

Chapter 1: Tandilashvili Home

It's funny, the lengths people will go to forge distinctions between like things.

It was an odd thought to have while crouched in the dark under a goat. Then again, what would count as a normal one? Yuna's mind was usually still waking up at milking hour, as numb as her fingers in the pre-dawn frost. It felt contradictory that the tales cautioning children against being out after dark had no qualms about waking before dawn. She would have to try that argument on her mother tomorrow. *What, the wicked things of the night simply decide they've had a reasonable amount of fun and turn in early?*

The eastern constellations might have faded into the blue horizon, but the northwestern sky still held the Daughters of the Dead. That meant that at some point, someone had noted all seven stars still visible and proceeded to call this dim twilight "*morning*." The audacity. They must have been operating with similar logic to whichever farmers or shepherds had declared this second winter "*springtime*." With the alpine meadows barely thawed enough for bright new grass to emerge, it resembled it— if one squinted their eyes and ignored the searing cold for several more weeks. In the meantime, the marshy earth was sprouting green and it was Yuna's duty to ensure that it was immediately eaten by goats.

It was, above all, both a glorious and terrible season. A welcome reprieve for the bottom half of a land crowned in eternal winter, but a time of restlessness. Not just for waking bears and unstable snow, but for the unseen landlords of the mountains and trees.

These stirrings shepherded in the sense of unease that always accompanied the change in season.

The seasonal miners were more particular about what constituted “*spring*” and would be arriving on some calendar date late enough to ensure the tree leaves and wildflowers arrived first. It was not the way they defined spring differently that had been bothering Yuna enough to inspire her rare morning pondering. It was the way they defined themselves. They wore their distinctions from the people of the remote hinterland they worked in as if it was a badge of courage. For example, they referred to Iskere, with its collection of farms and pastures in the narrow river gorge, as “the armpit of the mountain king”. If you asked what kinds of places they hailed from? Also farms and pastures in river gorges. Just better ones.

Not about to take offense lying down, Iskere locals had coined a private joke: “If our Village is *eqat*, then yours is *iltarang*.” As a little girl, Yuna had attempted to repeat the phrase to a group of miners, earning the stern cupping of her father’s hand across her mouth. She could see where she’d gone wrong. Though Avto’s position as mine supervisor gave the Tandilashvili family a degree of respect, telling the workers they hailed from the groin of the mountain king was, admittedly, going too far.

Yuna’s mother had suggested a more dignified pushback. From that day on, the meadows in which the Tandilashvilis goats grazed were renamed *iphoyn*, meaning His Shoulder. Yuna had argued that dignified was less satisfying— and didn’t the name rather confirm the armpit sentiment? Still, after countless visits, the title had stuck.

And no matter how nicely Gulara had named it, the goats resisted going. Yuna would have gotten to her knees at this point if it weren't for all the manure. "Don't you see you are a lucky animal to have an invitation to dine at the table of the sky and clouds?" Yuna begged a moth-colored goat who was picking through willow fodder scraps on the floor. Grasping it by the horns, Yuna was almost knocked onto her backside as she yanked the stubborn animal outdoors. The honor of the dining arrangement seemed to be lost on the gray doe, because as soon as the shepherd girl let go, it cut back toward its shelter.

"You can't expect them to have an appreciation of the finer things in life when they were raised by us," Yuna's mother said wryly as she approached. Grinning, Gulara dropped a cloth-wrapped block into her daughter's hands. Unwrapping it too quickly, Yuna let out a sound of disgust as her thumb sank into a lump of butter.

"For the totem in the corner," her mother instructed, leaning in the doorway to survey the barn's interior. Yuna was about to argue that the offering wouldn't increase the fat and milk in the goats any more than grazing. But Gulara whistled once, and the mousy gray goat joined the rest without fuss. Yuna's jaw dropped. Then again, she thought as she smeared the unpleasant greasiness against the carving, her mother obviously knew more about goats than she did.

"You deserve your own monument in town," Yuna told her. "If Markhum has a counterpart who leads goats to grass, you would be that goddess."

“Who would carve that?” Gulara scoffed, stroking one of the newest goat kids before mounting her mule. “These layabouts who didn’t even want to leave the pasture this morning?”

“You would have to gift them with hands first,” Yuna agreed with a smirk, wiping her own fingers on the butter cloth and tossing it aside before mounting the mule at her mother’s back.

