

**The Falling**

by

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There are three things that are always present in my writing; gods, ghosts, and morally ambiguous women whose desires and ambitions cause their inevitable downfall. Over the course of this major, I have always leaned towards these concepts, with nearly all of my submitted work falling in the fantasy genre and playing with these concepts one way or another. For my senior project, rather than using something I have worked on before, I wanted to try something fresh, something that was a true synthesis of the style I have developed and the things I have learned.

That's why I came to work on *The Falling*, a fantasy novel about a woman named Catalina setting off on a quest for revenge against a king that has destroyed the culture and traditions of their country, Hesperia. It takes place in a world different from our own, where gods take physical form and rely on prayers in order to live. The relationship between humans and gods is integral to both the theme and the plot, and the concept of faith and its importance to the growth of both country and tradition is at the core of the story.

One of the first problems I ran into with this story was the fear that the beginning would be too boring. In an effort to avoid making the start too slow, I jumped right into Catalina infiltrating a church on her quest to get power to usurp the king of Hesperia. To me, this beginning had been the snappiest I could think of. So much of Catalina's character, plot and motivation is drowned in methodical thinking that is meant to guide the reader through her thought process as she slowly breaks down her kingdom. Instead of showing her in her status quo, I threw her right into the most dramatic moments of her life and the culmination of her long, thought out plans of revenge.

This was not, however, the best place to start the story, as I would come to understand. While there were new things being established all the time and the plot was flying by, it left no

time for the reader to become acclimated to Catalina's world or her thoughts as a character. Gods are integral to the story, and so introducing many at a time without giving a face to them was confusing and rushed. So, I ended up reeling back the timeframe of the first few chapters in order to really ground Catalina in her world. For me, it has always been a greater struggle to start a story than to finish one. After all, the beginning is your first impression, and first impressions matter the most.

What made me want to rush through *The Falling* in a way I never have before with a story was that, for the first time perhaps ever, I had a very clear goal of what the ending of the story will be. Typically, endings of books concern me the least, whether they are my own or another's. To me, the most important part of telling a story is the middle, where the journey is at its peak and characters interact in unique and interesting ways. As long as that portion of a story is fun, then to me, it doesn't matter how the rest turns out, because a bad ending can't ruin how fun the journey of the story was. This naturally creates a dilemma, since endings can be a make or break situation for many readers, and for so long my stories meandered in my own sense of enjoyment rather than any coherent plot with an end goal in mind, which ultimately made them weaker.

That's why *The Falling* felt so unique to me when I started, and why the beginning got off to such a rocky start. Knowing exactly how characters' arcs will culminate and who will overcome their odds is satisfying in a way that most stories never are for me. Writing this story will be one of the few times in which I feel like I can reach an ending that is just as satisfactory as the middle.

As for the things that influenced this story in the first place, the main character Catalina was inspired by the first thing I ever submitted in this major, a short story called "Miss Fortune".

In it, the main character becomes obsessed with the object of her affection, going as far as to kill anyone who interacts with him in order to keep him solely for herself. By the end of the story, they both die, leaving no one the winner. One of the critiques I remember getting for that story was the main character's motivation. Just why exactly did she like this one man so much, to the point of madness? In the fourteen pages I had, I never felt like I could expand on the concept of what it meant to possessively love something, but with Catalina's character, I was finally able to give myself the room to explore this to its depths. Though Catalina is motivated by a love for her country and tradition rather than a single person, it still stems from what I had originally written nearly four years ago, and it provides a great space to worldbuild her country, Hesperia. I want the world of *The Falling* to feel as real as the characters, so that the readers can understand why Catalina fights so fiercely to bring it back to the traditional values she believes it should have.

Beyond my own works, I was also influenced by the many history classes I have taken during my time as a Purchase student. While most of my classes focused on the ancient world, far before the medieval Spanish period that the country of Hesperia is based on, many of them discussed the growth of religion and how the people of various areas such as Greece, Rome and Egypt weaved tales from the physical world around them. I knew early on I wanted to work with a large pantheon of gods that relied on humans to keep them alive. In many religions and myths, names are powerful. Invoking the wrong one could be disastrous, hence why certain gods, such as Persephone, had multiple names that were used to avoid drawing her attention. Giving names such gravity definitely influenced me to create a world where gods live and die by the popularity of their name. Another course that influenced me was a class on Latin American cities.

Structurally, they tend to have a plaza at the center of their towns where a church is located, modeled after what Spanish colonizers brought to South America from their homeland. It really

showed the importance of faith to these people, and at times the hegemony of the church. *The Falling* similarly deals with religions, gods and priests that fight for dominance over lands they don't belong in, and how that affects the people who are native to those areas.

For example, one of the other major characters in *The Falling* is a god named Elier. Through him, I aimed to explore what the responsibility of gods are to man, and how that might affect someone as a person with feelings rather than a figurehead of a religion. As of right now, his story line is a little less developed than Catalina's, mostly because the historical influence I aimed to draw him from is a lot more muddled and is taking a lot more effort to research.

One of the reasons I chose to base Hesperia off of medieval Spain was because of Spain's own history of religious conquest and interaction. Many of the churches in Spain are amalgamations of mosques and synagogues as well, with the structures being built over each other rather than destroying the past and creating the new. Architecturally and aesthetically, Spain worked well for a story that was centered on religion and the mixing of old gods with new gods. However, as stated previously, it does become difficult to find information on Spain that predates both the Christian and Islamic influences it has, and that has made it a struggle to put together the surrounding cast of gods like Elier. Fiction is inundated with medieval period and European influences, but I find that few of these stories cover Spain, typically preferring to stay towards England, France and portions of Scandinavia. Furthermore, since my family came from Puerto Rico and Columbia, I felt that I had closer connections to writing about Spain than any of those other countries.

Overall, this story is something that is old for me, and something that is completely new. It draws on skills I have developed over time by myself and on experiences given to me by workshops and professors at Purchase. There is nothing significant or new in it that I am trying

to impart to the reader. Rather, it is a story concerned with how far one person will go to prove themselves right, and how destructive absolute power is for everyone around them. The boundaries of culture and faith can be blurred to fit any agenda, and in writing this senior project I was able to break down many of these themes for my own understanding and enjoyment.

## Chapter One

Secrets squirreled themselves away in the cracks and crevices of the goddess Galatine's chamber. They were her domain, her power, and therefore they could not avoid being sucked into her orbit and breathed out of the lips of any unfortunate soul who wandered in. In a time of peace, she might have just become a whisper of a name, an oath that these secrets would never pass unwanted ears.

It was just her luck, then, that Hesperia had not found itself in a time of peace for nearly a decade. Secrets, particularly that of enemy soldiers, were more valuable than whatever little things the average person tried to keep behind their backs. It should have been Galatine's job to oversee these whispers and give them to her country, the one that had benevolently lifted her from a minor goddess to a foundational brick of a burgeoning empire, but gods were funny creatures. Fickle and egotistical, like children with cosmic powers in their hands.

And so it fell on Catalina's shoulders, who had found herself high priestess to Galatine years ago when she was desperate for a home and devoid of options. She entered the goddess' chamber much the way one entered an old friend's house--tired, slowly, and with none of the fanfare a goddess should have demanded.

Her hands were full with parchments stained in ink, the written catalogs of several Lutetian soldiers who had the misfortune of being prisoners in Galatine's church, and she took her place at the foot of the throne that Galatine sat on. It was always a strange sight to see her goddess, lounging with her legs stretched out and the drapes of her gossamer dress fanned around her in disarray.

There was no mistaking Galatine for a human, no matter how humanoid her body was. The legs, the arms, the head, they were all there, exactly where a human would have them. But



her skin was unusually pallid, grayed like a corpse, and the ice blue stained windows let the light shine on her so coldly that she looked overtaken by winter itself. Her face was covered from the eyes up, as all gods were, to make sure no mortal could meet her gaze. Unimaginably horrible things would occur if one looked a god in the eyes, or so Catalina was told. So, her goddess wore a rather ugly helmet that covered her eyes and stretched up into a spindly design like the branches of a dead tree. It left the bottom half of her face exposed; a severe jawline and thin lips that hid rows of sharp teeth.

Despite her gangly body of bones jutting beneath thin, ill skin, and a face half covered, Galatine's favorite pastime had always been to sit on her throne and watch herself through a small, cracked mirror. It came as no surprise to Catalina that she was doing just that as she entered, and didn't seem to care about the papers Catalina was holding.

"It's a shame, isn't it?" Galatine mused, her raspy voice echoing in the otherwise empty chamber of her church.

Catalina raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

"The state of it all. They made it sound so *easy*. Why did I believe them?"

There had once been a small hope in Catalina's heart that she would one day be able to easily read the goddess she served. Her strange, cryptic way of talking destroyed that very quickly. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to clarify."

Galatine waved her mirror around absently as if it were a pointer. "Lutetia. That's what you're here for, no? Something with the Lutetian men who crossed our border."

"Soldiers," Catalina clarified. "They're Lutetian soldiers."

"Always crossing, always firing their weapons on us. They said this would all end in the blink of an eye, but it's been so *long*."

*They.* Her favorite topic to complain about. The trinity of gods that held Hesperia up, protecting their king and strengthening their armies. From what Catalina understood, they had made some sort of agreement with Galatine. As long as she could tease out plans and secrets from captured Lutetian soldiers, they would send more worshippers her way. One day, they might even let her join them as a major god next to them. Galatine must have been eager for the worshippers, for without someone to call their name, a god was quick to fade and die. She had certainly forgotten that human prayers shaped the gods, and that their prayers, all geared towards war and Hesperian nationalism, had transformed her slowly into a very different creature.

Catalina glanced at the cracked mirror. Maybe Galatine had been beautiful, when she was a young goddess of secrets, the friend of hidden romances and sticky-fingered children. Now all she heard was the sound of drum beats and strife, and accordingly, the modern prayers of humans had turned her into something else entirely.

“I wrote down everything they said,” Catalina said. She wasn’t in the mood to hear another rambling about how Pridwen, Svalinn and Labrys cheated her out of a peaceful following. In Hesperia, everyone was cheated out of something they were owed. “Nothing stood out to me in particular, but as always I would prefer for you to look it over before I send them to His Majesty.”

Galatine turned her head like a stiff statue, one arm thrown over the back of the chair. “Nothing in particular?” Catalina schooled her face into an unreadable calm. “Some days, I think about you, Catalina. Rather than myself. I think about what it must be like to sign letters to the king, selling the enemies secrets to him so that he may win this war and let Hesperia prosper, and wonder if you would have let it go on this long if you were in his place.”

*Never*: “I am not a king,” she said. “Who knows what I would have done if I were given the crown.”

Galatine held out a long, slender hand and took the papers from Catalina. The other was still preoccupied with the mirror. “I do believe it is still a *what if* and not a *what could have been*, Catalina.”

Catalina couldn’t help the surprise on her face. Were those supposed to be words of encouragement? What was she meant to say to that?

Her silence dragged too long. “Don’t you have something else to do?” Galatine asked, a paper slipping out of the stack in her hand as she gestured with it.

“Yes, my lady.” With delicate poise, Catalina curtseyed, and left Galatine to review the papers.

A weight left her shoulders when she was no longer in the presence of a god. Truly, the closed doors between her and Galatine meant nothing. The thick stone that dragged across the floor and shut somberly against her back would never save her from the perceptive gaze of a god, least of all one that held domain over secrets. That didn’t stop her from sighing and letting the cold stone press against her back through her thin dress.

Galatine knew too much, and unlike the nosy humans who had sometimes wandered into Catalina’s life, she couldn’t be silenced. Only she looked at Catalina and saw the face of the king there, saw the similarities of their blood and origin, and she held it delicately over Catalina’s head. Galatine’s loyalty to Hesperia, and thus the three gods that protected King Cordero’s reign, seemed to be stuck in a war more tumultuous than their own with Lutetia. The natural pride of a god led her to resent the peers who had lied to her about how far she would soar in the new world, and that same ego prevented her from stabbing them in the back. So, like a declawed cat,

she observed Catalina with what she could only surmise was pity, wondering if this would be the human that toppled the whole regime.

