do I make a valorous thief?"

It was a gamble, how he'd react; their theft versus the reward. If anybody else had stolen madness honey, they'd have their eyes burned out with molten silver, but despite everything—the temple, Helena, the private thoughts Ambrosi never knew—she thought he loved her enough to be proud, rather than angry.

But Ambrosi braced for the worst, regardless.

A moment later, Agaman reached out and traced the curve of her cheek. His nail dragged against her skin, long and neatly trimmed. "Not valorous, daughter, but as clever as a cat, and twice as daring. If you were my son, I could even be proud of you."

As double-edged as the compliment was, it made Ambrosi's heart burn with triumph.

"Thank you, Father," she said.

There was an ugly thing that lived in her. It lay beside the anger, hot and fiery. It was a craving for power, like the heroes of old. Like her ancestors, which Ambrosi heard stories of as a child, whispered to her while she sat by Calips' knees. Once, long ago, the first Virita stole the heart of the Mountain Sister and crafted it into the Anax's crown.

They had been nothing, yet became the foundation that built a clan so powerful its mark was etched into the mountains for eternity.

For years, Ambrosi's world had been the temple, Calips' stories, and the distant knowledge that her father wore that crown. Even four years after being taken in by him, Ambrosi was still finding her footing, but she knew where she wanted her feet to take her. If power was a dais, she wished to climb to the top and wear his crown, make her own choices, and be someone nobody could overlook.

Hopefully, he'd remember her devotion to him when it came time to name his heir. Her or Tala, the last two who could continue their family's rule now that Brita was leaving them. It'd be unorthodox to give the younger daughter the crown, but these were unorthodox times. Ambrosi had a *chance*, and she'd pursue it to her dying breath.

Father tucked the vial into his chuba and ruffled her hair. "A kingly gift like this won't be forgotten. It is a shame the shepherd never caught his thief, but justice is so rarely meted. Now, go gather your sisters. It's time I made my announcement."

Ambrosi blinked and looked around. The hall was quieting, all attendees settling in to hear their Anax speak. Ambrosi's stomach twisted, her triumph fading. In her euphoria, she'd forgotten about his news. Whatever it was, she doubted it would bode well.

The last announcement he'd made had been Brita's engagement, and that had ended with his eldest throwing her crown at him, fleeing to the temple, and renouncing her birthright. Tonight could be just as bad, depending on what he said.

"Yes, Father," she said, and got up to fetch her sisters.

The absence of the honey vial under her robe was both a comfort, and curse.

Finding Tala and Brita required much elbowing and stepping on toes, but eventually Ambrosi brought them back to the dais. Once they were all reseated, Agaman stood to make his announcement.

“Friends and foes, allies and strangers,” he said. “The nights are growing cold and the shadows long. You are welcome in my hall under the laws of hospitality. As long as your blades are sheathed you are a guest on my mountain.

I am Anax Agaman of Altala. My line has ruled this illustrious peak since the gods walked among us, and we will rule for a thousand years more. Legend has it that if we should fall, the mountains will crumble as well; an amusing fable, isn’t it? One involving magic, monsters, and other make belief.”

The tables laughed. Ambrosi didn’t.

“Thankfully, the age of fables is over,” Agaman continued. “We are an enlightened people entering a new era—one of reason, logic, and change. My line will not remain strong because of an enchanted crown. It will last an eternity, for we are strong and fierce like winter wind.”

Her father cast his eyes over his daughters, landing on Brita. “However, we cannot rule if there is nobody to wear the crown.”

Brita put a hand on her sash, staring back at their father with eyes like smoldering coal.

“As you all know,” Agaman said, “my eldest, Princess Brita, has abdicated her inheritance in order to join the Mountain Sisters priestess-hood. According to their laws, once she enters the temple she will never marry nor rule, so another must take her place.”

Ambrosi exchanged a look with Tala. After months of silence, their father was finally addressing the succession problem. There were no male heirs, no other family lines to steal the crown; just Tala or Ambrosi. The second eldest or the youngest; one who didn’t care about ruling, and another who wanted it more than anything.

Ambrosi stared up at the headpiece resting on her father’s brow. It glowed like a miniature sun in the firelight, illuminating the feast hall. The air felt so thick Ambrosi couldn’t get it into her lungs. She swallowed again, but all she tasted was garlic and the barest hint of honey.

“My daughters Princess Tala and Princess Ambrosi have shown their characters a thousand times over,” Agaman said. “Princess Tala is kind and well-read. Ambrosi is fierce and determined. Both are loyal to our clan and have been raised to carry on our line. I am honored that *they* remain obedient to me—” Brita pursed her lips. “—and know they shall be suitable supporters of my heir.”

The words ran down Ambrosi’s spine like lightning. She sat ramrod straight in shock. Tala’s eyebrows had vanished into her hairline.

Supporters?

“The Altala clan will not survive under weak leadership,” Agaman continued, ignoring the ripples of confusion throughout the hall. “While my daughters have proved themselves, they remain the weaker sex. My rule will not end for many years, and I will

not give up hope for a son to reign in my stead while there is still breath in me. As such, I have gathered you here to announce my marriage to Lady Nestra of the Lowlands. For generations, our peoples have been entwined in bloodshed, but now they will be united in an unbreakable alliance. Altala will not only rule the peaks of the Spine Backs, but the valleys as well. Raise your glasses, men, for tonight we celebrate not only a union of people, but my future son as well.”

He lifted his cup. The crowd rippled as soldiers, counselors, and servants lifted their wine and cheered. Liquid sloshed as a toast was declared, and Agaman laughed as the feast whipped into a frenzy of celebration.

Ambrosi did not laugh, nor smile. Her hands remained clenched to the edge of the table as she stared at her father in betrayal.

He’d told her he was proud. He’d looked at her so honestly, with affection rarer than gold. But even after risking her life, she’d still never be what he wanted. If she were his son, Ambrosi knew she’d have his favor, but all the valor in the world didn’t count for anything since she wasn’t.

The pocket of his chuba sagged with the weight of the vial she’d given him. She wanted nothing more than to take it back and smash it against the ground, but all she could do was seethe.

CHAPTER FIVE

“This is outrageous!” Ambrosi said, once they were back in Brita’s room.

“It’s politics,” Tala replied.

Ambrosi whirled on her. “It’s pathetic, two-faced, and *illegal*.”

Brita scoffed by the vanity, hands full as she painstakingly removed the jewelry she’d been drowning in. “You’re the only one that thinks so, scab.”

“Me and everyone who leaves offerings to the Goddess.” Ambrosi said.

Brita carelessly tossed an earring onto the tabletop. “My point exactly.”

Tala rubbed her temples. “Very funny, Brita, the other Mountain Sisters will love you.”

“I try,” Brita smirked.

“The least you could do is care about this,” Ambrosi said, temper continuing to rise. “You’re going to be a priestess. Start acting like one, or I’ll tell Calips to disavow you.”

“That dotty old woman would never,” Brita said. “Just because you were raised by her doesn’t give you the run of the temple.”

Ambrosi threw a hairpin at her sister. It bounced off the mirror with a sharp ping. Brita scowled and began to march over. Tala stepped between them.

“Enough! This is no time for fighting,” she said. “Father has made his decision. It’s not our place to question it.”