The monument they were referring to was an ancient stone megalith in the center of Iskere. It was a land of many such relics— Remnants of sleeping religions left strewn on the mountain slopes by the receding waters of time. This particular monument had once shown an inscription to a goddess of the hunt, Markhum. A beautiful huntress, she was believed to endow the eyes of the worthy with sight and lead them trancelike to their prey. But the inscription had long-since weathered away, leaving only legend.

“Oh that would be perfect,” Gulara laughed. “A whole herd of ineptly charmed goats with backward hands or six arms— could you imagine?”

“They could be pets of the witches.” Everyone knew witches had inverted feet.

“Ah. At least you’re accusing me of being a goddess instead of witch,” her mother said, lifting a leg to point the upturned toe of her beaded boot. Not backwards. *Though, it’s not a surefire tell.*

“I think it’s the hat,” Gulara said, adjusting the tall fur cap over her ears in preparation for the canyon winds. “The goats just assume I’m one of them.”

“You basically are,” said Yuna, dodging as a dried apricot was chucked in her direction. It was happily gobbled up by a goat within seconds.

They exited the pasture, following the curve of road around the mountain face. Far below, Yuna could see a string of miners making pilgrimage across the patchwork of brown fields. Her father would be up by now, heading to join the ant trail as they disappeared into the tunnels. If it turned out to be a good day, Avto would be one of several men exchanging the rosy jewel-tones of a rising dawn for the deeper wine reds of garnet and topaz. If it was a normal day, their world would be black and gray, with only the occasional glow of magic. If it was a bad day... Yuna caught herself biting at her dry lips and wished she'd kept some of the butter.

At present, her own mortality was a not-quite welcome distraction from her father's. Yuna could not get her mule to walk anywhere but at its sister's backside, which was also *right* along the edge of the dropoff. A tight grip and whispered threats did nothing to sway her mule, which was a shame. If only Yuna could stop imagining scenarios of rolling down a ravine on horseback long enough to enjoy the views; they were stunning.

Except for the glaciers, the snow on the mountain walls around them was not deep. It stretched out in smooth lumps over rocks and mounds of vegetation like an inverted cloud, with gray slabs of stone mottling underneath. There was something mysterious about the way the white mists shrouded parts of the hills, like the ground beneath could have been the realm of dragons or part of a vast ocean of white crashing against jagged cliffs. It was easy to see why such places were said to be the realm of local deities. *I would build myself a palace of ice and shadow here, too.*

Admittedly, the bleating of goats ruined the ambiance. They were aided in this by Yuna's own mother, who flung her arms wide like eagle's wings.

"Does the sun not shine everywhere alike
Or does it shine only on the best places?
Dance, Lalla, with nothing on
But air. Sing, Lalla,
Wearing the sky.
Look at this glowing day! What clothes
Could be so beautiful, or
More sacred?"

Gulara then let out a carefree shriek that had the flock running like dust-bunnies hit with a broom.

"Avalanches!" Yuna protested, rolling her eyes through her laughter. "And you know Lalleshwari's poem is about dancing naked in the woods, right?"

"It *is* getting warmer," Gulara said, eyeing *iphoyn* with a sly smile. "Maybe I'll try reciting it that way next."

Yuna scoffed. True, the vast meadow they were entering was green at the bottom, but the trees lining it were skeletal. They blended into a thick carpet of evergreens framed by sheer cliffs and icy waterfalls. Yuna knew her imagination was too good when she could almost swear the frozen pillars were flowing. *It's too early for that.* She hugged her stomach that had clenched reflexively.

The mountain passes between Iskere and Gilgit would be opening soon, and gone would be the leisurely voyages to *iphoyn* with her mother. A steady stream of travelers, traders, and researchers would trickle through the Tandilashvilis' guesthouse— that was the exciting part.

Not all of the spring thaws would be equally welcome. *People will be able to leave*. Why anyone wanted to leave this for a city plagued by politics and powerful families, Yuna would never understand. *Powerful* was an understatement when these families were made up of mortals who, by whatever stroke of luck or favor, had been born with magic. And still, Prem and Bek were both eager to go there and live among them.

She couldn't think about that now unless she wanted a storm cloud over her head for the rest of the morning. She would rather brood over the other downside to the passes thawing: Lord Zhang and his family would visit. It was Iskere's much more tangible and powerful landlords, not the invisible creatures of the earth, who were responsible for the general anxiety within the valley. *After all, the only thing more frightening than the witches among you are the witches from someplace else.*