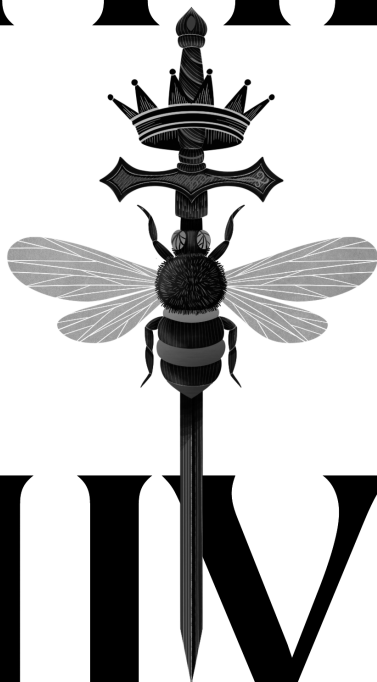


A FUTURE QUEEN LIES  
MURDERED...

THE



HIVE

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*For H and R.*  
*Keep asking questions.*

*We're not always selfish hypocrites.  
We also have the ability, under special circumstances,  
to shut down our petty selves and become like  
cells in a larger body, or like bees in a hive,  
working for the good of the group . . .  
Our bee-like nature facilitates altruism,  
heroism, war, and genocide.*

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*

# THE ROYAL FAMILY



**Doralie**  
Elder Queen

**Ixion**  
Shieldmaster

**Gregor**  
Treasurer

**Xavierre**  
Head Medic

**Halimeda**  
The First  
Shield: Gneiss

**Nikolos**  
The Sixth  
Shield: Slate (deceased)

**Karissa**  
The Ninth  
Shield: Quartz

**Pyrene**  
The Fourth  
Shield: Breccia

**Alexios**  
The Eighth  
Shield: Flint

& three  
younger



**Sirene**  
Younger Queen

**Alathea**  
Chief Advisor

**Trystan**  
Keeper of the Records

**Calista**  
The Third  
Shield: Porphyry

**Euphemie**  
The Seventh  
Shield: Feldspar

& two  
younger

**Leandros**  
The Second  
Shield: Basalt

**Ophion**  
The Fifth  
Shield: Gabbro

**Zephrine**  
The Tenth  
Shield: Marl



## FIRST MURDER

Wherever you are in the Hive, you can hear the hum of electricity. I'm not sure why it hums. Most of the time, it's just background noise, something so common that it doesn't even register – like the earthy damp scent of the passageways. Like breathing. But at least once a day, as it has this morning, the hum changes to a more urgent pitch, and that's when I know a storm is coming.

I touch the cool stone wall behind me for reassurance, then catch myself doing it and drop my hand. I'm a shield, raised with a single purpose: to protect my charge. I shouldn't be afraid of lightning. I shouldn't be afraid of *anything*.

'Feldspar!' Euphemie calls me, voice high and imperious. She's in front of the mirror, her handmaiden arranging her braided hair in a complicated crown, stormglow from the wall panels bathing their faces in yellow light. I move smoothly to her side, bowing my head.

‘Seventh.’

‘Oh, stop that. You know I hate it.’

I look up, meeting her reflected gaze, but say nothing. She knows I have to call her by her title when anyone else is present. Alone is a different matter.

‘Fine, have it your way.’ She sticks her tongue out at me, and I do everything I can to remain impassive, despite my silly urge to giggle. When we were little, our second-nurse used to say that Euphemie and I were mirror images of each other: warm brown eyes and quick, mischievous grins, whispers and private jokes filling the air between us like electricity. But that was before I grew tall and broad-shouldered and serious, while she stayed small and dainty and full of fun.

‘Well?’ she asks, turning so I can see the full effect of the golden threads woven into her hair, matching the thick make-up that lines her eyes. ‘How do I look?’

*Beautiful.* But I say stolidly, ‘The new style suits you.’