“Yes it *is*,” Ambrosi said, angry and petulant and *hurt*. “This is our mountain too. He doesn’t get to decide everything for us, especially when it involves bringing a *Lowlander* up here.”

Lowlanders were strange, pale nomads who pitched in tents and rode horses. Ambrosi assumed that meant they were very short people, since the mountain ponies were barely taller than she was. But small or not, Lowlanders were vicious savages; they rejected the Mountain Sister and worshiped the trench fog, singing wan melodies from within low-hanging clouds and drifting from valley to valley.

There was no love lost between their peoples. Altalans built in marble to last an eternity, and Lowlanders did not build at all. They’d been at war for longer than anyone could remember. The current peace was only because Agaman had slaughtered most of their royal family twenty years ago. Last Ambrosi had heard, Lady Nesta was the only survivor.

“Why does Father want to marry her, anyway?” Ambrosi asked. She kicked off her shoes and threw her outer robe on the floor.

“Because Lowlander or not, she’s as beautiful as a goddess,” Brita said, as she wiped the paint off her face. “It’s all anyone who crawls out of the trenches can talk about. ‘Lady Nesta, the fairest of them all.’ Father can’t marry within our clan without favoring one house too greatly, so why not pursue a foreign prize?”

“I don’t like it,” Ambrosi said. “It’s *wrong*.”

The window pane rattled from the wind. A small breeze slipped inside and nearly blew out the candles.

“You’re just jealous,” Brita said. “For someone who never even met your mother, you’re very attached to her memory.”

“Shut up!” Ambrosi’s voice echoed off the walls. If she’d had any more hairpins to throw, she would have aimed them at Brita’s eyes. “You don’t get to talk about her.”

Helena was a ghost that haunted the castle. Ambrosi hated that she would never have real memories of her, and that Brita *did*, and that she held them over her just out of reach, and only to cause hurt.

“Brosi, she’s sorry, calm down,” Tala began, trying to make things better. She was *always* trying to make things better. “Helena was dear to us too. Let’s talk about this.”

“Yeah, scab, let’s talk.” Brita did not look sorry. She looked like she always did when she landed a verbal blow to Ambrosi— vindictive with triumph and electric with glee. At that moment, Ambrosi loathed her more than Father. “Why don’t you tell Tala how bad an Anax you think she’d make, and which policies you want to overturn when *you’re* wearing the crown. Educate us, since you’re so much better than we’ll ever be.”

“I hate you both,” Ambrosi said. She wanted to break things and scream, trade even worse words until they were all bleeding, but Brita would enjoy that too, and Ambrosi couldn’t take any more of her glee without losing control. “I hope the Jack Jaws sting both of you until you bloat.”

She left and slammed the door behind her, drowning out Tala’s calls with her own footsteps.

Castle Virita was a fortress detached from the rest of the world. Ambrosi made it her mission to explore all its halls when she was brought to it. She was an expert at

disappearing into its corners and small enough to hide well enough that even her rest-colored hair wasn't noticed. Often, when she was upset, she ascended the stairs of the north tower and stared out its skylight at the stars. But tonight she didn't go there, where there was a chance Tala could find her. There was only one place Ambrosi felt truly safe, and it was not in the castle's walls.

Her bare feet pounded on the cold marble. Ambrosi's hair was a river of rust as she flew downstairs, past guards, and through windswept halls. The wires she'd twisted into her curls chimed like bells as she entered the kitchens. Ambrosi wove between toiling servants, dodging collisions until she reached the gate she and her sisters used so recently.

She unbolted the latch, and fled, vanishing into the rising mist of night, and left her sisters far behind.

CHAPTER SIX

Calips' private chambers were unlike anywhere else in the Mountain Sisters' temple. Thick, scarlet fabric hung off the walls, glinting with gold embroidery and hidden symbols. A fire burned in the center of the room, trapped in a sunken hearth built into the floor. Calips was so old that without constant fire the cold froze her into a stiff knot. She needed heat like others needed air.

Ambrosi sat near the fire, hands wrapped around her knees as she glared into its coals. Calips lifted a kettle off the spit and poured the steaming water into two ceramic cups. The tea leaves swirled like little eddies.

"There, now it just needs to steep," Calips said. "Perhaps it will improve your mood."

"Not this tea," Ambrosi grumbled into her knees. "You're feeding me *licorice*."

"Yes. It is a delicacy."

"It tastes slimy."

Calips shook her head and replaced the kettle over the fire. "One of these days you'll learn to love it. Now, while we wait, perhaps you can tell me what has you in such a fuss."

Ambrosi glared harder at the fire. She'd appeared on the temple steps late last night, out of breath and red eyed, and demanded Calips let her stay the night. Calips had without question, but Ambrosi's respite was over.

"Father is getting married again," she muttered.

“Ah,” Calips said, “I wondered when he’d make the announcement.”

Ambrosi’s head jerked up as Calips disturbed the embers with a fire poker. “You knew?”

“Of course. He wanted me to officiate the ceremony,” Calips replied. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, bracelets clacking. Her hair was as thin as spiderwebs and her body was hunched with age, twisted over itself as time crept into her bones. Her finery highlighted the deep wrinkles in her bronze skin, and the yellow glint of her teeth. “I refused, of course. He’s already had his three wives, but he may force my hand soon regardless.”

The three bride rule was an old law, but still an important one. Each person could marry only three times. It didn’t matter if it was all at once or spread out over a lifetime, the number was not to be exceeded, but Lady Nestra would be bride number four.

The room was already smothering, but now it was suffocating.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why was I the last one to find out?” Ambrosi demanded.

“You and the rest of the clan, Honeybee. You were hardly the last,” Calips said. “Besides, it wasn’t my privilege to gossip about your father’s affairs.”

“But it’s *me*. You always tell me things,” Ambrosi said. It wasn’t a whine, more of a plea.

Calips had raised Ambrosi for eight years. While Ambrosi’s sisters grew up in the castle taking lessons on trade and politics, Ambrosi had swept the temple steps and

learned the old ways from the priestesses—well, what they were allowed to share with her, at least, but Ambrosi never forgot their lessons. That had to count for something.

“When your father took you back, I stopped being so candid with you. You know this, princess. It is the price you must pay to wear that crown. Now, drink your tea.”

Ambrosi did with an irritable gulp. Anise and licorice coated her tongue like a grudge. “I don’t know why he bothered to bring me back. He doesn’t want me.”

“If he’d waited any longer to do so, he’d have lost his claim on you and been short an heir. The royal family is too thin for him to afford that,” Calips reminded her. “Hence his remarriage.”

Ambrosi set her cup down with a loud clink. “He doesn’t need a son. I’m right here.”

Calips sipped her tea. A strand of steam rose and disappeared into the air. The room was heavy with a hundred cups just like it. “He needs more children, Honeybee. Even if he doesn’t believe in your family’s favor from the gods, blood is above all. It is not only about the crown, but your family’s survival.”

Ambrosi scowled and shook her head. Tangled ringlets hung past her shoulders, uncombed since the night before. Delicate wires were still twisted in her mane. “We’re strong, we can survive everything. I’ll make sure of it.”

The fire spat sparks. They glowed sun-bright in the dim room, reflecting off Calips’ dark eyes. “That’s an arrogant belief, princess. Best be careful who you tell it to.”

“Why? I’d make a great Anax,” Ambrosi said.