The hall that Galatine's chamber let out into was dark and cramped, with a low ceiling that constantly pushed down on Catalina.

"Doña Catalina!" A young voice called for her, breaking her from her thoughts. She looked up to see one of the priests, Arias, approaching her with an exasperated expression on his face. Like all of Galatine's priests, he wore a long, pale blue dress and an organdy veil over his head, obscuring his finer features. "I've been looking all over for you!" He glanced at the doors behind her and grew somber. "How is Lady Galatine?"

"As listless as ever," Catalina admitted, stepping away from the door to guide him away. While Catalina was Galatine's high priestess and was in charge of all the priests, there were few who she bothered to speak with on a more personal level. A goddess in charge of torturing secrets out of prisoners of war tended to invite a stranger sort of folk that she felt too refined to befriend. Arias, born in Lutetia, seemed to wander his way in with his morals still intact, and for that alone Catalina considered him worthy to speak to.

Arias followed closely next to her. They were both used to the small, dim halls of Galatine's church that crowded them in. If they had more money, more worshippers who thought to leave coin behind, they might have hired someone to restructure the whole thing. Then again, the church was built in such a strange way that she couldn't imagine Hesperian architects being able to fix it without having to take it all apart. It was a small church, with high, pointed rooftops and low ceilings, built of gray stones that were uneven from years of use and creeping ice during the winter. It lacked the courtyard that was so popular with Hesperian churches, as if it were built for winter all the time. Catalina suspected that Galatine herself was a goddess from the north, a

country with a different name and a different climate, and she hadn't been able to let it go when she came south to Hesperia.

"Has she said anything about what you're up to?"

"Nothing."

"But she has to know."

"She certainly does." She knew more than Arias did, though he perceived himself as the most informed between the two of them. To Catalina, it was very clear that Galatine had sensed out her secrets the moment she began to work in the church. There were two simple things that created the heart and soul of the high priestess--her hatred for the current Hesperian king, and her desire for his throne. Galatine and Arias were aware of both. From Galatine, she couldn't hide a thing, and Arias had no love for Hesperia that could have been used against her. He had no love for his native Lutetia either, and his wishy-washy, ambitionless life rendered him rather harmless in Catalina's mind.

Only Galatine was aware how close Catalina had once been to the Hesperian throne, however. It was a bitter venom in her heart that always reminded her she had once, when she was very little, been able to call the current king her uncle. Galatine mentioned it offhandedly, and each time she did Catalina found herself filled to the brim with fear and frustration. Would it be used against her?

"You said you were looking for me," Catalina said as Arias stared coolly at the closed door behind her.

"Oh, yes. We cleared out more of the basement today, and there were several bookcases down there. I figured that would interest you more than the other items we found."

*A bookcase.* She supposed it was natural that something like that found its way to the basement of the church. “Show me.”

Arias led the way through the thin halls of the church and came to a dilapidated wooden door. Catalina pulled out the keys hanging from the chatelaine cinched to her waist and unlocked it, letting the rusty hinges swing open. There were a few wooden stairs that led down into a normal, small basement. The church was a normal, ancient structure, and so a basement like this was far from peculiar. What did make it peculiar was the clutter of strange, seemingly useless items that it accumulated over the years. No one ever came to put things here, and by the time they reached the bottom of the stairs they were already tripping over the legs of a broken chair, a cluster of children’s toys and a roll of thread, making it near impossible to navigate normally.

Arias offered out his hand to Catalina to help her step over a shattered plate. “I thought you cleared this out more,” she said.

“It always comes back,” he bemoaned, nearly smacking his head against a tall mirror as he turned around.

According to Galatine, it was a side effect of the goddess remaining in one place for so long. Secrets naturally accumulated through her, and sometimes those secrets were physical. Each object hailed from somewhere, hiding something important or something small. Luckily, they only appeared in the basement, otherwise Catalina and the other priests would have to play pick up with random objects strewn across the church.

Out of the corner of her, Catalina caught sight of a painting. She paused as Arias began to shuffle out a new path for them, the faces caught in splashes of pale paints bringing up vivid memories. It was faded now, but she could make out the strong features of the former king Leoncio and the shorter form of Queen Sancha next to him. This room haunted her with the

painting. Out of the corner of her eye, without fail, it would make itself known. There would have been less pain in seeing their current King Cordero depicted there than these faces.

Catalina wondered what items made themselves known when Arias stepped into the room.

She watched him shove a broom out of the way, revealing a short bookcase that was barely holding itself together. Many of the books were molded and destroyed beyond recognition, and old cobwebs were thickened by heavy coats of dust in the corners.

“Glad to see it stayed,” Arias muttered. If he had tried to take the books out of the room, he would have found them misplaced, disappearing all over. Everything that appeared in the basement had to stay in the basement, if one ever wanted to get back to it.

Arias cleared his throat. “Now, I can’t make out most of the titles, but it looked old enough that I thought it might grab your interest. You said you were looking for old things.”

Old things, indeed. Catalina kept most of her desires vague, just in case Arias got too close to her goals. It would have been quite unbecoming of a lady of her station to come out the gate with questions about killing gods.

Catalina slid her fingers over the spines of the books, swiping dust off of them. “Get the others ready for evening prayer,” she said. “I will be down here for a while.”

“Understood.” Arias left her with only the dim, swinging light overhead, and all the lost secrets of the world at her feet.

She collected the books that had been in the best condition and settled into a rocking chair that creaked dangerously. A pair of baby shoes had been tied to it by their laces. The first book cracked open in a plume of dust, and each page had to be flipped delicately. It had become

an old game at this point. Wander into the church's basement, read the old books no one was allowed to read, wonder if they would ever yield anything sufficient.

As long as King Cordero was on the throne, Catalina would always find herself down here, alone in contemplation. Years ago, Hesperia had been a different country. The gods did not cast their feelings and ideas into politics, and they certainly did not aim to support one regime over the other. Now, King Cordero was propped up by the three gods that made up the core of the new Hesperian pantheon. He was untouchable. Lutetia fought against Hesperia's expansion, but they could not fight the gods, and as long as they could not fight the gods, they could never dispose of the king.

Catalina had to find a way around that. Many of the books she flipped through had discussed Hesperia's old gods, the ones that held names native to their country, but nearly all of them had been silent for decades. None of them would come to her aid. They wouldn't even answer her prayers, unlike Galatine or Pridwen, who were eager responders if the prayer in question came from a notable source.

No, her glimmer of hope lay in an old story she had found down here years ago, half the pages torn out and rendered mostly unreadable by age. It told of a god that had been slaughtered. The god, ferocious and mercurial, created so much chaos from his actions that one day, a human rose up to kill all of the god's worshippers. If a god had no worshippers, no prayers to sustain it and no humans to call its name, it would be doomed to oblivion, essentially dead to the world. It must have taken a great deal of effort to kill all of the god's followers. By herself, Catalina would never be able to do the same to Pridwen, Labrys and Svalinn, who each propped Hesperia up with their gifts.



Their names had been mentioned in the story, however. This god scared them so terribly, his worshippers overshadowing their own, that the man who had gone on his rampage had been supported by the three of them. Even then, the fighting sounded gruesome, almost unwinnable. The three gods had been weaker back then, and not even allied to Hesperia, but it showed a weakness in their divine armor that Catalina was desperate to seize. Perhaps one person could not intimidate them, but a god that was their equal could.

She didn't need the three of them dead. Only out of the way. She had to buy herself a fracture of time to get to King Cordero, and make him suffer for the country he had turned Hesperia into. This forgotten god seemed to be the best she would have. Galatine was no help, and the old gods of Hesperia had left them to rot under the new command of foreign deities. If she could find the name of the fallen god, remind him of the bitterness of being turned against by others of his station, then she might have an ally they never saw coming.

She threw the book to the side when it yielded nothing important. Just one, completed copy. That was all she needed. The gods had been trying to hide this name for ages, but all secrets surfaced eventually in this church. The dim light made her feel drowsy, but her work had to persist. No one was going to salvage them from the war King Cordero had shoved them into except for her.

She picked up the next book. Her search continued.

## Chapter Two

There were no windows in the basement of Galatine's church to indicate where the sun was, or if the moon had risen. Through bleary eyes, Catalina worked through the books, her body begging her to get up and move, or to eat something. From that alone, she figured that the early hours of the morning were approaching. Another night wasted in the belly of secrets, it seemed. Galatine was truly her only hope. If there were whispers of the god who challenged the Hesperian pantheon centuries ago, before they even stepped foot in Hesperia itself, then this was the only way she could find it.

Somewhere out there was a god of truth, bearing a name she did not know, living as Galatine's pure opposite. A god like that would be helpful too, no doubt compelled to only answer questions honestly. Catalina was stuck in the fantasy of gods that could help her, rather than the ones that stood in the way of her and the king. In her sleepy stupor of reading, she recalled the stories her mother would tell of the Hesperian gods. The true gods, whose names sat comfortably on her tongue and had roamed Hesperia long before Galatine and the current pantheon.

Before King Cordero's reign, Hesperia had built shrines and churches to the gods native to their country. The very border of Hesperia itself was said to have been walked by one of their gods eons ago, and to contract or push out that border was an act of heresy. Her mother told her of Lobera, of Estrella and the Sagitta river, gods who respectfully stayed out of human politics and kept their country thriving. Those gods quieted over the years, but Catalina hadn't thought them gone until King Cordero usurped the throne, and with him came Pridwen, Labrys and Svalinn. Wealth, victory, protection. Now, those gods were the only names Hesperians spoke,

even as they tripped over foreign syllables and pronunciations that should have stayed outside their borders.

She rubbed her eyes, regrettably forgetting there had been dust on her hands from the old books. She put it aside in favor of another, smaller one. A diary of some sort. Her research had made her a fast reader and she skimmed through the pages, eager to be done with the next disappointment.

A name caught her attention. Svalinn. The diary was older than King Cordero's current reign--no, older than Hesperia. She couldn't find the writer calling the nation anything, but they mentioned mountains to the north and a great river cutting through a central plateau, sounding very much like the Sagitta river. Svalinn from that time must have been a very minor god, considering all his prominence came from the modern Hesperia. Whoever this person was must have been close to Svalinn, and it seemed as though Svalinn was being intimidated by another god.

She didn't want to get her hopes up, but it was sounding like a firsthand account of the book she had read so long ago. A strange, ancient god of ruination that scared the other gods of the time and was known for his dedicated following... She flipped through the pages, desperate for a name. She couldn't even find who had written the diary. A close follower of Svalinn's? Maybe even one of his first? It followed Svalinn's journey loosely, mentioning some place named Ilspet, and broken up with this person's accounts of their own life. For a time ruled by a wicked god, the writer was quite dedicated to writing about their wife and children. Catalina had no care for their personal drama. She needed to know who the god of ruination was.

The narrative of the diary shifted. The writer was assisting Svalinn with hiding something. The words chosen began to confuse her. Catalina had been given a brief, brilliant

education in ancient languages as a child before Cordero usurped the throne from her father, but these words were foreign to her. It was some place in what would become Hesperia, that was for sure. She parsed some words to mean ‘a dip in the earth’, but that was hardly useful. Plenty of areas in the plains found themselves dipping into small valleys the closer they got to the mountains, and particularly towards Lutetia. Wherever they were, it seemed they were trying to bury a soul.

A god’s soul.

She hadn’t thought something like that existed. The writer described it as dormant, nearly dead, but not yet declawed or without its dangers. Doing this was meant to put Svalinn at ease. Her only thought was that it must still be the same god that instilled fear in the others so long ago.

The writer was a total scatterbrain, writing in frustrating circles about how they were feeling rather than what they were doing. She was so tired that she was reading pages over and over, trying to wring meaning from an old language that she was feeling less confident about knowing by the minute. It felt as though the end would never come, and that she was once more dancing by the answers she desperately sought out.