She dismisses the handmaiden with a wave of her fingers, then looks at me expectantly.

‘It suits you, *Euphemie.*’

‘So it should,’ she says, rolling her eyes. ‘It took long enough. You’re lucky you don’t have to bother with all this nonsense.’ Dancing across the room to pick up a scarf, she throws over her shoulder, ‘Read me today’s messages, would you?’

I begin working through the small pile, brought by the courier at sunup. ‘Umber thanks you for the invitation, and will

gladly attend your party in ten days' time. Sienna too. The Second is sadly otherwise engaged with . . .'

But I lose the thread of that third message, because I've glimpsed the fourth and final one below it. Thick paper, unlike the flimsy green slips of the others. Addressed to *Euphemie, Seventh Ascendant* in forceful black characters. And on the back . . . I turn it over, my throat dry. A pointed oval with five alternating horizontal stripes and six equally spaced lines radiating from it. The royal emblem.

I break the seal and unfold the expensive paper, but I know what it says without having to read it. A message from the Apex – the Hive's royal council – can only mean one thing. My pulse accelerates, the two queens' signatures blurring in front of my eyes. But this is Euphemie's duty, and mine, and I should be glad of it.

'There's to be another Winnowing,' I say. 'The day after your party.'

In the answering silence, I lift my head and am caught by her frozen gaze. Beneath the make-up, her face is stiff, her lips dry. There have only been two previous Winnowings since she came of age a year ago. Perhaps she was able to forget there would be more – or, at least, allow everyday concerns to push the knowledge to the back of her mind, the way I try to.

'Euphemie,' I begin, unsure exactly what the rest of the sentence will be.

*I promise I'll protect you.*



*The cutter soldiers will do most of the work.*

*There's no need to be afraid.*

But before I can get any further than her name, she's taking the Apex's message from me and scanning it with a careless shrug.

'Drones over the age of forty to be reduced by three-quarters,' she says. 'That includes both Sienna's parents. At least she can enjoy the party first.'

'Euphemie . . .'

She drops the paper back on to the dressing table. The fear has melted from her eyes, to be replaced by feverish excitement. 'This is my chance to start proving myself. To show everyone how good a queen I'd be. And this time, you're not going to spoil it.'

It's an unexpected accusation. Faintly, I echo, 'Spoil it?'

'Last time, you didn't let me *do* anything.'

Last time, she barricaded herself into a corner with her face hidden against her folded knees and cried until it was over. Not that I blamed her. A Winnowing is meant to be an orderly exodus of those identified as surplus to the requirements of the Hive, not the massacre it turned out to be.

We'd seen people killed in the first Winnowing we were in, but not many. That matched what we'd been taught: that the chosen exiles would be reluctant to leave, but most of them would rather accept the merciful gift of a chance at life outside than resist and die. So when, in the most recent Winnowing,

the surplus fought back as a group, it took everyone by surprise. Not that they stood any chance against fully armed ascendants and shields and soldiers. By the time it was over, the sloping rock leading out from the winnowing gate to the causeway was scarlet with blood.

And maybe Euphemie is right: watching them scream and bleed and die, maybe I was at least a little glad that her fear had given us a legitimate reason to stay on the periphery of the action. I'm always so afraid of losing her, of letting her down, that maybe I let my own anxiety hold her back.

'I'm sorry, Seventh,' I mumble.

She doesn't correct me over the use of her title this time. 'It isn't as if there'll be many more opportunities to impress the queens. I have to make the most of every one.'

I nod. Though the primary purpose of the Winnowings is to prevent us from exceeding our population limit, they also give the ascendants who have come of age a way to demonstrate their fitness to rule the Hive as one of the seven people who will make up the next Apex. That's even more important for Euphemie and the other girls, because they have a chance at the throne. Although each of them is given time with our current queens every week, the Winnowings are by far the best test of their strength, teamwork and good judgement – culminating, once the youngest ascendant turns sixteen, in one final Winnowing in which the current Elder and Younger Queens will choose their successors.