For as long as she'd lived in Castle Virita, she'd wanted to be its ruler. With the crown, nobody could force her to do anything she didn't want. Becoming Anax didn't only mean power. It was freedom.

"And what would you do if you were Anax, Honeybee?" Calips said, voice measured. "If you had that kind of power, how would Anax Ambrosi spend it?"

Ambrosi traced her finger over the rim of her teacup. Despite the room's humidity, her lips were dry. "That's simple. I'd fund the temple again. Everyone would be required to bring offerings to the Goddess, festivals would be reinstated, and we'd send runners to the Delfi again. I'd make things go back to the way they used to be."

Decades ago, Altala had been one of the most pious clans there was. It was the reason Helena of Sparti married Agaman; she'd been a devout follower of the Mountain Deities, and she'd been just as enamored by Altala's temple as she was by her husband's ardent love. However, once she died Agaman had denounced the gods, cut off relations with the Sparti, and abandoned Ambrosi, his sickly newborn daughter, on the temple steps. He hated the gods now and was doing everything to drive them from his halls.

"Time does not go backward," Calips said evenly. "No matter how hard we wish, it will only go in one direction."

"I know *that*," Ambrosi grumbled.

Ambrosi understood that time and culture changed, but the way her father ruthlessly attacked at her childhood home was painful as well as scary. Her memories of the temple were the best ones she had. How much could he take away before nothing was left?

Calips sighed and refilled her teacup, then set it to steep again. “You are so much like your father. I remember him at your age. He was much the same as you are now; precocious, angry, overlooked.”

“Such words of charity,” Ambrosi muttered. “I’m honored.”

The head priestess chuckled. “He was the youngest as well, but eventually seized his chance to rule. It required great cleverness and much luck.”

“I’ve already heard this story,” Ambrosi said. “What does it have to do with anything?”

Ambrosi’s Grandfather, Anax Atreus, went mad and murdered all his heirs; every son, daughter, sister, brother. All except Agaman, her father, who fled to the southern peaks. When he returned with an army, he killed Atreus and put the Samadhi crown on his own brow, still wet with his father’s blood. His was an inheritance of violence, where power was taken, not given, and Agaman always took what he wanted.

“It matters because despite his position, I still can only see your father as the petulant boy he used to be,” Calips replied. “He always hated not getting his way, but he used to be cleverer about pursuing his desires. Now that cunning has atrophied. His brow is rotting under that crown.”

“Careful,” Ambrosi frowned. “He won’t like that you said that.”

People who spoke badly about the Anax were severely punished. Father was even tempered until he was slighted. When he got mad, mercy was a forgotten word.

Calips chuffed. “Even he cannot get away with harming the head priestess yet. I will be fine.”

Yet. Ambrosi didn't like that word.

"Do you think he will, someday?" Ambrosi asked.

The head priestess took another draft of tea and considered the question.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I'm not the Delfi. I haven't been blessed with prophecy. Only time will tell."

Ambrosi threw a stick into the fire. "I hate waiting."

"Yes, that has always been apparent, but knowing *when* to speak is just as important as what words you say. Your father, for all his stubbornness, can get away with marrying this Lowland woman now, but it would have been impossible ten years ago. People think much less of tradition now."

"Is that why he waited this long to do this? Has he been planning it from the start?" Ambrosi gripped her teacup so hard her nails scratched the ceramic.

"No, your father isn't doing this because of his grand designs for a new age." Calips said. "He is doing it because he is a coward."

Ambrosi felt as if she had been slapped. "Anax Agaman, a coward?"

He was a man of warfare and strife. He'd killed his father for the throne, expanded their reign over two more peaks, and dominated their mountains with an iron fist. Everyone who touched their borders was wary of his army, and he could quiet a room with just a glance.

"Yes. Tragedy has turned him into one." Calips sipped her tea and sighed. "When he met your mother, he had just lost Ladies Naii and Tooni to illness. He needed a new wife to bear him a son, and Anax Damas of the Sparti promised him a suitable woman

from his court. Instead, your father fell in love with Damas' daughter and begged for her hand. I have never seen someone look at another with so much love. Not in all my years."

Calips stared into the fire, lost in memories. Her teacup was empty, but she made no move to refill it. "Love like that is dangerous, Honeybee. It consumes people, makes them dependent on it. When he lost your mother, that love soured and embittered him."

"I thought grief did that, not love," Ambrosi said.

"Love is ugly, Ambrosi," Calips said. "I am convinced that the vilest deeds are done in its name. Your father has let his harden his heart, and we are only starting to see the consequences of that. He's grown blind to the world around him. The gods have loved your family for a millennium, but I not know if that favor will continue with such blatant disrespect."

"Why bring this up?" Ambrosi said. "What does it all mean?"

She didn't want to think about her father that way. Agaman was so larger than life. It seemed impossible that just the memory of Helena had that much power over him. But was Ambrosi any different? She was haunted by her mother's ghost as well, except that hers was the ghost of a woman she had never met, rather than someone treasured beyond life itself.

"Whoever this Lowland Lady is, she is not his new love," Calips said. "At best, she is a distraction from truths he is unwilling to face. Anax Agaman is not thrusting us into a new age, he is fleeing the present one. You don't need to worry about Helena being forgotten, Ambrosi. You should concern yourself with the fact that she never will be."

The embers had almost burned out. It would soon be time to add a new log to the hearth. A bead of sweat rolled down Ambrosi's nose. It felt dark in here now, even though it was mid-morning.

"It seems you are out of tea," Calips said when Ambrosi didn't answer. "Did I finally convert you to my favorite blend?"

Ambrosi hadn't even noticed herself drinking it. Her tongue tasted like ash instead of licorice. "No, I don't think so, Calips."

"Well then, you will just need to come back another day to try it again," the head priestess said imperiously. "Now, I have given you much to think about. Go leave an offering by the statue of the Goddess and reflect on it. I will see you another day."

Ambrosi nodded and got to her feet and murmured goodbye to the woman who was a grandmother to her in all but name.

Once back in the temple's main sanctum, Ambrosi approached the shrine. It was an altar built around a statue of the Mountain Goddess, who stood stooped and shrouded, empty hands outstretched as if she were still proffering the Samadhi crown to Ambrosi's ancestor.

Ambrosi pulled one of the wires out of her hair. It was copper, with a small bead of sapphire dangling from the end. She placed it on the altar and looked up at the statue's face.

"I don't know if you're listening," she told it. "But if you are, help me, please."

The words felt like ash on her lips. Unsaid were the years Ambrosi had cleaned this altar, stood at its base and wondered if this was the Mountain Goddess's true appearance, and the following years as she fumbled for a life outside the temple's shelter.

"You kept me alive for a reason," Ambrosi continued, quietly enough that nobody else would hear. The temple was still empty this early, but it never hurt to be careful. "I know there's a purpose to my life, so help me understand what it is."

Ambrosi wanted. Oh, she wanted, even though it was wrong. It wasn't seemly for a girl to wish for more than she was allowed, but Ambrosi was greedy. She wanted greatness all the same.

The statue did not answer, and no spontaneous wisdom graced her mind. The smell of incense and stone was her only companion, and at length Ambrosi turned her back on the statue, unsure if she'd expected an answer at all.

The outside air was cool. It wicked the sweat off her face in an instant, smelling like pine and juniper.