A word caught her eye. She searched for the context of the sentence, jumbled as it was with other unintelligible words, and found her hopes rising. It wasn’t just a word--it was a name. *Elier*. It hadn’t shown up anywhere else yet, and it was surrounded by many words she didn’t know. It could very well be the god that the writer and Svalinn was burying, or it could be someone else they ran across. The name was written once, and the writer was adamant about not writing it anymore.

That surely confirmed it. The name of a god was powerful. As long as humans used it, prayed to it, then they would maintain their power and form, and grow by this worship. If Svalinn and the other gods of that time wanted this god to remain dead forever, then it was in their best interest to make sure humans never spoke it. What compelled the writer to finally jot it down, she did not know. But it didn't matter. This was what she was looking for.

She stood up, her knees and back aching with the effort. She needed to track down where they buried this... Elier, as it were. There were some descriptions of the surroundings, but Catalina's life had been a sheltered journey from the Hesperian capital to Galatine's service. Some days, it didn't feel as if she physically experienced her country at all, her entire world reduced to the words of a mad goddess and the weeps of war prisoners. Hazy memories of her father situating her on his knee over an outcrop of maps served of no use now. The list of things Cordero took from her when he stole the throne never seemed to stop expanding.

She placed the diary down on the nearby bookshelf where she knew it would inevitably disappear, like all the rest of the items in the basement. They were in constant flux, disappearing and reappearing at the least convenience, but for once, they had served Catalina well. She had a name, and a vague understanding of a location. It would have to be enough.

As high priestess, the demands of her job were constant. There was little time for her to lay down and recover the sleep she had lost to the basement, and what sleep did come was marred with a dream that startled her, but that she couldn't quite remember when she opened her eyes again. It was a soft knock on her door that finally motivated her to leave her bed. She was thankful for it--she had work to do, such as finding a modern map of Hesperia to see if she could narrow down where that writer and Svalinn lay Elier's dormant soul to rest.

Unsurprisingly, it was Arias who wanted her attention, tapping his foot like an impatient child. “It’s nearly midday,” he announced, as if Catalina was not aware.

She narrowed her eyes. “And I assume that there is something you require of me. Did Galatine send for me?”

He shook his head. “We got another Lutetian soldier sent over from the border. Thought you would want to speak to him first.” There was a glint in Arias’ eyes, something that he wasn’t saying.

Catalina crossed her arms, intrigued. “His position?”

“Not sure. A useful one, I think.”

She watched him for a moment. Catalina was quickly coming upon the realization that she would not be able to do damage to Cordero’s reign from Galatine’s church. The horizon of Hesperia was waiting for her, and she could not greet it as a high priestess here. Would someone like Arias be ready, or even want to take the position? She could think of no one else in Galatine’s service that was worthy. Many of the priests and priestesses were staunch followers of Cordero’s reign, believing themselves integral to the war against Lutetia and standing for Hesperian pride. They were caught up in the falsehoods Cordero and his pantheon sewed, made stupid and docile like a flock of sheep.

It was strange to think that she cared who ended up serving Galatine. There wasn’t love or appreciation or respect for the goddess, and yet it made her uncomfortable to think of a high priest who might sit there and praise Cordero’s regime endlessly to Galatine, unaware of her feelings.

“I’ll speak to him immediately,” Catalina said. “See to the church while I’m gone.”

Arias nodded. He was already performing half of Catalina's duties when she was too busy searching for the avenues of her revenge. She had to keep him in mind if she intended to leave her service here.

The prisoners of war, and those the Hesperian crown deemed traitors, were kept deep within the church. Much of the church existed as a series of dark, thin hallways in need of repair, with most of the effort for maintenance reserved to Galatine's chamber. Where they kept those they interrogated was in worse shape. It had once been a chamber of worship for whoever prayed here before, and so mirrored the tall, domed ceilings popular in Hesperia. Its windows had been covered with curtains thick enough to block out the sun, and the sparse inhabitants were kept in place with a series of shackles that had been employed prior to Catalina becoming high priestess. When they served their purpose, it was typically Galatine herself who disposed of them. In all her years, Catalina never knew quite what that meant. Death, surely, but then Galatine would have made the priests bury the bodies, and no such thing had been requested. For as macabre as Galatine's church could appear, it was not a graveyard.

She entered the chamber and its dim orange glow. The ghostly blue light of Galatine's chamber was gone here, and instead replaced by simple torches that were kept regularly lit. Catalina looked over those who had arrived. One of the men who she had talked to, and even submitted to in the papers she gave Galatine, was missing. Well, not missing. Just dealt with in the way that Galatine dealt with people. There were few others as well, since their selection couldn't have been broad to begin with. Captured Lutetian soldiers who spoke Hesperian weren't common, and while she could speak Lutetian, too many had talked in dialects she didn't understand or was afraid of misinterpreting, which could prove fatal for Hesperia's ambitions. Thus, they limited who they dealt with accordingly.

The new face was easy to pick out. He was an older man with stringy blond hair and a wild look in his eyes, like a starved beast. His lips were dry and his face gaunt, as if the church was draining his will and health from him for every second he sat there. Like others who arrived before him, he had been left in a Lutetian military uniform, the crest of his country sitting right above his heart. Around him, the other prisoners sat with hung heads, curled in their corners as their past and their future ran through their minds.

Catalina knew that both armies were trained to die with their secrets, but there was little the men who arrived here could do to stop Galatine's influence. When gods stood in one place for too long, the environment shaped to their domain. That was why the basement was always turning up long lost secrets, and why it was difficult for newcomers who didn't acclimate to Galatine's presence to keep their secrets to themselves. It had turned her into something of a confessional for visitors as well. Other gods avoided this by always being on the move, almost nomadic with their priests, to ensure that the land did not warp to their godly presence. For Galatine, being stationary was necessary. There would be very few opportunities to see the Hesperia she claimed to protect.

Catalina kneeled in front of the man. He stared back at her, unwavering. He would have never guessed that they shared a common hatred for the land they stood on. If Lutetia knew that Catalina had claim to the throne, they no doubt would have tried to broker a bond there. It was something she had to keep in mind. They would be useful, but only after she had enacted her own plans first. She was not eager to become a puppet for Lutetia, paraded around as the 'true' monarch or becoming a symbol of their hatred for gods. They would mold her into someone else entirely. Catalina did not hate the gods and their worshippers--it was just that Hesperia was worshiping the wrong gods, and at the hands of a man who she *did* hate.



“Hello there,” she greeted, keeping her voice sweet. It occurred to her that if she did leave, she couldn’t have Arias be in charge of interrogating. His dry personality left little room for conversation, and even if Galatine’s presence teased out secrets, one still had to get the prisoner talking to have results.

The man eyed her carefully. She kept on.

“You must’ve come far from Lutetia. A commander?” She reached out for his crest, and because his hands were bound, he could not stop her from ripping it from the cloth of his shirt. It sat heavy and cold in her hand. “If you were expecting an execution, you can relax. I only wish to talk to you.”

“To what end?” he asked in a voice hoarse from disuse.

She raised an eyebrow. “We’ll have to find out.” From his shackled hands, she could see that he had not been born into a hard knock life, and probably did not struggle to work his way up the ranks. His Hesperian was unaccented, which was common for the upper class in Lutetia. There was a delicate bend to his nose, a nervous twitch in his fingers, and Catalina assumed that he, like many men in the world, had bought his way to the top to earn prestige, rather than to protect his country. It would have been common before Hesperia declared war on Lutetia, because never in Lutetia’s wildest dreams did they think Hesperia would try to seize back the land they stole over four generations ago. Water under the bridge, they must have assumed. And it was, for most Hesperians. King Cordero turned it into a primary reason for war, however, and convinced most everyone that it was worth the bloodshed.

Catalina tilted her head. This Lutetian man of good breeding probably just wanted the war to be over, to go home to his rich estate where he likely had a wife and children, and to live out the rest of his days peacefully, inflating the stories of his time in the war and hopefully

getting to end them happily. It wasn't in Lutetia's interest to keep someone like this in command of any part of their army. Maybe she was doing them a favor by relieving him from their service, though she didn't love the idea of sending a relatively innocent man to his ominous end at Galatine's hands. Fighting against King Cordero was hardly a crime punishable by torture, interrogation and death.

"What part of Lutetia are you from?" Catalina asked, rolling the metal crest between her fingers.

"Why do you care?"

"Curious. I imagine it's been a while since you were there. Hesperia's dragged all of Lutetia out of its military hibernation, hasn't it?" She kept her voice quiet, soft. "I'm not a fan of keeping people away from their homes."

The man narrowed his eyes. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"All I do is serve as a priestess for this church. We take in refugees on both sides of the war all the time--do you think I enjoy seeing Galatine's worshippers treated so poorly by the world?"

He rolled his eyes. "Hesperia's gods are in bed with their king. Acting like you're divorced from this conflict just because you sit on holy grounds is not going to work."

Catalina nodded in agreement. Ever since Hesperia's invasion, Lutetia had firmly voiced dissent against using the gods politically and militarily. If their country wasn't already turning away from worshiping their gods, this war was the nail in the coffin.

"It's true, King Cordero cares about what we simple priests and priestesses do here, but when I became a priestess years ago, it wasn't to prop up the decisions of my king. I don't know

why you would assume I want Hesperia to function the way it does. How does it benefit me, or my goddess, to be embroiled in this war?"

He looked her up and down. "I'm sure Hesperians are saying her name now more than ever, if they think it can support your king."

"What good are selfish prayers filled with malice?" Catalina shook her head. "Gods are malleable to our wants, but when those wants turn evil, it distorts them in ways we can't even fathom. Galatine is warped by the war as much as the common Hesperian is."

The gentle honesty with which she spoke seemed to get the man to relax his shoulders, just a bit. Secrets had to come out here, one way or another, and Galatine's domain was disarming in how it slowly pulled them out of you, too slow to notice and too fast to take back.

"Lutetia will never stop defending our borders," he said. "Everything Hesperia has occupied, even up to the Central Church--"

"The Central Church?" Her eyes widened. "Of Svalinn, you mean?"

His nod was stiff, like his head didn't quite want to comply with the motion.

Catalina didn't think they would head that far. At one point, the land the Central Church of Svalinn laid on was contested, but it had been a long, long time since Lutetia thought much of it. In fact, she wasn't even sure Lutetia had borne that name when they were there, and historically the land was nothing more than a battlefield.

"They wouldn't expect it," she mused.

"No," the man said.

And it would deal quite the blow to Svalinn. Unlike Pridwen and Labrys, who stayed close to the capital and thus Cordero, Svalinn was willing to put himself and his most popular

church closer to the border. If he didn't, it would be more difficult to project the image of a strong god of protection.

"There must already be Lutetian plans in the works then," she said. The look in his eyes was sort of helpless, though he didn't seem to understand why. Why he was so willing to comply, why he even mentioned the Central Church at all.

There was much for them to talk about.

Catalina did not think she would have to leave Galatine's service so soon. The minute the Lutetian prisoner mentioned the Central Church of Svalinn, however, she knew she had to. Geographically, it lined up with what the writer of the diary had mentioned. She wasn't sure why she hadn't put two and two together. If this dormant god, Elier, was so dangerous centuries ago, then it was likely Svalinn had never wanted to abandon the place where he was buried. Maybe Hesperia knew the Central Church as a fort, but it had been something long before that, too, lost to time. Gods and their immortal memories were as obscured as fog to humans, but finally Catalina was beginning to parse through it.

"I don't understand," said Arias, following her like a panicked dog. "Why *leave*? You're high priestess, you've got the rest of your life in comfort waiting for you here!"

She didn't expect him to understand. He was from Lutetia, torn from it by the war. All he wanted to seek was comfort and stability. Catalina, in turn, did not want peace until Cordero was ripped from the throne. She was not born to be a priestess, high up or not. Her father was the dead king Leoncio, and she owed it to him to rise back to her station where she belonged.