Euphemie is good at the first part of each Winothing, where the ascendants hear each person from the chosen section of the population make their case, before deciding who can stay in the Hive and who is no longer needed. She enjoys listening to the pleas, arguing for her favourites, delivering the judgement. But that isn't enough for her to become a queen. Not without proving herself in the second part as well.

*'And,'* she adds, clearly determined to work through my full list of faults, 'I wish you hadn't lost my royal brooch. How is anyone supposed to know who I am?'

I've scoured our chambers, but it isn't here. I'm almost certain she dropped it down the drain.

'You don't need a gold brooch for everyone to know who you are,' I say truthfully, which seems to mollify her somewhat. She takes a final glance in the mirror, before spinning on her heel and heading for the door.

'Fetch your boots, Feldspar. I want to walk to the sunroom.'

I follow her out into the exochamber, tasting the sharpness of the air. These chambers are as close to the outer walls as it's possible to live without being rendered permanently cold and damp by the vents, so the circulated breeze is still fresh. It makes me question what it would be like to feel it on my face directly, unfiltered by turbines and pipes. But every way out of the Hive is dangerous. There's the causeway that leads from the winnowing gate: a line of rocks above the surface of the ocean, slippery and wreathed in seaweed. That's visible only at

low tide, which is when the Winnowings always take place. And there are the tunnels deep underground, leading who knows where and infested with the same lawless people who try to raid our colony for its resources.

Small wonder that no one leaves the Hive unless they're forced to. We live our whole lives underground, within the hollow veins of this island, because it's our one refuge from the merciless sky above and the raging sea all around.

Euphemie's embroidered slippers are already on her feet. She stands by the outer door, watching me tug my boots on.

'You love me, don't you?' she asks. Her irritation has faded, to be replaced by something more wistful.

'Of course.'

'Good. At least someone does.'

*Would you care so much if my death didn't mean yours?* she asked me once, in one of her darker moods. I told her that I'd love her even without the shield-bond, but I could see she didn't believe me. Her life isn't built around mine as mine is around hers; she doesn't realize that a shield is only ever thinking about keeping her charge alive. The fact that her survival also keeps me alive is immaterial.

'Everyone loves you,' I add, and a little smile touches her lips.

'You think so?'

'I know so. Euphemie—'

'Hurry up, Feldspar.' The fleeting shadow has passed, as it always does. 'Let's go.'

I check I have my knives, though I always have my knives. Already, I'm tense. Night-time means that Euphemie is safe, or as safe as she can be. At sunup, when the stormglow first begins to brighten from the dim orange of night, and I unlock this door to let in the handmaidens and couriers and whoever else has business with her first thing in the morning, a weight of fear and responsibility settles on my shoulders. And when we leave our chambers, it bears heavy upon me until we're back. Because there are always additional people in the royal levels – drones attending their chosen ascendants, cutters doing their jobs as guards and cooks and medics – and people mean danger. It's always been impressed on me that no one in the Hive can ever really be trusted except the royal family themselves.

*Now there's to be another Winnowing.* The knowledge trickles down my spine like ice water. *And this time, she wants to prove herself.*

'There's going to be a storm,' I blurt out. 'Are you sure it's safe to—'

But Euphemie has already left our chambers, and I have no choice but to follow.

The royal family occupy the uppermost levels of the Hive. Euphemie spends a lot of time on her own level, with the aim of forming alliances; whichever girls become queens, they're the ones who'll decide who takes the other five roles in their

new Apex, so it's important for her to be liked by her fellow ascendants. Each set of chambers is some distance from its neighbours, but I could find my way to any of them with my eyes closed . . . except the Sixth's, maybe. We pass the turning to his chambers every day, but we never see him. Not that I want to. *If you annoy me too much*, Euphemie says sometimes – half a joke and half a threat – *I'll hand you over to Nikolos. He spends most of his time inventing new ways to torture people with the dark arts. And he despises shields. I'm sure he'd love the chance to experiment on you.*

From here, we have three flights of steps to climb – all guarded, though with Euphemie present, the soldiers just bow their heads and let us through. The first flight takes us up to the communal level, which houses the salon, theatre and baths, as well as important places like the medical centre, treasury and royal kitchens. The next leads up to the Apex's quarters, and the third goes from there to the sunroom itself. Through the centre of every ring-shaped level runs the Spire: the vast metallic rod that rises out of the top of the Hive, ready to be struck by lightning and supply us with power.