The temple of the Mountain Sister was a thing of beauty, built during an era when aesthetics meant more than fortifications. Ornate friezes and fluted columns were carved out of marble, highlighting the crisp lines and angles of the building. Inside was a maze of meander patterns and tapestries only the initiates knew the meaning of. However, to Ambrosi, the most beautiful part of the temple would always be its engineering; despite its crispness, there wasn't a single straight line in its design. Calips told Ambrosi it was because nothing was rigid in nature, so the temple—and offering to the gods—shouldn't

be either. As such, the building curved as well, so subtly it was almost impossible to notice.

Ambrosi gazed down at her country from the temple's top step, soaking in the jagged peaks, red stone, and misty trenches that spread across the horizon like a tapestry. It was so vast that she couldn't see the end of it.

It was just as overwhelming as everything Calips had told her. Ambrosi didn't know what to do with these new revelations, or how they'd help her current predicament. All they left her was conflicted.

She'd lied to Calips a little bit. She didn't want the crown just to restore the temple; she wanted to be free and the only way to do that was to be the one who made the rules. All her life, somebody had her under their thumb; guardians, sisters, her father. Each one dictated who she could be and what she could do. Unless she broke free, Ambrosi would always be just the scab underfoot, never taken seriously, and the butt of Brita's barbs.

Now freedom was looking unlikelier than ever, and apparently it was all because her father was too much of a coward to acknowledge anything other than his delusions.

Another breeze blew past. This time, it carried a sound. A soft buzzing, almost sinister in nature.

Ambrosi looked up. In the eaves of a column, a small hornet's nest was hidden. It crawled with late-summer insects.

Jack-Jaws, dozens of them, hidden in plain sight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Throughout the following days, Ambrosi missed the temple. It was a simple place built on rituals. Time there passed slowly, without the disruption of politics or family strife.

Castle Virita was the opposite. It was a buzz of activity as preparations were made to welcome Lady Nesta into their halls. Servants scurried from room to room, airing out unused chambers while councilmen requested details on the engagement from Agaman.

Ambrosi loathed hearing about the Lowlander woman, but she sat at her father's feet day after day regardless. She always attended his meetings, determined to learn all she could about how he ruled, and even the sting of betrayal would not make her stop. Because of that, Ambrosi knew more about Lady Nesta than either of her sisters.

Lady Nesta was the one who wanted marriage. She'd plied Agaman with gifts for months, sending messenger after messenger through the trenches with honey, woven scarves, and poems. She was the one who proffered peace between their people and promised him heirs. Lady Nesta had spoken of creating a clan that spread from the tallest peaks to the lowest valley, mightier than all others in the Spine Backs. It didn't matter that she was from a minor clan conquered by the Viritas over twenty years ago, or that the path through the trenches meant half her messengers died en route. The offered treaty between the two lands (unification instead of subjugation, added resources, increased tax revenues) was simply an added bonus.

“It’s all good politics,” Brita said when Ambrosi relayed this, “but don’t be fooled. Father is only marrying her because she is beautiful.”

“He’s not that foolish,” Tala said. “It’s a sensible match. Even Councilman Ibas says so.”

The three of them were laying on the floor of the East tower, stargazing. The night sky was clear and twinkling. Sparti’s distant peak was a jagged cut on the horizon, harsh and silhouetted against the cosmos, separated from Virita by a deep maze of ravines, runoffs, and snow melt that made up the notorious trenches. The path to Sparti was so deadly that traders took a month-long detour to avoid them. Only foolhardy, desperate people went that way. Or the strong, if the Sparti were to be believed, but their clan could *only* be reached by traversing Altala’s labyrinth, not the higher mountain paths.

“It’s *not* sensible,” Ambrosi said. “It’s foolish.”

Brita tugged Ambrosi’s loose hair. “We can quibble, but just remember what I said. Men like pretty things, and Father is no exception. It’s why he married all of our mothers. Why should Nesta be an exception?”

“He married Helena because he loved her,” Ambrosi said. “It was a love story of the ages. You told me so.”

“Yes he loved her, but she was also pretty,” Tala said. “Those tapestries don’t do her justice.”

Ambrosi scowled. Romance made her uncomfortable. Meleus’ hooded eyes and lingering looks burned on her skin at the mere thought.

“What do you think the future will be like?” Brita asked.

“What do you mean?” Tala asked.

“I mean with Father’s new age, things will change,” Brita said impatiently. “Virita will change. I just don’t know how.”

Tala hummed, her voice a lullaby as she gathered her thoughts, though Ambrosi couldn’t parse out a tune.

“I think it will be good,” Tala said. “Father is right. We’ve become trapped by the past. We’re not our ancestors. We should be free to make our own choices.”

“Right, but what choices are those?” Brita said.

“You’d know if you went to the council sessions,” Ambrosi said. “I’m not excited.”

She didn’t like change. Every upheaval in her life made things go from bad to worse; she didn’t trust this one to be any different.

Brita leaned over and whacked her lightly on the head. “Perks of leaving that behind, scab, is that I don’t have to both with politics anymore.”

“He wants to get rid of obsolete laws, silly customs, things nobody will miss,” Tala said to Brita.

Ambrosi clenched her jaw, tracing the Scorpius constellation with her eyes.

“Some of them are important, Tal. Like the Temple days.”

“Nobody goes to them,” Tala said. “That speaks for itself.”

“Only because Father stops them,” Ambrosi muttered.

People pretended temple attendance faded because of lack of interest, but Ambrosi remembered living with the Mountain Sisters, hands fisted into Calips’ chuba as

soldiers blocked the roads on temple days and demanded higher tributes on her own father's orders. Laws were passed limiting holidays, offerings were restricted to the wealthy class, and the number of priestesses was capped. Agaman had spent years tearing the temple down in all ways but literal.

"Why is he doing this?"

"Because he hates," Calips said, "and people who let anger rule will do terrible things to feed it."

Agaman thought the gods killed Helena, so he was killing them in return, with a slow strangulation and a crumbling temple. At the rate he was going, Brita would only be a Mountain Sister for a few years before she had to either forsake her vows or pilgrim to another clan's temple. Her vows might slow the closure down, but Ambrosi doubted it would forestall it for long.

"Just because you care about stuffy statues doesn't mean everyone else does," Brita said. "You're always harping about those old laws, but some things need to end. That's how progress is made."

"Calips says new ideas are just as dangerous as old ones," Ambrosi countered. "The trouble comes when people place all their hope on an easy fix."

Change was good. It could do so much. Ambrosi knew if she were Anax, she would change so many things. But Father had a look in his eyes, a manic focus on this "perfect world" he wanted to shepherd in. It made her uneasy because, like everything Agaman did, he would raze all else to the ground to achieve it, cutting off the nose to spite the face.

“I’m just glad I won’t be here soon.” Brita said. She lifted a hand, as if to grab the stars. “I’ll say my vows on the next full moon, then it’s goodbye. Father can’t touch me after that.”

“And then it’ll be on us to get married,” Tala said, subdued. “Ambrosi and I.”

“He won’t sell us. That’s what this marriage with the Lowlander is for,” Ambrosi said. “Nestra will give him heirs. We’ll be safe from suitors.”

Neither of her sisters said anything. Tala looked sad.