“I’ll put in a word with Galatine if it’s a position you covet so much,” Catalina said, already arriving at the goddess’ chamber.

“That’s not really the point.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.” She paused in front of the door, waiting for Arias to explain himself.

He glanced away from her gaze. “Then, good luck with Galatine.” His tone was muted, withdrawn.

Catalina didn’t have time for whatever was warring in his head. She was about to hand him the keys to the whole church, and give him that stable life he was seeking. Well, temporarily. The fall of King Cordero and the Hesperian pantheon would also mean the fall of Galatine. She would not allow the foreign god to stay in their territory and draw prayers from the native gods of Hesperia. Catalina would be back here to burn it all down, and Arias wouldn’t be wishing her luck then.

She entered the chamber alone and without a knock. Galatine was, as always, entranced by her shattered mirror, and the broken reflection of herself. Her chamber forever framed her in isolation and blue, and Catalina bet that if the war came to her doorstep, she would do nothing but sit in that false throne and wonder where she had gone wrong. Gods had an eternity to mend their mistakes, and that never seemed to occur to Galatine.

Catalina cleared her throat and Galatine raised her head. What might her eyes have shown, if they could be seen? Was there remorse? Depression? Resignation? Years here, and Catalina felt as if she hardly knew her at all. It was better that way.

“I knew it would come to this,” Galatine said in her shrill voice.

“I haven’t said anything yet,” Catalina said.

“I can tell.”

It bothered Catalina that she might be as observable as Galatine herself was. “I can no longer serve as your high priestess,” she announced, regardless of whether Galatine knew or not. “Hesperia needs a strong hand elsewhere. Every day, Lutetia presses closer on our borders, and only Svalinn stands watch. He cannot be everywhere at once.”

“Svalinn?” Galatine said with bitterness.

“I have ambitions beyond here.”

“You always have.” Galatine rested her head against her free hand, twirling the mirror in her other. Catalina was afraid she would drop it and render it useless. There was a smile on her face, revealing those awful, jagged teeth. “I do not believe you will get far, Catalina. Men cannot move mountains, no matter how hard they try. But who am I to stop you?” Then, she was looking back at her mirror, done with their conversation. It was as much permission as Catalina could hope to ask for.

She thought of thanking Galatine, though she wasn't sure what for. Any gratitude would look spiteful when it all inevitably burned. The church of Galatine gave Catalina shelter for years, and she would never repay it for that kindness. The reality of it sat like lead in her stomach, even as she willed herself to be stronger, and to always keep in mind that it had been gods like Galatine that forced her life down this path.

Her hopes rested on the name of Elier, and that far away future of Hesperia's freedom. The first step to it all lay with Svalinn, and so she turned her back on Galatine.

### Chapter Three

It had pained Catalina more than she thought to leave Galatine's church behind. She wouldn't dare to call it home, but the years spent there were many, and over time, they had become comfortable and expected. The setup for her transfer in Svalinn's service had taken several more days, and in that time she busied herself with what she could. Best not to think about her current situation, and to instead put her mind to the future. Those around her would judge her enough for her move, seeing her like a child turning her back on a parent, ungrateful and looking for greener pastures rather than staying to fix what was already her place. Worse yet, she was--had been--high priestess. Arias would take over as high priest, as she had ensured, and wouldn't spread any harsh words about her, but that wouldn't be enough to stop the whispers. The priests of Svalinn might embrace her readily, but the priests of Galatine would never forget her swift and sudden move.

She told herself she didn't care what they said.

She smoothed out some of the wrinkles in her dress and leaned her head against the window of the carriage, peering at the faces of Svalinn's priests as she passed. Some were whispering amongst themselves, others were completely stiff with anticipation. All of them wore a long, white cloth over their heads that draped down their bodies like the skirt of a flamenco dancer's dress, and their heads were slightly tilted forward to keep the cloth from falling. Such a large transfer, even if it was from a priestess of a lesser goddess, was probably the most excitement in weeks for them. They would want to keep her around. From what she heard, Svalinn's followers were among the most devout, and it was their pride to convert and take in others.

The carriage pulled to a halt inside the church's courtyard. Great stone walls kept them in, and it was clearly some sort of repurposed fort, a piece of Hesperian history written over to make them look stronger. No longer would war be waged in Hesperia's borders. Now, they worshipped a god over an old battlefield to show their strength. Once more she yearned for the diary she had read to be more clear. What had this place looked like to that writer, before it was a church or a fort, before it was housing a forgotten god?

A man around her age appeared outside the window and pulled open the carriage door for her, and she opened up her black fan as she stepped out, paying no mind to him. The air was disgustingly thick with humidity while the gray sky above was heavy with unshed rain.

"Doña Catalina," said the man who had opened her carriage, and she turned to see that he was hardly dressed like a servant at all. His dark blue robes were highlighted by gold stitches around his shoulders and waist, and it draped all the way to the floor where it was catching bits of dirt from between the cobblestone path. He was without the white cloth the rest of them had, though his sunburned face likely could have benefitted from it more than the rest. Catalina raised her fan slightly to cover half of her face. He greeted her with a smile and said, "Welcome to the Central Church of Svalinn. As you can see, we are all eager to make your acquaintance."

*Eager indeed.* "I'm afraid you have me at a bit of a disadvantage," she said, casting her eyes elsewhere. "I was not expecting Svalinn's highest priest to be the one to open my carriage door." His stern face and dark eyes would be something she had to remember. This man knew where that forgotten monster was hiding, she *needed* his trust more than anything right now.

"I wanted to give you a warmer welcome than sending out some servant boy," he said. "From one high priest to another."

"Don Blas, you know I am no longer a priest of your level."



“You carry yourself like one.”

Catalina smirked behind her fan. High Priest Blas was a reserved man from what she heard, a fan of nothing but his god and worship, but some were more derogatory in claiming his soft heart left Svalinn’s lower priests in disarray. Svalinn’s numerous churches were no stranger to accusations of corruption and backdoor deals with local criminals, intent on lining their own pockets in the name of Svalinn’s protection. It contrasted with the devout attitude they put forward. Maybe their eagerness to convert outsiders was more eagerness to run scams on fools, or some other cover up. It interested her, but it was not the goal. Blas seemed sincere in the moment, but perhaps it wasn’t a soft heart that was keeping his priests loose in their morals. Perhaps it was all rotting from the top.

“That is behind me now,” Catalina said. “Svalinn’s service is meant to be a new start for me. Or will I be beholden to my status of High Priestess for Galatine?”

“Of course not. Svalinn is not a god that will chain you down with old status and secrets.”

Catalina inclined her head. *Secrets*. She had those to trade, at least. Secrets of Galatine’s inner circle, secrets of Hesperia’s royal court, secrets of her own, carefully held close to her chest for this moment. Getting new secrets would be much harder now, however. She tightened her grip on her fan to stop from shaking with anticipation.

“Come, Doña Catalina. I will lead you through Svalinn’s church.” Blas offered out his arm for her, which she took gracefully. Around them the priests whispered, some barely hiding their curiosity. “I am curious why you chose to join Svalinn. A lifetime under Galatine’s wing as her most cherished priestess must have come with some enjoyments that were hard to part with.”

Catalina glanced behind her as Blas led her away from the carriage and to the front door of the church. It was swung wide open for her arrival, revealing a dark interior of old wooden

pews and a statue of Svalinn's image, and a shiver ran down her spine. Just as she suspected, something ancient and dark was hiding the depths of Svalinn's most sacred grounds. "I am looking for something Galatine cannot offer," she admitted. She lowered her gaze as if she were about to lay a vulnerable truth bare to Blas, and he leaned closer to her.

"And what does the lady of isolation fail to offer?"

*A true god to follow.* Catalina knew her desires did not reside with Galatine or Svalinn. They couldn't--she would never be a true follower to gods who continued to prop up Hesperia's growth as an empire. No, her true god lay beneath the earth, crushed by the weight of Svalinn's church, waiting for a human to utter his name after centuries of fading. She told herself that true faith would make itself known for the god who would make her dreams come true. It felt like it had been a long, long time since she truly believed in a god.

"A heart," Catalina said simply. There were no high opinions of Galatine anywhere. She leaned into the perception of a cold, dangerous goddess, and of herself as a woman escaping it for a warmer life.

Blas smiled at her. "I am certain you will find Svalinn has nothing but heart to offer."

Catalina chuckled behind her fan and made sure she looked like an intent listener as Blas told her about the times of ceremonies that were held here. The priestesses were expected to pray in the early morning, and the priests at sundown. Visitors were allowed to come in and out, though she noticed there were none of them around today. Like all the gods of Hesperia's pantheon, no one was to pray once the moon rose, lest they upset their ethereal patrons.

She counted four interior doors that led deeper into the church. The crowd of priests that had come to greet her were slowly beginning to fill back into their places, either to prepare something further in the depths of the building or to finally shake off their excitement. The

majority went through the first door to the right, while some of the more finely dressed ones went to the second door on the right.

“As you can see, Svalinn prefers to keep decorations light in his primary place of worship. His protection is free, and we don’t want the people to have any misconceptions about that,” Blas was saying, his hands folded together. “No gems in the statues, no over the top necklaces or jewelry that might make our followers insecure. Protection is for all, so long as they speak his name.”

Catalina fanned herself, catching a glimpse of the dark hall down the second door. Perhaps there was something beyond there, hiding the forgotten god from her. “What a humble god. Does he spend all of his time here?”

“He is frequently called to the capital to speak with His Majesty. Svalinn’s very presence keeps the borders of Hesperia safe, and it is essential that he focuses his powers with whatever plans the Hesperian generals craft. I imagine Galatine was similar.”

She nodded. “Our great pantheon works hard to keep this country safe.” They worked even harder to keep His Majesty in one piece on a throne he was never owed. If it weren’t for divine power backing King Cordero, he would have had no way of ascending the throne, no power to back Hesperia’s new imperial conquest into neighboring lands. He would be a speck in history, where he belonged. The gods had crafted him into a mountain instead.

She longed to utter the name of the god sleeping beneath Svalinn’s church and free him to do his worst. Elier, yet another name from another place far from Hesperia. It would be the last time she had to pray to a foreign god, she hoped. *Not yet*, she had to remind herself as Blas led her deeper into the church. *Not until you know where they are chaining him.*

They passed by tall windows covered in thin layers of dust and through tight, gray corridors that hadn't even been warmed by a nice rug or pop of color. Catalina folded her fan in fear that she would just blow dust right into her face.

"This is a very old church," she said.

"It was a fort once, when Hesperia's borders were smaller and the gods would not even pity us with a look." He said nothing of Elier locked below. Perhaps he didn't know at all. There had been something here, before Hesperia held a name, but the current memory never went farther back than a handful of Hesperian and Lutetian wars.

"Sensible, then, that the god of protection would make it his home. Galatine once said that even mortal ghosts can carry a god's name--perhaps they called out to him long ago." She sighed. "I'm sure the soldiers on the border front exhaust his name every night."

Blas flattened the front of his coat. "Speaking of the border front... As you well know, this church is very close to it. Svalinn's protection will never fail us, but do be aware of where the enemy lingers."

"Of course." He failed to mention what Catalina already knew about the Central Church--that if it fell, it would greatly weaken the faith of the people. Hesperia was a terrible land for farming, and most of the farmland they needed resided dangerously close to the war. King Cordero had to convince farmers to stay, pay them to pray to Svalinn and carry on their work feeding an entire army, or else Hesperia would have entered a famine long ago.

All of Hesperia was a delicate web with a raging spider on top. Catalina could see all the strings she needed to pull, but her hands would never be strong enough.

"I have heard there is a library here," Catalina said. "Will you show me?"

Blas' face stilled, and he pulled on the edge of his black glove. "Svalinn reserves that for priests who have earned his trust."