The sunroom is the only level that's built on the surface of the rock instead of inside it. Three of its walls and its sloping roof are made of thick glass panes, making it the only place that anyone in the Hive can see the whole sky. The fourth wall is the rocky peak of the island itself, etched with an enormous royal emblem in golden lines. More gold gleams in the filigree

design of loops and swirls covering the lower half of each vertical pane.

I can never be comfortable here. I'm always waiting for lightning to strike the Spire. Yet Euphemie loves it. She can usually be sure of plenty of people to talk to; failing that, she can watch for gulls flying overhead, which are the subject of many of her paintings. And she always imagines she'll catch the sky at the perfect moment between storm and sun. Today, though, I can tell she's disappointed. Thick black clouds have already gathered overhead, leaving the room gloomy – not that it's much better at any other time. Despite its name, the sunroom is completely uninhabitable when the sun comes out; no one can stand for long beneath that merciless glare without burning.

I glance around the room, checking who else is present. Several drones, none of them Euphemie's followers. Two members of the Apex: Gregor, the treasurer, with his distinctive tufty hair, looking tall and gangly next to Alatheia, the chief advisor, who's slight and sandy-skinned and has a warm tone to her voice that carries even amid the hubbub. And three ascendants: Alexios, Leandros, Calista. Behind each of them stands a shield, their shaven heads easy to pick out among the elaborate hairstyles of the royal family and the ostentatious adornment of the drones.

The other shields are my kind – and I spent years training with some of them – but none of them could ever matter more

to me than Euphemie. She and I have been together for as long as I can remember: when we cut our first teeth, took our first steps, learnt to read and write. Even during those years of training, when our lessons diverged to allow her to learn the business of the Hive while I learnt the business of keeping her alive, we always returned to each other at the end of the day. The two halves of an oyster, aligning perfectly.

She's greeted by Alexios, next to her in age, wearing a bright yellow embroidered jacket that contrasts with his dark skin. As the two of them fall into easy conversation, I exchange nods with his pale-skinned shield, Flint, but we don't speak. Our job is to listen and observe.

'You look well,' Alexios is saying. 'Is that a new scarf?'

Euphemie smiles at him. 'Clever of you to notice.'

'I hear the Apex have announced the result of their most recent vote. More cutter women to be granted permission to bear children who'll be trained as soldiers.' His lip curls. 'No doubt that explains the forthcoming Winnowing.'

A renewed chill creeps over my skin. I might die with Euphemie, or in her defence, but at least I'll never be winnowed. Whereas the drones can be winnowed at any time: to make room for new lives, as in this case; because a particular family has been identified as a poor genetic match for future queens; because an individual supported an unsuccessful candidate for the throne. I'd have expected that uncertainty to make them cautious and careful, like shields. Instead, most



of the younger ones spend their lives in a frivolous blur, drinking and partying and throwing themselves after their chosen ascendants in a blatant grab for power.

‘Plus, there’s to be a cut in rations for the carders,’ Alexios adds, and the chill sinks into the pit of my stomach to settle there. Unlike the cutters, who have the privilege of living alongside and serving the royal family, the carders live and work separately from the rest of us, in the depths of the lower levels – the Honeycomb. They’re smaller and weaker than us, meaning they don’t need as much sustenance, so they’re usually the first to be affected when the queens want to conserve resources. More soldiers and less food must mean that raids through the tunnels at the very bottom of the Hive are increasing again. Still, I can tell Euphemie isn’t really paying attention.