Ambrosi rolled onto her side and ignored them. It was true; there’d be no need to sell them now, especially after what Brita did. There wouldn’t be many men willing to try for their hands if the risk of a runaway bride spread through their entire family.

“If we’re lucky, the change will be good,” Tala said. “But if not, I hope your time with the Sisterhood is full of grace, Brita.”

There wasn’t much else to say. All they could do was lay in silence until they left the tower.

The conversation lingered between them, a thousand other words left unspoken. Ambrosi put it to the side, too weighed down with her own worries to pay it any mind.

Ambrosi had hoped that the court would push back against Father’s marriage, but they were in favor. Only a few of the oldest councilmen muttered that it was against their tradition.

“Anax Agaman is right, times are changing,” Councilman Ibas had said at dinner the other night. “We should look to the future, not our sordid past.”

Ambrosi dug her nails into her palms, and wished people would stop saying that. Her whole life, she'd held onto the tenets of the temple and the traditions of her forefathers, and now people were throwing them away.

Were they actually precious if they were so easy to throw away? Was there any point in following the three-bride rule if breaking it made the family stronger. Ambrosi was plagued with questions, but there was nobody she could go to for an honest answer. Father hated the temple, and Calips spoke in riddles. Both were entrenched in their beliefs, and the court bent under the force of their personalities. Ambrosi was left to make her own opinions.

Lady Nesta would arrive in a month, and the wedding would take place on the autumnal equinox, barely a week later. Ambrosi had that long to reconcile her feelings and stem the sting of betrayal from her father. A month did not feel long at all.

Ambrosi was drowning in the castle, so she escaped it as often as she could. She skipped her lessons and stole food from the kitchens, making herself as scarce as Madness Honey. She only reappeared during council meetings, where she curled at her father's feet and listened to the debates and policies of Virita's court.

So far, Agaman hadn't confronted her on her absences from her tutors. Ambrosi wondered if he even knew she was skipping them. How much attention he paid her when she was out of his sight was a mystery. It wasn't like the lessons were useful; they were things like how to weave tapestries or talk politely. Womanly skills and manners, neither

of which Ambrosi cared for. Had she been a boy, sent to the gymnasium to wrestle and fight, it would have been different, but she had no patience for manners.

When she should have been in class, Ambrosi isolated herself on the slopes south of the castle and ran among the goats. Sweeping inclines of golden grass rolled down the mountain, interspersed with plateaus where shepherd huts perched. Ambrosi chased goat kids down the hills until her arms were scratched from braking against outcropping rocks. The beehives were a half-hour walk west, so she wasn't worried about vengeful shepherds setting their dogs on her.

Out there, she could let go of her worries and be just Ambrosi. Not a princess, not a girl raised by priestesses in a dying temple, not the scab or the youngest child. Just her. She climbed sheer walls, ran through freezing streams, and shouted conversations to her echo, reveling in the joy of being alone. Going home to stifling expectations and bickering sisters was only done with reluctance. On some days, Ambrosi eyed the trenches with envy.

Altala's labyrinth splayed out beneath her, a maze of shifting rocks obscured by fog. It wrapped around each mountain, isolating each clan from one another. There were bridges here and there, carefully guarded, so traders could bring their mules over the labyrinth instead of through it. Pieces of the maze crept up toward cities, while others petered down into the deep valleys below. Ambrosi's tutors said the maze was cut out of the rock by snowmelt, and got bigger every year, but Calips said it was made by the gods. There was a story behind it, just like with the Samadhi crown. But she never told Ambrosi what it was. *"Unless you wear our sash, princess, you never will."*

As always, the mystery rankled Ambrosi. She didn't like not knowing things, and something about the trenches made her wary. She knew there was magic in the mist, but she didn't know what it did. All she knew, was that it watched her, day in and day out. Lurking on the edge of her vision, an ominous cloud of mist, just out of reach.

She hoped that was all it would do; watch, and stay far, far below where it could reach her.

Three weeks after Agaman's engagement was announced, the air was tinged with frost. Ambrosi chased the cold away by chasing goat kids again. Her shoes were caked in red dust, and her chuba lay discarded on the ground, held down from the wind by a few scattered rocks. It was chilly today, but Ambrosi relished the air on her skin, and the texture of goat hair on her arms as she lifted one of the smallest kids up.

"It's a good thing you're up here and not by the trenches," she told it. "You're the perfect size for a Largess to snap up."

It bleated back at her, stupid and dumb. Lucky creature. All it had to worry about was staying fed and warm. Whatever politics the goats had weren't as all-encompassing as Ambrosi's woes.

Ambrosi let it go and watched it run back to its mother, awkward and wobbly legged. It was endearing. Ambrosi wished she'd been able to be like that as a child. There hadn't been much time for games when there were shrines to be swept and braziers rekindled.

She sat on a ledge and squinted down at the trenches hundreds of feet below. While the peaks were all sheer cliffs and sweeping vistas, the maze was a labyrinth of

runoffs and warped stone buried under layers of endless fog. Sometimes when Ambrosi snuck out she followed the moat to its outlet and stared into the barren void. There was a weight to the fog unique to the trenches; like it was the bated breath of a monster. Perhaps a Largess? Those strange, half wolf, half serpentine creatures were the bane of the shepherds. They were why so few people lived near the trenches; they were always hungry, and disturbingly clever.

Today the mist was thin. Ambrosi saw the scoured passageways from her vantage point, all jagged rock and muddy terrain, like a dirty mouth that wanted to swallow her whole. Ambrosi glared back at it.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

The mist did not answer, obviously. But Ambrosi wasn’t convinced it couldn’t hear her. Calips said that Ambrosi was not to dwell on the strange fog that hung in the trenches. “*Let the Lowlanders worry about things close to the ground,*” she would say, because Altala’s sect honored the high peaks, not the lower plateaus—but Ambrosi felt drawn to it all the same.

She wondered what secrets the trenches held. Strange things happened in the maze of rocks, where monsters dwelt. Corridors shifted, travelers whispered of ghosts haunting them on their journeys, and the plants in its depths grew twisted and strange. Father liked to pretend the gods had long abandoned the mortal realm, but every time Ambrosi heard people whisper about the trenches, she knew he was wrong.

“One of these days, I’ll figure you out,” Ambrosi told the fog. If it heard her, it made no reply. But no matter. The Goddess hadn’t answered her, she didn’t expect a lump of stones to either.

Ambrosi turned to go, when a glint of metal caught her eye. She squinted at the trenches again, and took in a sharp breath when she saw it again; a flash, bright white and yellow like the sun.

She shadowed her eyes with the palm of her hand. She wasn’t imagining it; something was moving in the trenches. A lot of somethings; dots that could be people, glinting with the dull sheen of metal in the sun, and the shuffle of pack animals.

Her stomach flipped; *A caravan.*

Ambrosi ran so fast she doubted her feet touched the ground. Her lungs screamed for air as her heart pumped so hard she felt it as if it would burst.

She flew through the Lower-town, barely taking in the bright cloth banners hanging from each window or the silver bells nailed to each doorway. Ambrosi hissed as she scrambled up endless staircases, using her hands to go faster. Her palms scraped again and her torn fingernail burned.

All too soon, she was at the gates, colliding with one of the sentries.

“Princess, there you are,” he said. “Your sister was requesting—”

“There’s no time, Frel,” she gasped, fishing his name out of her memory.