"Oh." She cast her eyes down. "I suppose I have much trust to earn. I'm certain the priests here will be waiting for me to turn my back on Svalinn as I did Galatine, wondering which god I will try to lend myself to next." She straightened her back and met Blas' gaze firmly. "I have no intention of moving from Svalinn's service. I served Galatine well as her High Priestess, and we both knew I was better off serving a god who needed more assistance."

Blas' smile was soft. "You wear your eagerness on your sleeve." He seemed to contemplate something for a moment, and Catalina knew that he was an easy catch to reel in. Pious, malleable, unobservant... She was more than pleased to work with this. "I can't let you peruse the books themselves, but perhaps a tour?"

"I don't wish to offend Svalinn."

"It's no offense. Come, come."

Catalina could hardly believe such a man had risen in the ranks of priesthood to stand by Svalinn's side. It was easy to picture a lesser god, one not hungry for power and prayers, to let a gentler soul in to represent them. Svalinn might deserve a more intense comb-through than Catalina had first assumed.

She caught whispers of priests passing by as Blas led her with confidence to the library in the Central Church. The door, a simple wooden structure that stood out against the harsh stone of the church, creaked open against a well traced mark on the floor, revealing a rather underwhelming spectacle. There were several shelves stocked with books, none of which seemed to be original copies, and it was considerably smaller than the central place of worship that the church had opened up into.

She took a step forward and noted the hollow sound beneath the floorboard. The further she walked in, the more the sound became noticeable to her. Hollow, likely. Something was beneath it. It could be nothing but poor structure. It could be Elier.

“Sometimes, Svalinn will come straight here,” said Blas. “These books are more for him than anyone else.” She didn’t imagine the god of protection was much of a reader. The library it was, then, until she found some other place of importance or intrigue.

“And yet they are restricted by seniority.”

“Svalinn’s choice. It would not be wise to question it.”

“Of course not. I, too, kept secrets for Galatine. It’s funny how the gods can be like us in such little ways. Their hobbies, their likes...” Her mind drifted to Arias, who would now have to entertain and discuss important matters with Galatine as she stared at herself in cracked mirrors and dreamed of an impossible, different reality. A few candles were lit in the room, giving a warm orange glow to it all, but she noted no windows and no extra doors. One way in, one way out. “Does anyone else come here?”

“Not often. The door is locked at night, and we can be very busy attending to our guests during the day.” Blas inhaled deeply. His dark eyes scanned the room, and Catalina watched intently to see where they fell. “Shall we continue?” he said, looking back at her.

“Lead the way.”

She kept her eyes peeled for any clues or resources that would tell her about the bowels of this place. This was no ordinary fort, meant to hold down Hesperia’s borders long ago. It was built on the corpse of a god, held together by his bones, and she knew that his heart was still beating somewhere deep inside. Blas had to know it, too. One did not become a High Priest without recognizing the telltale presence of a god, no matter how feint or feeble.

Blas was not a talkative man, nor one that seemed imbued with any sort of passion. He didn't notice much about Catalina, like the way her eyes darted between rooms, or how she lingered in obscure halls to peer at shadows for a second too long. What was it that had made this man such an attractive option to Svalinn for the candidacy of High Priest? The other priests milling about were far more mindful of her presence, and they were rightfully suspicious of her intentions. There had been little excuse given to her parting with Galatine, and they likely gossiped about how Galatine might treat her priestesses, or what Catalina stood to gain from entering Svalinn's service besides publicity.

Catalina put two fingers to her forehead suddenly. "Oh, I do believe the coming storm is beginning to give me somewhat of a headache. Where is it the priestesses stay in this church?"

Blas arched his eyebrows. "Right this way, Doña Catalina. I apologize for leading you around when you weren't feeling well."

She reopened her fan to blow the strands of her dark hair out of her face. "It was sudden. You have nothing to apologize for."

The quarters that Blas led her to were tight and cold, much like the rest of the place, but she was pleased to see that people here had rooms to themselves. With nothing more than a small window and a bed, Catalina had been downgraded from Galatine's service. A cobweb was growing in the corner of the room and the scent of mildew clung to the fabrics of the bed. She noticed the one piece of luggage she had brought on the carriage had been dropped off next to the door.

"I will send a priestess to attend to you. Will you join me for dinner tonight?"

Catalina gave him a weak smile. "I would love nothing more."

Blas gave a polite nod of his head before leaving the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. She waited for his footsteps to retreat down the hall before toeing it completely shut. She snapped her fan closed and looked to the cobweb where a small, black spider was peering down at her. Its many eyes could view the whole room, and its small legs could carry it into any crevice, unnoticed by the people who walked past.

Slowly, Catalina reached her closed fan up to it, prodding the edge of the web, and delicately, the spider crawled on. There had been one gift Galatine left her with as High Priestess, one blessing bestowed upon her as thank you for her service. Catalina still recalled kneeling against the cold marble floor before the goddess, her head hung low as she asked for a blessing that would let her control lonely creatures, to understand them and interpret them when no one else would bat their eye at their presence. They would be her little servants, as Catalina and the priests had been to Galatine. All those years ago, receiving a blessing from a goddess, Catalina had imagined that it was to make up for the coronation she would have, the blessings of Hesperia never there to grace her when the time came. Had it been a mocking gesture from Galatine? Or a sincere one? It didn't matter anymore. It was useful now, and she intended to control whatever tiny, isolated creatures she could get her hands on.

Galatine had blessed her, and now as she peered down at the spider, she could feel its small, insignificant thoughts of hunger washing over her. It was a creature without a goal, pliable to commands, and Catalina gave a small wish to the creature.

“Find the god,” she murmured. “Lead me to the one who will bring Hesperia’s destruction.”

She stretched her fan back up to the web and watched the spider crawl off of it, past its own web and deep into the crevices of Svalinn’s dearest church.



## Chapter Four

Catalina had to bide her time. All around her, spiders whispered of hidden depths to the Central Church of Svalinn, something powerful built into the bones of the old fort, but never the exact spot. She still considered the library, with its hollow, thin floors, and ancient feeling. Something was stuck beneath there, and there were small cracks they disappeared to, scurrying beneath the library doors as she passed them by longingly. When the moment was right, that was where she had to strike. Until then, there were still things she had to survey about the church, watching the younger priests slowly warm to her presence.

She kept to the outskirts of the church sometimes, eyeing the artwork Svalinn must have commissioned to make the church seem like a place of worship, and not a place of warfare. As she made her way through an outdoor path, she spotted movement on the farside of the courtyard.

A young priestess was bent low, gently scrubbing at the corner of a person etched into the relief of a wall. The courtyard behind them was devoid of much content, as if to draw all the attention to this walkway and beckon passerbys back inside. Catalina looked up at the grand relief the priestess was working on.

The three gods of Hesperia were pictured, as always. Svalinn, with his knight's helm, was kneeling firmly on the right as Hesperia's shield. Labrys was opposite him, his eyes bandaged and his legendary blade pointed out, always ready to promote warfare and victory. And then there was Pridwen, their flamboyant god of wealth and excess, strewn in beads and medallions that would have been painted gold, had Hesperia any love for painted figures at all. The three of them were poised like a boundary in front of one man, one ruler. It couldn't have just been Galatine who was hurt by such art excluding her. There were other minor gods who were left out,

stuck in a comfortable place not quite close enough to the fame and faith they once thought they would get.

Catalina tasted something bitter on her tongue. King Cordero was always at the heart of these images, stationed between and above his three gods as if he, too, were to be worshipped in evenings of prayer. He elevated himself to godhood, and lowered gods to shields and swords in his presence. His unpleasing arrogance radiated from every icon of himself painted across Hesperia's borders, watching over priests who prayed for his safety and soldiers that died for his divine expansionism.

"Doña Catalina," said the priestess, noticing her staring. "Is something wrong?"

Catalina shook her head, clasping her hands in front of her. "I was just taken in by this image, is all. It is quite grand."

The priestess stood up and stepped back to get the full view with her. "It's... certainly a popular one in these areas."

Catalina watched her out of the corner of her eye. Her mousy brown hair slipped from her shoulder to her back as she began to fold the cloth she was using, revealing spots of scarring. They were burn marks, and not terribly old ones either. "From here to the capital, I imagine."

"Do they have them in Galatine's church?"

"I'm afraid not. These sorts of works are commissioned by the king, yes? Well, they do little to bring support in for Galatine herself. She prefers her priestesses to paint her image." Not that it meant Galatine's satisfaction, of course. The goddess held a vile hatred for her painted appearance, no matter how hard Catalina and the others tried to please her with pretty smiles and perfect teeth painted against picturesque backgrounds. That little mirror of hers was the only

thing that reflected what she wanted to see, even as she continued to ask them for reliefs and pictures.

The priestess smiled, no doubt expecting to hear horror stories of Galatine. “That sounds lovely.” She held little joy when she looked back at the relief, however.

Catalina tilted her head. “I apologize, I’ve been a bit slow to learn the names of everyone here. What do you call yourself?”

“Ysabel.”

“Ysabel, I can’t help but notice you don’t seem entirely happy with the relief. Is it not to your liking?” Catalina’s mind was already turning out its own conclusions. Her young age, the burn scars, her status as a priestess here -- no doubt Ysabel came from one of Hesperia’s border towns and experienced the brunt of a siege. Priesthood was easy work for the skillless, abandoned orphans of Hesperia’s war, offering shelter and mobility, should their god like them enough. Likely, she was stuck between wanting Svalinn’s protection to be true and save her from future harm, and uncertainty that he may have already failed her once.

She put her own conclusions to the side, however. There were always surprises, and she was no mind reader, as useful as that may have been. Galatine’s blessing of understanding and controlling lonely creatures never extended to humans, it appeared. Catalina had tried many times before, of course, always to a disappointing outcome.

“King Cordero,” she began hesitantly, “has asked us to keep a lookout for a harvest god that has been wandering in and out of Hesperia’s borders.”

“A harvest god?”

“They say her name is Draupnir. She’s walked as far as the northern edges of the Sagitta River--some say she came by here, too.”

It made quite a bit of sense to Catalina. Ever since his ascension to the throne, conquest and expansionism had painted Cordero's rule in unshakeable colors, and his sudden string of victories were attributed to the gods he allied himself with. Without Svalinn's protection, Pridwen's wealth and Labrys' might, he would have never been able to turn the meek, whittled down Hesperia into the burgeoning empire it was now.

Cordero needed a harvest god in his pantheon, one that wasn't going to wander into Lutetian land to bless enemy fields, and one that was ready to tie their name down as a patron god of his country. From her time as High Priestess for Galatine, she knew that soldiers were beginning to suffer on both sides, and farmers were feeling the pains of sustaining more than their fields could bear. They were one bad harvest away from disaster.

"I'll have to keep an eye out for her as well," said Catalina.

Ysabel shook her head. "That's not what I worry about, Doña Catalina. I remember as a child my mother would tell me of different gods, ones that came from Hesperia's very own soil and its peoples' wishes. This Draupnir... even her name is difficult to pronounce. She comes from so far away, and yet His Majesty believes she can be persuaded to stay with us."

It was strange, yet pleasing to hear her own opinions voiced by someone. Ysabel was certainly younger than her, and she too recalled a different Hesperia from not that long ago, passed down to her by her mother. "Our god is a foreign one as well," Catalina reminded her, looking at the Svalinn etched into the relief. His helmet was nothing like what Hesperian soldiers wore now, and his clothes were a mismatch of something ancient and something strictly Cordero.

"Yes, and I don't doubt him. I don't doubt your former master, either. But whatever happened to the ones we used to speak of?" Ysabel sighed. "Have they abandoned us?"

*We abandoned them.* Hesperia's conquest was championed by foreign gods and a megalomaniac with a crown. Catalina spent most of her life surrounded by the false gods Cordero propped up in the aftermath of his ascension, watching as a country once proud of itself and loyal to its most ancient gods became bellicose and greedy for its neighbors wealth. Ysabel was just one of many voices that softly questioned what was happening, and yet she still prayed to Svalinn, still followed her king, and sat back as it all continued.