‘What are they talking about?’ Her head tilts towards Leandros and Calista, deep in conversation with the chief advisor, Alatheia.

Alexios follows her gaze. ‘Oh, Leandros is claiming that instead of going to the trouble of winnowing an unneeded demographic, we might as well kill the surplus and have done with it. Calista is becoming quite vehement in response. Sometimes I think his greatest pleasure in life is riling up other people for his own entertainment.’

‘That’s Leandros for you,’ Euphemie says, shrugging, but her voice is warm with amusement. ‘So, are you going to

introduce me . . . ?’

She gestures to the drone boy standing nearby. I don’t know his name, but I recognize him – we’ve seen him with Alexios several times in the past few weeks, and Euphemie has whispered to me on more than one occasion about their potential romance.

As Alexios makes the introductions, I watch him carefully, but I already know he’s no threat. He’s a healer through and through, to the point where he’s willing to show overt disgust at the idea of a few drones dying for the benefit of the Hive. And he’s always taken an interest in Euphemie.

I relax slightly, allowing my gaze to wander around the room in search of wider threats. Yet it always comes back to her, like a needle pointing north.

The sky whites out, briefly, making me jump even before the growl of thunder that follows. *I knew it.* Fat drops of water begin to hit the glass above us, clattering like stones. Euphemie’s only acknowledgement that the storm has begun is to raise her voice; this weather is too common to be worth any attention. Yet I can no longer concentrate. I’m too busy counting the seconds after each lightning strike. It’s almost overhead. Almost at the Spire. And what if it misses? What if it breaks through the roof and Euphemie is right underneath and—

I shake off the unreasonable panic, because someone is approaching us. But when I recognize Leandros – eldest royal

son, lethal with a blade, intends to be shieldmaster one day – I tense further still. Even though the ascendants work together for the good of the Hive, making them less of a threat to Euphemie than anyone, I can't help but feel instinctive alarm at the proximity of someone I've seen decapitating a carder with a single stroke. When he walks straight past her and flings an arm around my shoulders, I should be relieved. Instead, I freeze, pulse pounding in my ears.

'You agree with me, don't you?' he asks. He and Euphemie are both the Younger Queen's children, though it's impossible to tell. Each ascendant has unique drone parentage on one side, making their lineage hard to trace just by looking. 'That it would be far better simply to kill a surplus group and save everyone the pain of winnowing?'

I turn my face away from him, back to Euphemie. 'It's not my place to say, Second.'

'Look at me.' His fingers touch my cheek, wrenching my head round. 'She's not going to die if you stop watching her for one moment.'

He isn't supposed to be touching me. I doubt he even knows my name. I dart a glance around the room, before reluctantly returning my gaze to his. 'It's my job to guard the Seventh.'

'Hmm. You know, once I'm part of the Apex, I intend to have a little *fun*. And who better to have fun with than the shields of my surviving sisters, right?'

His hand squeezes my shoulder. Another flash of lightning illuminates the room, thunder hard on its heels. *So close.* Suppressing a shiver, I force out, 'Yes, Second.'

'It was lovely talking to you,' Euphemie's voice says, a little too brightly. 'But I'm afraid I really must go.'

Leandros lets go of me. I look from him to her. For a fleeting instant, I see the family resemblance between the two of them – something around the eyes – and am unsettled by a tiny squirm of fear.

'It's Feldspar's fault,' Euphemie goes on. 'She always becomes unreasonably anxious if I'm out of my chambers during a storm.'

She laughs, and Leandros laughs with her. Alexios glances between us, but says only, 'It's kind of you to be concerned about your shield, Euphemie.'

'But of course,' she replies. 'I love Feldspar.'

That makes her and Leandros laugh again, though I don't know why. She blows him a kiss. Then she heads for the door, and I hurry to take my place at her side. My hands are shaking. Probably just the lightning. Anything else would be silly.