“They’re here!”

The man blinked, then glanced around the gates. “Who?”

“The Lowlanders—their caravan is almost out of the trenches,” Ambrosi said.
“They’ll be here in a matter of hours.”

Frel muttered a curse that would curdle milk. “They’re early. *Weeks* early. I will notify the guards immediately. You—”

“I don’t answer to you,” Ambrosi snapped. “Now move. I need to see my father.”

Frel lifted his hands and backed away.

Ambrosi let the castle swallow her as she ran to the throne room, all thoughts bent on the fact that Lady Nestra was here.

To put it bluntly, Father was not pleased his new bride was early. There were preparations still being made for her arrival, and he was loath to welcome anyone into a court that did not appear at its best.

All the same, he placed a weather-worn hand on Ambrosi’s shoulder, and thanked her for notifying him of the caravan’s arrival before the castle sentries. The praise made Ambrosi stand straighter, and she didn’t even complain when he ordered her to get herself presentable for Lady Nestra.

“I’m dressed like a Lowlander already,” she said, jutting her chin. “She’ll think I’m a familiar face.”

Her father barked a laugh. “They are not as uncivilized as your tutors led you to believe, daughter. Now go, before your jests become irksome.”

She rolled her eyes and left, glad he had been alone when she found him. She didn’t have to mind her manners as much when others weren’t watching.

Ambrosi found her sisters in the weaving room, and dragged them to the baths with her. They barely had time to scrub themselves clean in tepid, unheated water before rushing to the courtyard.

“Sometimes, I wish we lived somewhere with fewer stairs,” Brita said as they ran down the steps. “I’m going to fall and break my neck.”

“Please do,” Ambrosi said. “You’d do us all a favor.”

Tala sighed.

They arrived in the courtyard before the caravan. The three sisters found their places at Agaman’s side. Tala smoothed her hair as she got into place, keeping Ambrosi close.

“I’m surprised you’re doing her the courtesy of greeting her at the gates,” Brita murmured to Father. “How gallant.”

“Unlike some, I treat my intended with respect.” Agaman replied, his words clipped.

Tala squeezed Ambrosi’s shoulders tighter. The two of them stayed silent; they were between Brita and Agaman, and it wasn’t a comfortable place to be.

The drawbridge had been lowered beforehand, its thick timbers freshly polished in preparation for winter. The clatter of hooves on wood caused Ambrosi’s head to jerk up, and her eyes widened when she saw the creatures her new mother rode in on.

The Virita clan had horses, of course, but they were small, burly creatures built to survive the high climate. Few people rode them, as they were beasts of burden. The two dozen the Lowlanders brought were taller than Brita and bitted with leather, teeth large

and brick-like. Metal shod their hooves and each of their steps cracked the ground like hammers.

The caravan was at least a hundred men, dressed in heavy chubas with meander patterns stitched onto the hems. The fabric was all gray, varying from muted charcoals to pale, cloudy hues. Their waists were girded with heavy metal loops, and they were armed with spears, swords, and crossbows.

It was not the ragged, barbaric picture of the Lowlanders Ambrosi had painted in her head. They were travel worn, yes, but dressed well, and none of the men wore beards. But all of them paled to Lady Nestra.

The first thing Ambrosi noticed about her was that she was tall.

Tall and pale, like a marble pillar. She rode a massive horse, and sat with graceful poise, covered by a wool cloak that draped down her body like a waterfall. Her hair, plaited against her head, shimmered like water in sunlight. Although her face was thin, it wasn't horselike. Even at a distance, Ambrosi knew each rumor of Nestra's beauty had been true. She was the most beautiful woman she'd even seen.

Ambrosi looked up at her father, and saw a gleam of hunger in his eyes. The same Meleus had when he'd grabbed Ambrosi at the feast all those weeks ago.

The Lowlanders halted their steeds at the edge of the courtyard. Their animals brayed as Virita soldiers looked on at the spectacle. An entire contingent lined the parapets and Father's personal guards ringed the courtyard itself. Ambrosi noticed a few Lowlanders put hands on their weapons, although they made no move to draw them.

Lady Nesta did not share their nervousness. Her horse ambled to the base of the steps, followed by another, smaller animal ridden by a pale man. When she stopped, he dismounted and lifted her from the horse. Her feet touched the ground, yet she seemed scarcely shorter than she'd been on the horse.

She looked at them, a coy smile breaking across her face. It transformed the statuesque lines of her face into something joyful and warm.

"My lord," she said to Father, "you honor me with your presence."

With a daring that left Tala taking a sharp breath, Lady Nesta climbed the steps without waiting for permission. There was a ripple of surprise among everyone present, but Agaman did not signal for intervention.

Ambrosi's first introduction to her stepmother was the woman bowing at Agaman's feet and taking his hand in hers to kiss.

"You are early," he told her, amused.

"I could not wait a moment longer," she replied. "This day has been so long coming, after all."

Agaman laughed. He traced his finger across her lips while Nesta remained kneeling. "You are a wild thing, just like your letters. Let's pray civilization does not take that spark from you, my lady."

He let her rise, and Ambrosi was surprised to see that Nesta was taller than him. If Agaman were a juniper tree, gnarled from years in the wind, she was an aspen stretching toward the sky.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," she said, "but my people do not pray."

“Then we are in agreement over the gods,” Agaman said. “There is no need to pray to those who will not listen.”

Ambrosi bit her cheek, but her face still showed what she thought of *that*.

“Come, let me introduce you to my daughters,” Agaman said. He walked Nestra to them. “Princesses Brita, Tala, and Ambrosi. You’ll find them as unruly as yourself, Ambrosi most of all.”

“A pleasure.” The smile Nestra gave them was all charm and happiness. “You seem to be such darling things. I’m sure we will get along very well.”

Ambrosi pressed her back into Tala and did not return the greeting. She was imagining Father unwrapping Nestra from her robes and pushing her onto his furs. She was a beautiful woman. Ambrosi did not know if she was prettier than Helena had been, but that hardly mattered. Helena was dead, which made it an easy contest for Nestra to win.

Calips had said Agaman was marrying Nestra to run from his grief. Ambrosi hadn’t thought that was possible, but looking up at the woman who would be her stepmother, she could see how one could drown in those eyes.

With her here, the memories of Helena, and any connection Ambrosi had with her mother, would fade like fog in sunshine, leaving nothing but ghosts behind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The welcome was a long, arduous affair. Ambrosi wished she wasn't there. Nestra had flouted the traditional greetings in her haste to kiss Agaman's hand, but propriety still had to be maintained. The man who'd helped her off her horse—Aegis, her personal guard—read aloud the engagement to the courtyard to witness. Ambrosi fidgeted as he recited vows of peace and named the dowry Agaman paid for Nestra's hand.

Tala's grip on her shoulders remained firm, keeping her in place. That was all Tala was good at; staying in line and making Ambrosi do the same.

By the time it was over, the sun was dipping toward the trenches, its light a brilliant gold. It painted the courtyard as if it were stained-glass, and made the shadows all the darker.

"It is late, my lady," Agaman said, as a cool breeze rustled the banners. "Let us continue these proceedings in my hall."