Catalina would not let herself be so passive.

"Our old gods still walk our lands," Catalina said. "Some gods are older than humans, and don't need our prayers to continue."

"And what of the ones that do? Will they fade?" There was trepidation in Ysabel's voice.

Catalina's chest tightened. For the gods who were born from prayer, they lived and died by human words. Without priests to preach and people to pray, they would eventually slip until not a soul remembered them. "Gods are never truly gone," she said. The sleeping god beneath Svalinn's church was surely a testament to that. She was eager to learn the specifics.

"I apologize for bringing this all up," Ysabel said. "I *am* faithful to Svalinn. I won't question his or His Majesty's intentions and strength."

Catalina gave a small shrug of her shoulders. "I believe in powerful gods and powerful men, such as you do. But I wonder why the fires of war still rage against all this might." Ysabel's eyes widened, and Catalina gave her a quick farewell before she could ask her any more questions.

From then on, Catalina could sense Ysabel watching her every move. It wasn't that the girl had put her under suspicion. Rather, she seemed curious that someone else in the church might share her worries, and just as Catalina was hoping, it was spreading among the younger

priests and priestesses. It was minor unrest, uncertainty about the future, fueled by reports of Lutetian soldiers pressing in on the border. King Cordero had never promised a swift war with Lutetia, but they had hoped all the same that it would be gone before they could blink. People weren't good at adapting to the idea of years and years of instability.

Catalina helped light a stick of incense during the evening with Blas, watching his furrowed brow out of the corner of her eye. They stood in the now empty place of worship, the pews devoid of followers as the last of the priests began to clear out and the lights slowly dimmed as their flames burned down.

"Svalinn is returning from the capital," Blas said suddenly.

"Wonderful news," Catalina answered.

"Lutetia is plotting something, he thinks. He wants to be here to protect his primary church."

"It must be stressful to have his most important place of worship be so close to the warfront." A thin trail of smoke swirled up from the incense.

Blas nodded stiffly. "Your prior work with Galatine has been immensely helpful to Svalinn and His Majesty."

Catalina paused what she was doing. "Then you're aware of what she and her priestesses do?"

"I have to be, as Svalinn's High Priest. What was the last thing you were made aware of before you left to join this church?"

Catalina began to unfold her fan from where it hung on her waist. She thought of the Lutetian soldier, his war-weary eyes and his clearly pampered background. Words of an attempt to take the Central Church had fallen out of him like brittle autumn leaves, and Catalina picked

up each and every detail. There had been times before him where worse tactics were used to grasp information, but none were meant to know what her church and her priestesses truly did. Secrets had to be kept, after all, even from the other gods and their priests, or until King Cordero gave them the go ahead to reveal something.

“I haven’t been with Galatine in over a month now,” Catalina said, and gods, it had felt longer than that. “If there are any recent developments, I couldn’t tell you.” She played with the laced edge of her fan. Memories of dark corners rank with blood and iron shackles made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. So many secrets drawn out of dried lips and weeping eyes, and so many she had kept for herself, away from even Galatine’s awareness. A month ago, those memories didn’t bother her. The missing soldiers that she had brought down there and never brought out. The hollowness of that room. They had been so normal, so expected. Why was the distance making it feel like a thorn in her heart, like the shadows of that room had followed her out the gates of Galatine’s church? Catalina had done horrible things and seen horrible things. They were nothing to reminisce about.

“I’m sorry--I know you no longer serve her. I just haven’t seen Svalinn on edge like this in so long, and we simply don’t know where they will strike next.”

Catalina had the knowledge to assuage Blas’ fear. She knew a Lutetian siege was planned for the upcoming moonless night, and had kept it from Galatine. If Hesperia’s soldiers weren’t aware, the Lutetians had a chance to break through the front and reach as far as the Central Church by sunrise. Amidst that chaos, Catalina would finally steal away to find the god hidden in the church’s depths..

“There is nothing that the Lutetians have gained in the last few months that should make you worry,” Catalina said. “Even if they make an attack, they have paled in these last few months. Their armies grow weak.” *Their armies wait like wolves before the hunt.*

“Should an attack happen--”

“Svalinn will protect us.”

Blas watched her for a moment, his dark gaze unreadable. Catalina wasn't sure what she saw in this man, and similarly, she could not imagine what Svalinn saw in him, either. There were no rough edges to him, as if life itself had never brushed past him, and a complete, unshakeable faith in Svalinn sat firmly in his heart. Even in her weakest moments, Catalina could never summon up the feelings of true devotion to Galatine. She was worlds apart from the man right next to her.

“Thank you,” Blas said. “You're absolutely right. I don't need to worry myself or others about this, not before Svalinn is given the chance to act.” There was a renewed energy to him, and Catalina wondered what his face would look like when the Lutetian soldiers finally descended upon them.

She counted the days to their inevitable arrival. Each day, the moon became a sliver of its former self, while the priests who wandered beneath it remained blissfully unaware of the upcoming threat. Hesperian forces would be broken through, startled by the Lutetian attack, and would skirt close enough to startle the church.

As the sun set on the final day, Catalina stood in her room and slipped on the headband that held the white cloth that covered the priests' faces. It was thin enough for her to see through, and at this hour it would be far from suspicious, given that all the priests wore them. She drew in



a breath, startled that it was shaky. *This was the plan*, she told herself. *This was the plan from the start. Beneath the library, follow the trail of spiders to where he lies.*

A shout in the distance startled her out of her thoughts. It couldn't have been far from the church itself. Finally, her time had come. The chaos would shield her from their eyes, and she would have a moment to speak the sleeping god's name without fear.

*I'm coming, Elier.*

## Chapter Five

Commotion took the Central Church of Svalinn by storm just as the stars had come out against a moonless night. Catalina hurried through the halls, her heels clicking against the stone floors as other priestesses evacuated their rooms at the sound of the bell being rung. They all wore the white veil over their faces--not enough time had passed for anyone to put on their evening gowns. This was not a suspicious attack in the dead of night, but rather a planned assault just as night was becoming its darkest.

Catalina followed the growing crowd until she spotted the hall the library was in. This was where all the spiders kept crawling off to, whispering of dark depths inaccessible to the rest. She kept an eye on the group as she split off from them and down the corridor, her heart thumping in her chest. The candles flickered dimly around her as she pressed her hands against the library door. *Locked, naturally.* She felt for the thin skeleton keys that sat in the pocket of her dress. There were several on a loop, and each one had been whittled to a point where they could get into most warded locks.

She fit the first key into the lock, and listened to it quietly click open. For a church, she would have thought some sort of ward or curse was sitting over it, since Svalinn was the god of protection. She felt no shimmer of a god's magic as she passed through the door into the dark library, and she closed the doors behind as she slipped inside, completely sealing herself off from the panic of the church.

Immediately, she heard that familiar sound of weak floorboards. The dim light of the night outside poured in through the windows, and Catalina spotted the barest movement of a bug across the floor. She followed its skittering black body until it came upon a bookcase in the back room and disappeared beneath it. She squinted to see if there were any skid lines across the

floorboards to indicate what she was supposed to do, but it was too dark. Kneeling on the floor, Catalina traced her fingers beneath the bottom of the bookcase. A cool wave of air hit her skin, and a chill ran down her spine.

This was it. The tingling, ice cold feeling of a god's presence crept over her, emanating primordial magics she could barely begin to understand. Somewhere behind this, or beneath this, was the sleeping god.

Something violently slammed into a part of the church near Catalina, shaking the entire room with the deafening sound of stone and brick falling apart. Books fell off the shelves and a nearby candlestick toppled over, spilling wax over the floor near her.

That was absolutely *not* in the plan. Had the Lutetians brought cannons? All the way from the border? Catalina gripped a nearby shelf, her nails digging into the wood. She thought she had gained everything she could from that man in Galatine's church. Her heart pounded in her chest. Fine then. If Lutetia intended to damage the church as much as possible, she would find a way to use it to her advantage. She wouldn't have to care about leaving the library in the exact condition she found it, because they would shake the foundation so terribly that trying to piece together what fell from her and what fell from the Lutetians would be impossible.

Catalina began to push on one side of the bookcase that stood in her way. With half the books on the floor, it was much lighter and easily toppled over with a crash, revealing a bare, dusty wall behind it. Her hopes had gone up at the expectation of a door or a ward blocking her way, only to descend right back down to rock bottom. She pressed against the wall, only for her heel to hit against a particularly loose board.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Catalina fell back to her knees, feeling the cool air come out from a loose floorboard that had been hidden beneath the bookcase. She expected a hidden door

or latch, but it was clear that these floorboards had been built right over something. The church was more of a rock on top of a piece of paper than it was a jail for the god. To her surprise, the planks lifted away easily, and would likely be as easily put back in place. Did Blas know about this? Was this his and Svalinn's secret? Or was it just Svalinn, sitting on a wealth of knowledge that could change Hesperia forever?

The more boards Catalina pulled out, the more a dark, stone staircase leading down was revealed to her. It was a thin, steep drop of steps that blew out a chilly breeze at her face and carried the sharp scent of herbs. Catalina wrinkled her nose to avoid sneezing. Carefully, she began to descend the darkness of the stairs, her hand trailing the cold stone wall next to her to keep her steady. The church shook around her with another blast that nearly sent her falling forward. These damned uneven steps were going to be the death of her.

Soon, only the wall and one foot after another guided her into the depths, down, down, down. Her breath must have been collecting in a fog in front of her by now. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping for an end. How long could she walk? How far below the earth did this creature sleep?

When she opened them, there was a soft, bluish glow towards the bottom of the stairs. She rushed forward, only to find that the stairs had changed from simple steps to spaced out pieces of stone that weren't connected to anything but the wall. Between them was nothing but an endless abyss, no floor to catch her, and tall ceilings that stretched into nothing. The room was vast, and the strange stairs circled around it in a downward spiral towards an isolated platform below, where that blueish glow emanated. With a bit more light, she could make out strange symbols etched on the walls around her hands, and... shadows?

They certainly looked like the shadows of chains, or very finely done soot marks, but they didn't rub away at her touch and there were no chains lined up against the light to make them appear against the wall. Catalina's stomach dropped as she glanced at the endless darkness below. It could go all the way to the center of the planet, for all she knew! The power of the gods must have carved this out beneath the church.

She held her breath as she began to take the strange steps. They were spaced further apart and steeper than the stairs behind her, and they were so thin that she had to go on her tiptoes, leaving her heels with no support to fall back on. *I've no gods to pray to for my safety, but for the love of all the names in the sky, don't let this be how I die.* The embarrassment of it all would kill her a second time, surely.

Her steps echoed through the room, but when she paused for a breath, something else was filling the silence. Pulsing. Thumping. She drew her hand away from the wall. All around her the room beat like the shell of a heart, slow and dying, steady and soft. All the strangeness of the world was concentrated here, and yet the distinct godly presence that had dogged Galatine's every step was gone here. Lost. This was certainly a grave for a god, chaining its ghost in place, perhaps even using it to sustain some sort of power to the church.

She continued down her path with fervor, following the wide spiral of stairs until she was staring at the straight path that led to the platform. The blueish glow was nothing more than a pale flame sat at the top of a torch, flickering dimly.

She had been right. She had spent so long looking for that lost name of that lost god, searching through archives that only a High Priestess like herself could have , avoiding the watchful eyes of a goddess known for keeping secrets, and it all could have led to dust and space. It had been for *something*.

The flame floated delicately above its torch, the shadows of chains on the floor beneath it illuminated by its glow. Catalina gently cupped her hands beneath the flame, and finally, *finally*, she felt the cool flicker of divinity. Something intangible and awe inspiring and chilling, all in the same moment, presenting itself at the first sign of the fact that this was truly a god. A god who should have been dead, or perhaps already was, but held on with the small remnants of his strength, waiting for a human to whisper his name and breathe life back into him.