We follow our usual route, a longer path along some of the lesser-frequented passageways of the upper levels. Euphemie is always in a hurry to get to the sunroom, but she's never as keen to leave again. Typically, she chats to me on our slow meander home, telling me everything she said to everyone we met,

asking my opinion of what this or that person did. Today, however, we walk in silence. From time to time, I steal a glance at her; she's looking resolutely ahead, her lips pressed together. She feels . . . cold. Distant. And it makes my stomach hurt.

'Seventh,' I venture finally. 'Are you angry with me?'

She doesn't look at me. 'Why should I be?'

I don't know. That's the trouble. I'm not sure what I did wrong. After a while, I say tentatively, 'We could have stayed. The sunroom is safe in a storm, despite my . . . I'm sorry if my fear made you cut short your visit.'

She shrugs. We keep walking.

'Leandros is an ascendant,' she says, two corridors later. 'And my brother. It isn't appropriate for you to flirt with him.'

*What?* I stumble over my own feet. 'Seventh, that wasn't how it—'

'Don't answer back,' she snaps. 'In fact, I'd really rather you didn't speak to me at all. Or look at me.'

I'm familiar with this mood. Though I try to be careful, sometimes I end up offending her. I suppose it's inevitable, when two people live so close together. All the same, my stomach hurts worse than ever, a nagging dull pain – and I know from experience that it will keep on hurting until she's forgiven me.

We turn a corner into another empty corridor, past a sign bearing the royal emblem and the words *Our lives for the Hive*. Our footfalls strike a muffled echo from the rock. Then Euphemie says crossly, 'You know, Feldspar . . .'

I hear a soft sound, like a sigh.

‘... I really hate it when—’

A dull thud. Her voice rises to a wordless cry. I turn: she’s wavering on her feet, left hand clutching her right shoulder. Between her fingers protrudes a slender bone arrow.

I spin on my heel, my knives in my hands. Yet nothing stirs in the passageway ahead of us. It’s striped with stormglow and shadow, like every other route through the Hive.

‘Feldspar?’ Euphemie’s voice is a croak.

Dropping the blades, I hurry to her side. She sags against me, hand falling away to reveal the merest smear of blood on her fingers. The arrow hasn’t hit her in any vital organ. It’s a small, fragile thing. Yet her arms are twitching, and her lips are turning blue.

*Poison.*

Her weight becomes too much; the two of us crumple to the floor. I’m fumbling to get a grip on the arrow, slick and smooth with a little blood and my own sweat. Finally, I pull it out of her, throw it on the floor beside us. More blood trickles from the wound, but it’s still not much. As an arrow, it would barely have scarred her. But with poison . . .

They taught us battle medicine, the way they taught us anything else that might help us keep our charges alive. Yet they didn’t teach us this.

*No one uses poison to kill other people in the Hive.* The knowledge runs through my head, spinning in useless circles in the

face of reality. *It's forbidden.*

The sound of running footsteps, light and quick, makes me look up sharply. A plea for help forms on my lips, then dies as a figure in black races past us, stooping to collect the arrow as it goes. *The attacker.* I snatch up one of my knives, hurling it wildly after the retreating figure. The weapon strikes its arm before clattering to the floor. The figure stumbles but doesn't stop, vanishing into the shadows once more. There's something glinting on the floor beside us, something that wasn't there before. Automatically my hand closes around it.

'Euphemie,' I whisper, barely knowing what I'm saying. 'I found your brooch.'

She takes a painful, rattling breath, and I lean back over her. Her skin is the colour of ash; her limbs no longer twitch, but lie unnaturally still against the stone. A film covers her eyes. She's seeing not this world, but the one beyond.

'Feldspar . . .' Her voice is a breath. Then her head drops against my arm, and she's gone.

Dead.

My charge is dead.

My charge is dead, and I'm still alive.

And that's impossible.