"It would be an honor. We are tired from our travels. Your hospitality is generous," Nestra said. "If I may entreat you, please allow my men the honor of lingering in Virita as well. These men are like my family. It is customary that they witness my marriage, and that is one tradition I will not part from. I am sure you understand the importance of family, Anax."

Father smiled, but it was without mirth. "You'll find Virita has a much different view on family than your valleys."

There was a tapestry in the Hall of Stories of the Atreus' massacre, weaving their line's bloody history into a permanent reminder of the price power was obtained. Agaman was better than his father, but he never let Ambrosi nor her sisters forget where they came from. That, ultimately, theirs was a family of conquerors, and victory came at a heavy cost.

"Even so, I would implore you that they stay," Nestra said, "as a wedding gift."

"They shall," Agaman said, "but there isn't room for a hundred men in my castle. They will live in the barracks with the other soldiers."

Ambrosi wrinkled her nose; if the Lowlanders smelled bad now, living in those sweaty bunks would make them stink. She would need to tell Nalii to hang more garlic in the barracks to drown out the stench.

"I'm impressed you brought so many with you," Tala said, eying the caravan. "Was it a hard journey through the trenches?"

"Very. We lost a dozen warriors to Largess," Nestra said. Her skin was covered in gooseflesh. "Our map did not last through the journey. The tunnels twisted into new shapes at night, and led us into a nest of vipers. We were not due to arrive here so early, but it seems the maze showed kindness on us."

Below the steps, the Lowlanders began unloading their horses, piling sacks of grain and furs onto the ground. The horses swayed with exhaustion, and the men looked warily at the high walls hemming them in. Many of their chubas were woven with silver beads, making them shimmer; there was almost no gold or iron. Just silver, endless silver. Strange.

“Blame your mapmakers,” Agaman said. “They gave you an incomplete scroll.”

“Oh, no, sire,” Nestra said. “Even if the gods have left us, the magic of the trenches is very real. If you don’t believe me, you must talk to my shaman about it. He is here to officiate the ceremony.”

Father’s face shuttered at the mention of a magic.

“You have a shaman?” Ambrosi asked. She stepped away from Tala and strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man. She’d never met one of those before. The only stories about them were cautionary tales about men driven mad by magic. However, the courtyard was too crowded to make out which of the Lowlanders Nestra was referring to, and none of them *looked* mad at first glance.

Nestra put her hands on her knees and leaned down to Ambrosi’s eye level. She was so tall that she was practically bent in half. “Yes, a powerful man who knows many spells. Perhaps I will introduce you.”

“Spells?” Ambrosi echoed. “People can’t cast spells.”

Magic was untamed. It twisted and hurt whoever used it, which was why only the gods could control it. Well, them and the Star-Touched, but nobody had seen one of them in a thousand years.

“We’ve forgotten how to use enchantments, but he’ll fix that for us. He’s dedicated his life to learning the secrets of the mist,” Nestra said. She straightened. “Now, the air grows chill. Let us retire for the night. We have much to discuss, husband of mine.”

Agaman gave Lady Nestra his arm and walked with her back into the castle. The hem of Nestra's chuba dragged on the ground, stained with trench dirt and red dust. It looked as if she were dripping blood.

"I don't like her," Ambrosi muttered to Tala.

Brita snorted. "You don't like anyone. She's perfectly nice."

"I think she's wonderful," Tala said. Her voice was quiet, as always, and too soft to be anything but gentle.

"She's stealing our inheritance from us," Ambrosi reminded them. At least, her child would be stealing from them.

"It doesn't matter who hates who," Brita said. "She changes nothing. Let Father have his trophy wife, I say. She won't ever see the crown on her head, and it's not like a Lowlander will last long here anyway."

"Play nice," Tala said. "Lowlander or not, she's family now."

"Not yet," Ambrosi muttered. "They still have to get married and consummate."

Privately, she'd been hoping the woman's entourage would be killed by Largess on their way up the mountain, but the gods hadn't heard her prayers.

"Don't be crude," Tala chided.

"I wasn't. Brita's the one who's crude. I was just—"

"Come on, scab," Brita said, nudging Ambrosi forward. "We can complain later. Nestra was right; it *is* cold, and I don't want to be out here past dark."

Ambrosi scowled, but followed her sisters inside.

She spared another glance at the Lowlanders milling in the courtyard, noticing again the amount of silver on their persons. It was an odd choice; silver was soft and elegant, a woman's metal. Iron would have been proper, but perhaps the Lowlands were different. Silver was the color of trench mist; Ambrosi wondered if to them it felt like home.

Lady Nesta was kind.

That surprised Ambrosi, who had a vision of a vain and savage woman intent on stealing her birthright. In all the stories of the Lowlanders she'd heard they were uncivilized people barely better than true trench folk, but that could not be farther from Nesta.

At dinner, she spoke to Ambrosi and her sisters with a warm smile and soft hugs, voice dripping with excitement. From a distance she seemed cold and statuesque, but up close she radiated easy charm and an amiable nature.

"I've always wanted daughters, and now I have three," she said, "fortune has smiled on me."

"Only two, I'm afraid," Tala said, looking as bewildered as Ambrosi felt. Daughters were not treasured; sons were what every family wanted.

"I leave for the Mountain Sisters in a fortnight," Brita explained, at Nesta's inquisitive face. "Once I do, my ties to the crown are void."

Agaman sawed a knife through a leg of goat with more force than required. Brita jutted her chin in challenge. Ambrosi leaned against the back of her chair and braced for another fight.

Nestra stopped that by taking Brita's hand. "Fear not, I will visit you. Even if you don't wear a crown, family is more than blood."

Brita stared at her in surprise. For a moment, her perpetual frown was gone, replaced with soft confusion.

Nestra turned to Ambrosi next. "So quiet, princess. Are you shy? Don't be, we will be wonderful friends. You look just like your father."

"I haven't heard that before," Ambrosi said. More often than not, she was compared with her mother. "You look strange, like unpolished marble."

"Brosi," Tala hissed.

"No, it's true," Nestra said with a smile. "I'm afraid there isn't much sunlight in the valleys, at least until summer. It has washed the color out of me."

"I heard that pale people don't have souls," Ambrosi said. "That's why you burn in the sun."

"Brosi, *manners*," Tala said again. "Lady Nestra, I truly am sorry."

"Nonsense, she's young," Nestra picked up her cup to sip from. "She'll learn one way or another."

Ambrosi glared up at her, suspicious. The easy forgiveness was strange. The lack of a scolding, even more so.

“I am delighted to get to know all of you,” Nestra told them. “I fear as I familiarize myself with this city I will be relying on your hospitality. Perhaps I can call on you to be my guides?”

“It would be our pleasure, Lady Nestra,” Tala said. Her shoulders were relaxed, and her smile genuine.

“*Your* pleasure,” Ambrosi muttered.

“If time permits, we can acquaint you with the castle,” Brita said. “It is easy to get lost in here.”

“Don’t tell her that,” Ambrosi said, poking Brita in the side. Castle Virita was a labyrinth of twisting corridors, and Ambrosi had been excited to watch Nestra fumble through hallways as if she were still in the trenches.

“I would love that, but it will depend on your lord father,” Nestra said, turning back to Agaman. “I’m sure he is anxious to speak with me regarding our marriage.”

“Hardly. Your early arrival changes little,” Agaman said. “Go with the princesses. I will speak with you in the morning.”