“Elier,” Catalina whispered his name. The flame pulsed.

Cracking sounds filled the cavernous room, and large splits began to form on the walls around her. The shadows shifted, broken, fractured, and suddenly grew, sucking out every bit of light from the room. Her heart pounded in her chest as the slow creep of a god’s presence overcame her, and everything looked like it was about to fall apart with his awakened presence.

She looked down at the flame in the palms in her hands. “The first thing you do when you awaken is cause problems for me. I suppose gods of ruin don’t wake lightly.” The entire room began to shake, though she couldn’t tell if it was from Elier or the siege above. The steps she had taken down here were already so precariously placed, she had no clue if it could survive a shake like this.

The flame flickered vibrantly in her hands and began to drift skyward, towards the exit above. The edges of the platform she stood on began to tremble so hard that they fell off into the abyss below, weakening her standing, and Catalina wasted no second turning right back around to race up the poorly placed steps that had taken her here in the first place. If going down had been a nightmare, ascending with the place quaking around her was hellish. It was as if shackles were shattered, releasing Elier into the world after centuries of being shackled.

As she made her way back up in a rush, she could hardly believe she had been right about Elier. He was an old god, one that had popped up in many stories, yet remained firmly nameless so that no human could invoke his presence. Without a human to call his name and prayers to give him life, he should have fallen into the only death gods knew; oblivion. Every tome Catalina pulled apart had held a shred of hope for the nameless god despite this all. If he was truly dead, the gods of today wouldn't have gone so far to hide his final resting place.

All around her the room faded to darkness and noisy breaking as the flame of the god dissipated, leaving her to scramble up the steps in the darkness. Relief flooded her when she reached the normal stone stairs that had first taken her down here. Without the fear of falling into the depths of the church's basement, Catalina raced forward, feeling the presence of Elier dog her steps. She didn't know where the god had physically disappeared to, but she knew the presence of a lingering soul better than most.

When she reached the last step in the dim light of the library the church shook again, and even more bookshelves were on the floor than before. Was there going to be anything left of this church after the Lutetian attack? Maybe she had been wrong to put any faith in Svalinn--he clearly wasn't showing where he was needed.

Catalina threw open the door to the library, only to find that the hallway it led into was partially caved in with rubble, exposing the night sky. Distant shouting from outside drew Catalina's attention, and she caught a glimpse of people moving away from the church to try and find safety. At this point, Catalina wouldn't have to act scared when she ran out of the building. It truly was going to collapse on her if she didn't get herself moving. With little clue as to where the small flame of Elier had wandered to, Catalina began to rush down the stairs of the church to the exit, the halls abandoned and destroyed all around her.

“Catalina!” called the panicked voice of Ysabel as she came to the swung open door leading outside. Her voice sent relief through Catalina. She didn’t expect Ysabel to truly still be in here, but now, if she came out with her, her alibi would be solid.

Ysabel’s face was grayed with dust and the sleeve of her dress was torn, but she seemed otherwise alright. Catalina bared the girl no ill will, and she was glad to see she wasn’t injured. “What are you doing in here?” Catalina asked, stepping over fallen stones to reach her.

“I was checking to see if everyone had cleared out! Don Blas has gathered everyone outside the church. Gods, what are the Lutetians doing here?”

“You shouldn’t be the one crawling back through this rubble,” Catalina said, gently grabbing Ysabel’s arm to coax her out of the building. Part of her wondered if releasing Elier had weakened the church even more. It seemed as though every part of it was ready to fall to the ground around them. “Let’s go, now.”

Ysabel could hardly argue. Her face was flushed and her eyes watery as Catalina guided her out into the cold, damp night. She spotted movement of white clothes among the nearby treeline and made her way there with Ysabel in tow, keeping her grip firm. Many of the priests had their hands clasped together in prayer.

“Don Blas,” Catalina called out, unable to spot him from the crowd. The people crowding by him had hidden him from her view, and when he stepped out there was a bead of sweat on his brow. “Ysabel had gone back inside. Is anyone not accounted for here?”

“No, no, you two are the last ones.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You *must* keep an eye on those you’re in charge of. Where is Svalinn?”

“He should be arriving--”



Blas was cut off by the sudden uptick of wind, and a strong presence behind Catalina sent a shiver down her spine. She let go of Ysabel and turned around to see the towering stature of a god standing over her.

Svalinn was draped in a dramatic cloak and heavy pieces of armor and chainmail, seeming quite human in size. His head, however, was completely covered by a golden helmet with the visor pulled down, blocking his gaze. All the gods hid their eyes from humans, for if a mortal looked at them, it was said that a terrible fate would befall them. By all the gods though, Catalina wished she could see his eyes, just to know how deeply they stared into her soul. Gods were not omniscient, not all-knowing and powerful and incorruptible, and he had no way of knowing what her intentions were here.

Still, his head was angled down at her. Catalina straightened her back. Behind her, the other priests bowed their heads, some still muttering prayers into their closed hands.

“Svalinn, protector of us all,” Blas greeted, his voice tight with fear. “The Lutetians have cut farther into the border than expected. We had no word this was going to happen.”

“Yes,” Catalina said with far more judgement in her voice. “I presume the gods had an inkling of this event, and yet there was nothing here to protect us until now.”

Svalinn turned towards Blas, ignoring her. “Move away from the church.” His voice echoed through his helmet. “It is unsalvageable.”

“But, this is your most holy place of worship. We can come back to rebuild it, stronger than before.”

Svalinn raised his right hand over his chest, revealing a gauntleted hand that was shaped like sharp claws at the end. “I am here to fulfill my duty. Leave here.” Blas did not try to argue

further, and Svalinn turned his back on them, disappearing into the night's edge, where the Lutetians were readying their rolled in cannons once more.

Moments later, Catalina saw an array of something orange out in the distance, like a thin smoke trailing out of the forest, and the sudden cries of startled men. Near them, the church shuttered, not from the impact of another cannon, but from its own weight, and she watched with shock as the entire building came down. Every piece, from edge to edge, collapsed, as if one brick had been pulled out that kept the whole thing up. Wings of priests' quarters and rooms of worship and prayer were all gone in one fell swoop. The library and its sealed tomes would be difficult to recover from this.

Catalina turned back to see the scared, shaking forms of the other priests. Among them, Ysabel looked downright ill, her eyes wide and her lips a thin, trembling line. For many of them, this was the first time seeing any sort of weakness of the Hesperian gods. Svalinn may have been with them now, charging into the fray as if he were an army unto himself, but his central church had collapsed, and he hadn't been here for the brunt of the attack.

"This is what you all receive from years of prayer?" Catalina said, turning her tone bitter. The priests looked up at her.

"Svalinn is here," Blas reminded her.

"Svalinn is *late*. Anyone could have been in there, or crushed by cannon fire. And now we are to abandon his very own church, one of Hesperia's centers of culture? This church sits closest to our border with Lutetia. How does this not make us look weak right now? Svalinn couldn't even protect his most prized home. This is not the protection I was promised when I left Galatine's service."

Blas stared at her in confusion, but around him, some of the priests had a renewed confidence at her words. Ysabel couldn't have been the only one filled with trepidation at Hesperia's rapidly changing landscape.

"Don Blas, forgive me for this, but this is not what I expected when I transferred my services here. If this is the level of care given..." She let herself trail off.

"The gods are not perfect," Blas admitted. His gaze darted to the destroyed church. There was something else confusing him about the mess, but she couldn't discern what. "But churches are not the soul fountain of our faith. As long as we remain steadfast in our beliefs, then they will come to answer us. I understand your concern, but Svalinn is here now, and just as he has before, he will ensure Hesperia's borders and eliminate the Lutetian forces."

"I don't recall Lutetians reaching this far before," a priest muttered behind her.

Catalina shook her head. "When I was with Galatine, we were each well taken care of, and she is hardly the god that Svalinn is." She sighed, taking a step back. "Perhaps I will take myself to the capital."

His eyes widened. "What for?"

"I've been hasty in my decisions since I left Galatine. I want to know the state of service with both Pridwen and Labrys."

"So soon? Doña Catalina, I--" Blas paused. "I am sorry that these events have disappointed you. Both the High Priests of Pridwen and Labrys would be eager to speak to you, I'm sure."

His sudden resignation to her words was suspicious, but moreover, he seemed oblivious to how uncertain that was making the priests around him. Once again, Catalina was convinced that Svalinn had chosen a man who was half a fool for this position. Maybe Blas and Svalinn did

know what she had done just moments ago, but neither was eager to act on it, even when she was vulnerable to any attack, and especially now that she was announcing her leave of Svalinn's service for the capital.

"Take everyone to the town in the east," Catalina said. She caught Ysabel's panicked gaze. "I suggest you all think over this evening."

"You're not coming with us?" Ysabel asked in a meek voice.

"The road to the capital is south." She watched Blas, who normally would have objected to anyone walking the roads late in the night, remain utterly silent at her words. "I believe I'll see you at the Summit of the Gods in three months' time," she said to him.

"Yes," Blas said. "You likely will."

She turned her back on him, ignoring the small objection that Ysabel was raising, and abandoned the group. The sounds of the Lutetian siege had completely died down at this point, and she felt more safe wandering the night alone than staying with Blas and waiting for Svalinn's return. Even having her back face the group left her on edge, uncertain of what moves they might make.

It had never been her intention to fully hide her actions in freeing Elier, but just how much did Blas know of the situation? And did Elier's existence here predate even Svalinn's time as a god? Soon, she would have the protection of another god, and she wouldn't have to feel so skittish around Hesperia's pantheon.

The road to the capital was dark and shrouded in great trees that crowded her in on every side, casting shadows over her walk. She paused, spotting a figure standing a few feet from her on the road.

When she got closer, she saw it was a man standing very still, a small flame in the palm of his hand illuminating him. His skin was a paled, sickly gray, his lips dried and dark, and his body clad in clothes Catalina did not recognize. They were black, cinched at the waist with some sort of decorative rope, and draped onto the floor like a robe, while one sleeve hung off of his shoulder, exposing his right arm and the strange lettering inked on it in pure black. His eyes were covered by bandages that were torn and stained.

He closed his hand around the flame, and it dissipated.

So this was what Elier truly looked like. Like Svalinn, he was so close to being human, and yet several steps away from it. Catalina smiled at him, feeling for the first time in a while that all of her efforts to track him down had paid off.

“I hope you’re happy to abandon your slumber,” she said. “The king of Hesperia awaits us.”

## Chapter Six

Maybe it was the fact that the god's eyes were covered by bandages, or that his thin lips seemed incapable of moving even to draw a breath, but Catalina found herself struggling to get any read on Elier. The two of them had continued down the southern road to the capital in silence, but as the night carried on, Catalina made the decision to settle for the night, having some familiarity with camping out. It hadn't occurred to her that she would not have a companion who would never complain about his needs. The gods didn't eat or sleep, or at least she had seen no evidence of such from Galatine. If Catalina wanted to get some rest, it would be solely up to her to call those shots.

The night pressed around her as she stared at Elier, impatient with his silence. Oh, Galatine had never wasted a *moment* to talk. It bothered her that Elier's quiet made her crave such a thing. She looked at the black letters on his arm, written in letters she did not recognize.

"Do you truly have no words for me?" she asked. If she were in his situation, she would have been dying for answers. Was there no curiosity about who brought him back? Or even how long he had been gone? Catalina had no interest in withholding any information from him. He was the essential part of her plan in tackling the gods, and Elier was already familiar with at least Svalinn, if the journal was anything to go by.

Elier, sat with his back leaning against a tree, very still like a rigid corpse, only inclined his head slightly toward her, like he had caught the loud chirp of a cricket more than an interesting conversation.

Finally, he asked a question. "Are we in Ilspet?" His voice was low and rough, hoarse from disuse. The wind through the dry branches above nearly drowned him out.

Catalina shook her head. "The name of this country is Hesperia."

“Then what do you drag me here for?” There was an edge to him now, like he was teetering on the line of boredom and annoyance. Catalina didn’t think it would serve her well to have a powerful, destructive god fall into either of those moods.

“To me, you are a very old god who once nearly got the best of a god named Svalinn. At the time, he would have been accompanied by other small gods as well, namely Pridwen and Labrys. While you fell into shadows, they have long since grown to be the major gods of Hesperia.”

Elier fell quiet again. Was it rage that burned beneath his still face? Would he share Catalina’s desires for revenge? Maybe she was wrong--maybe she had messed up terribly. Those centuries in captivity, held in a state of death or sleep that only gods could experience, may have ruined him for good. The stories of a terrible ruination brought on by his name alone were so old as to be legends more than events. There had always been the chance that Elier was not what he once was. Catalina would have to do so much more work to mold him into the spear she needed, then, and more work meant more time for King Cordero to destroy Hesperia from the inside out.

“They have grown?” Elier asked.

Catalina nodded once.

“Then this Hesperia is their doing,” he said.

“No, no. Hesperia existed before they rose to power. They only gained prominence in the last two decades. Hesperia had gods before them.”

In a strange display, there was a sudden smirk on his face. “So your old gods have abandoned this land.”

“They have not abandoned it. It has been changed beyond what they once ruled,” she explained. “You know too little of the circumstances to accuse them of such a thing.”

Elier went quiet, and once again, Catalina was unsure of what to make of him. The thoughts that ran through a god's mind were intriguing to her, moreso now than ever before. It was possible he even knew some of the Hesperian gods, before there was even a Hesperia for them to rule. For much of her childhood, she was told that those gods had come to be with the people of the nation, but it wouldn't surprise her to learn they were much older, tied more to the land they walked on than the flags that flew over them.

"How did Svalinn rise to power?" Elier finally asked. "That little man seemed incapable of anything more than whining when I last spoke to him."

Catalina raised an eyebrow. It had been partially Svalinn's doing that placed Elier beneath the Central Church. Speaking so confidently was not in the god's best interest. "A king, Cordero, usurped the throne. He promised them the support and prayers of the Hesperian people, and in turn, they gave him defense against his enemies. I assume they have known each other for some time, well before he took over. He's protected by Svalinn, Pridwen and Labrys, but there are also minor gods that have joined his collective."

Elier leaned his head back against the tree, looking up at the dark canopy. If he could see through those bandages at all. "Such as?"

"Galatine."

"Entirely useless. Is that all who follows?"

Catalina wasn't sure why those words dug at her. She could not defend Galatine and proclaim her use--that wasn't her job. She could not have any emotions towards the goddess.

"Nok overlooks sea travel and trade."

Elier nodded. "So you want me to take down this king?"



“Not the kings. The gods that protect him. Beneath their divine shield, King Cordero is just a man, as weak as any. I don’t need a god to kill him, but I *do* need a god to break through that shell. And in the end, isn’t it quite magnanimous of me to grant you this chance for revenge? From what I understand, you were locked up down there a long, long time.”

Elier snorted. “Oh, it wasn’t *personal*.” The bitterness in his voice said the opposite. “I wasn’t sealed because I was Elier, or because I devastated this land and ruined the domains of hundreds of gods for centuries.”

“Why, then?”

“Because I am proof that a man can kill a god.” His tone had softened, the memories no doubt hurting him. She had expected more rage to come from him, like the rage she felt over the death of her mother and father. The god she was looking at seemed rather more... broken.

*Unusable.*

“Clearly not,” she countered. “You were simply dormant in Svalinn’s most treasured church, and I have brought you here now.”

“If a god’s name is forgotten, they die,” Elier said. “More specifically, if humans cease to pray to them. The only reason I held on, dormant as you say, is because *gods* were remembering my name. Svalinn would have been happy to let me go to waste, my name dust in the wind, except that he and the others would forget the circumstances that put me there, and how dangerous it was for them. A god remembered only by other gods is hardly a living being at all. It’s a step removed from death.”

Catalina frowned. Many gods did fall to the swift sands of time. It was inevitable that some be forgotten, or their names traded for new ones. That was the threat gods thrived against,

hungry for prayers and wishes to keep them afloat. “They exemplified you as a reminder that a human can kill a god?”

Elier leaned forward, his hands knit together. His posture suddenly seemed so human, like a man she might find in a tavern, down on his luck. “That’s one part, yes. Other reasons too, I’m sure.”

“Then, tell me. How does a man kill a god?” This could be easier than she assumed. If she could do it, she would. Svalinn and Pridwen and Labrys--she could do it. Whatever was burgeoning in her chest felt like a corrupted hope, a desire to be the one to see it through, rather than pawn it off to a third party. She tried to quash it.

“You kill all of the god’s followers,” Elier said as if it were the easiest, simplest thing in the world. He even shrugged his shoulders, shaking off some of his rigidity.

Catalina swallowed. There were many, many followers of Hesperia’s main gods. Cordero had preached far and wide for them. It wouldn’t even surprise her to hear that they were worshiped outside of Hesperia’s borders, both by Hesperians who left and those who lived in the lands those gods came from.

“Seems like a foolish thing to joke about,” she said, annoyance in her tone.

“You think I’m joking?”

“One man cannot kill all of a god’s followers. You can weaken their faith--which I intend to do--but the only thing that can naturally wipe a god’s name from this planet is the march of time.”

“It would have to be an extraordinary man,” Elier conceded. “But it’s not impossible. It’s never impossible to raze countries and cultures to the ground.”

Catalina wished he were easier to read. Part of her still felt like he was toying with her, like a cat might with a mouse. “I don’t have time to hunt down every last follower, and as I told you, my goal is their king. If *you* wish to seek vengeance against those three, I won’t stand in your way. I will help preach your name across Hesperia, and return you to the god you once were, so long as you get them out of the way long enough to kill Cordero.”

“And then what?” Elier asked. “Assume the throne yourself? Mend the wounds this Cordero has caused?”

It wasn’t meant to be easy, but she was prepared to take that journey. If she hated Hesperia, she wouldn’t bother trying to take the throne back. It was because she loved her country, and the legacy of her parents, that she sought to rectify its current state.

“That’s for me to worry about,” Catalina said.

Elier tapped his foot, something clearly on his mind. Catalina watched him closely. “Tell me something. Do you see yourself as Hesperia’s savior? Do you think we will lower the people’s faith in these gods easily?”

“They have been lied to,” Catalina said. “Cordero has made them forget what Hesperia is meant to be, deluded them with this war on Lutetia and erased the names of our gods from our churches.”

Elier stood up suddenly, startling her. “The only delusion here is yours,” he snapped.

“Excuse me?”

“I hear the way you’re talking. You think we will just release these poor Hesperians from the command of a tyrant. You’re looking at a broad picture painted by your own biases, but let me tell you something very important. If those gods are standing strong now because of your king, being worshiped by your country, then you are in no position to save anyone. They don’t

want you to--they believe in Svalinn and the others.” Elier’s chuckle was spine chilling. “You will have to hurt these people much more than you think if you want to break their faith. What sort of person goes around ruining the lives of her fellow countrymen just to enact a regime change?”

Catalina stood up as well, a cold night wind blowing through the trees. “They are already hurting. War kills our men, drains our country, with only the highest officials reaping any benefit.”

“Do they hate Lutetia?” Elier asked.

“That’s not--”

“Do they hate them? Does Hesperia see itself as the superior half to this land? I may have been gone a long time, but humans never change. They will dig their heels in and get defensive when under attack. Your actions will just drive them further into the arms of Cordero.” Elier began to pace, his hand on his chin. “I would gladly silence each and every follower that Svalinn, Pridwen and Labrys have. It wouldn’t be a favor to you for bringing me back--it would be the only thing left for me to do in this world.”

“I am not seeking the destruction of Hesperia,” Catalina said. “The people can be saved. It’s just that none of them have the power to save themselves.”

“That’s not just your arrogance speaking. There’s something else.”

Catalina frowned. Even to her own ears, she sounded ridiculous. Elier’s words were thoughts in her mind long before they met. Cordero was a *popular* king, much as it pained her to admit. He was dangerously building an image for himself in the minds of the Hesperian people, and it was this image that made her fight a race against time.

“I am afraid that King Cordero seeks to deify himself,” she admitted. Elier had to know everything. He had to be aware of every pitfall and every backstory if he was going to help her. Or seek his revenge, whichever form his actions took. When the sheep’s wool was pulled from their eyes, the Hesperians would be left to choose. Those who still ran back to the foreign gods would be forced to reckon with Elier, it seemed. She did not think it would be a significant amount.

Elier stopped pacing. “Now that *would* be a dilemma, wouldn’t it? It’s not a very easy thing to do, you know. You may be worrying about nothing at all.”

Catalina shook her head. “I know him.” She saw the signs of it everywhere. The portraits of him with his gods surrounding him, as if he were a member of the pantheon himself. The way he kept Pridwen close to the capital at all times, or how he was always depicted with the same icons, the way they often did with the gods.

Gods were born of human wishes and human prayers. Their stories and fears and wants given shape and motive. It was not uncommon for an ancient tree, standing tall at the center of a clan or a civilization, to find itself prayed to by the people around it, and then soon after become a god itself. Not every god began without a face. It was rare, but it *was* possible for an outstanding human to be seen as god-like by the masses, and once someone was god-like, how many steps were they truly removed from being a god themselves?

Catalina was too sure of it to not consider it an option. Cordero had killed his brother, her father, to take the throne. It was a pure power grab, and if a power-hungry man thought he could have more, why not take it? Truthfully, she could see parts of herself in that line of thought. If the potential was there, to become a god, she imagined there would be very few people in the world who would say no to it.

“Even further proof that he is popular with his people,” Elier said.

“If you’re not going to help me, just say so.”

“Why would I say no to destroying a country?”

Catalina flinched. She was well aware that she was unleashing a god of ruination on her home. She only needed him channeled at the other gods, and not recklessly running through Hesperia.

“We are not destroying Hesperia,” she told him. “The Hesperia that matters is already on the verge of collapse, if not dead entirely. I intend to bring it back. A rebirth, if you will.”

Once again, Elier left her in silence. He sat back down, his pacing seeming to have drawn out whatever energy had built up in him. She waited for him to say something, to agree or to laugh in her face. Without any other human to speak his name, Elier was doomed to fall back into oblivion if he refused her, but for all she knew, that was what he wanted. He had known it for quite some time, after all.

Years of working with Galatine had told her what gods wanted, but knowing what they had in common somehow made it more difficult to understand what each individual was after. What sort of loneliness was Galatine chasing away? What sort of companionship was Svalinn holding onto with a man like Blas at his side? One could be aware that humans were united in their desire to eat or be sheltered, but that knowledge would never give them the upperhand in deciphering their deeper qualities.

She didn’t know where to begin with Elier. Once he had worshipers again, she didn’t know what would follow.

“You mentioned a god of sea travel and trade,” Elier finally said, though it had been so long since they talked that Catalina’s eyes were half closed with sleep.

“Nok,” she said.

“You’ll want to isolate these gods from their partners. Unreliable trade will upset many of them. It’ll make it personal, if you will.”

“We aren’t headed in that direction,” Catalina said. She inhaled sharply through her nose. At the moment, it was better to take his advice, and make herself seem more pliable to his ideas than she wished to be. “But we can make amends to that in the morning. Does this mean you’ll help me?”

Like a cat settling in for a nap, Elier reclined against the tree behind him. “For now.”

It was enough for her. The smallest bit of aid could freefall into the events she needed. If Elier wanted destruction, then she would set him down on a controlled path of it, and let him believe he had wrought it all himself.

Still, sitting across from a god that had been dormant for so long, known to have caused unspeakable torment to the world long ago, made it difficult for her to find any bit of sleep. Elier was still, his shoulders not even moving with breath, and Catalina found herself watching him until she could keep her eyes open no more, and drifted into sleep.