He dismissed them with a wave. The four of them bowed, and all too soon, dinner was over. Brita and Tala volunteered to show Nestra to her chambers.

Ambrosi followed slowly, lips pursed. She was troubled, but didn’t know why.

Nestra’s chambers were next door to Father’s. Ambrosi didn’t like to think about why. The only silver lining was that Ambrosi and her sisters’ rooms were far from the Lowlander’s, so they needn’t cross paths unless they wished.

The door was polished hardwood with flowers carved into it. It opened into a large, airy room tiled with red granite. The stone was veined with pink, white, and yellow, and cut into a myriad of patterns. Nestra ran her hands over the wall, humming with interest.

Tala flitted through the room, explaining each thing in it and giving commentary on the castle. Brita slipped out to find servants to help haul Nestra's belongings up from the courtyard. Ambrosi crawled into the window niche, back pressed against the stained-glass, and let her feet dangle above the floor. She watched Nestra's eyes widen when she looked at certain parts of the room, and felt her curiosity grow.

"I heard you don't have homes where you're from," Ambrosi said. "Is that true?"

"Manners," Tala said with an air of exhaustion.

Nestra smiled. "All is forgiven. My homeland is... less stable than your mountain peaks. Whatever we build crumbles within a generation because the ground shifts and breaks apart so often. There are no grand temples or illustrious palaces, but it is beautiful nonetheless. I have lived in many places and seen vistas unlike anything here."

"My father says the weak earth is why you never became strong enough to defend yourselves," Ambrosi said, offended at the idea that anywhere could be more beautiful than Altala. "You're too concerned with surviving to build anything worthwhile."

Ambrosi had heard of the instability of the Lowlands. Its air was thicker and the resources more plentiful, but the landslides and floods sounded worse than the trenches. Ambrosi wondered why anyone bothered to live there.

“We have many stories of you as well,” Nesta said in a voice that was not complementary.

Ambrosi bristled, reminded of Brita’s condescending remarks. She could hear the unspoken barb in Nesta’s voice. But before Ambrosi could reply, Brita glided back into the room as if summoned by Ambrosi’s thoughts.

Brita had replaced her formal chuba with an undyed, work one that workers favored. Several strong men followed her, carrying bags and boxes wrapped in oilskin. “Pardon the wait, Lady Nesta. Is this all you brought?”

The servants set their load down; five hope chests made of aspen wood, a small pile of waterproof bags, and a variety of packages wrapped in cloth. Ambrosi leaned out from the window niche to get a closer look, intrigued by the patterns carved on the chests; looping swirls and bowed boughs, dotted with insects.

“There is so little one can bring on such a journey,” Nesta said, placing her fingertips on the largest box. “Forgive me for having so little.”

“I meant no offense,” Brita said. “Here, let’s get you settled.”

It was the nicest Ambrosi had seen Brita (barring her trysts) and it offset her. Ambrosi scooted back into her seat and watched as the three women organized and unpacked. The servants, now that they weren’t needed, slipped away like shadows in a river.

Nesta brought many interesting things; cloth woven with more detail than anything Ambrosi had even seen, silver bracelets as thick as manacles embedded with

garnets, bone shuttles and red wool to make a wedding veil, and a thousand other trinkets Ambrosi couldn't see from her vantage by the window.

"We may not have castles, but we take pride in our craftsmanship," Nesta said.
"Our artisans are masters of their crafts."

At length, they drifted into the other chamber, voices echoing off stone. The open archway between spaces was all that separated them, but it left Ambrosi feeling abandoned.

She slipped out of her nook and wandered to the pile. The smaller items had already been relocated to other spots in the room, but the chests were still lumped together. Ambrosi placed her hand on one. It came away damp, and smelled like polish and rain.

When Ambrosi had left the temple, she hadn't even had a hope chest. Mountain Sisters didn't have belongings, so when Agaman called for her return to Castle Virita, all of her belongings were left behind. Ambrosi wondered what things Nesta brought with her, and how somebody decided what was important enough to take, even through so dangerous a place as the trenches.

Ambrosi looked toward the archway, but the others were still in the other chamber. She heard the clink of jewelry; they must have been filling the vanity.

Slowly, quietly, Ambrosi knelt in front of one of the chests and unlatched the silver clasp fastening it shut. She'd chosen the box with honeybees carved into its lid, all gathered around a flower so detailed it could have been real.

She lifted the lid and was hit by the smell of clove, anise, and something sweet. Robes of a thousand colors lay neatly folded, used to cushion other objects. There were little statues made out of bones, hairpins as delicate as baby icicles, and vials of cloudy liquids. Perfume, perhaps.

Ambrosi's eyes caught on a glint of metal, almost buried under a bloodred chuba. Curiosity burning, she reached forward to grab it.

The lid to came down like an ax.

Ambrosi barely yanked her hands back in time. The lid slammed against its base like jaws. If she hadn't been so quick, her fingers would have been smashed.

"Now, darling," Nestra said, hands splayed over the hope chest. "Didn't your mother tell you it's rude to pry?"

Ambrosi swallowed and squeezed her fingers together. She hadn't heard Nestra come back. Nestra's smile had a sharp edge, and her eyes a dangerous glint. The warmth was gone from her face, as was her serene demeanor. It shouldn't have made such a difference, but the curl of her lip turned the brightness of her smile into something dark.

"Nestra, are you alright?" Tala called. She reentered the main room, followed by Brita. "We heard a noise."

In a blink, Nestra was herself again. She straightened and smiled at the older girls. "It was nothing. Your sister nearly jammed her hands."

"Were you snooping?" Brita asked Ambrosi. She turned to Nestra before Ambrosi could reply. "Apologies, she was raised by goats. If she does it again, let me know. I can wrangle her for you."

“Brita, that’s not—” Ambrosi began.

“I’ll be sure to, although I doubt it will be necessary,” Nestra said, laying a bony hand on Ambrosi’s shoulder. “I can handle her on my own.”

Her nails were sharp, filed into points, and rested by Ambrosi’s neck.

“Good luck, she’s a handful,” Brita laughed.

Ambrosi wasn’t laughing.

“Now, Ambrosi,” Nestra said. She squeezed her shoulder harder. “I know you are curious, but it is rude to pry. If you wanted to get to know me, all you had to do was ask.”

“She’s shy,” Tala said, speaking for Ambrosi. “You wouldn’t know it to look at her though. Her bark is all bravado.”

Ambrosi clenches her fists, tongue-tied and alarmed. Her heart pounded in its cage, still shocked from her narrow escape. The confusion she’d had was fading, replaced with wariness.

“Then Ambrosi shall be my guide in Altala,” Nestra said. “I can think of no one better to show me through the city. What do you say, daughter?”

Nestra smiled down at her, every inch as graceful as when she’d first ridden into the courtyard. But the wild charm Ambrosi had seen felt double-edged now, and the woman’s invitation was not benign. All Ambrosi heard was a challenge, and now she could place why the woman made her uncomfortable.

Everything about Nestra, from the curl of her smile to the sharpness of her eyes, had an almost invisible shadow. Ambrosi had only seen it because Nestra *let* her, and it scared her.

Ambrosi wasn't one for artifice; she couldn't hide what she was.

But Nesta? Even that brief glimpse of shadow had been as familiar and venomous as a Jack-Jaw's sting.

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