# MEDEA

# MEDEA

*A Novel*

EILISH QUIN

ATRIA BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI


An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Atria Books hardcover edition February 2024

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*Interior design by Kyoko Watanabe*

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Quin, Eilish, author.
Title: Medea / Eilish Quin.
Description: First Atria Books hardcover edition. | New York : Atria Books, 2024.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023030982 (print) | LCCN 2023030983 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781668020760 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781668020777 (paperback) |
ISBN 9781668020784 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Medea, consort of Aegeus, King of Athens (Mythological character)—Fiction. | LCGFT: Mythological fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3617.U53596 M43 2024 (print) | LCC PS3617.U53596 (ebook) |
DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230719
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023030982
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023030983

ISBN 978-1-6680-2076-0
ISBN 978-1-6680-5738-4 (Int Exp)
ISBN 978-1-6680-2078-4 (ebook)

*For my mom*

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# MEDEA

CHAPTER ONE

# The Naiad

Of the Oceanids, there were innumerable. My mother was the youngest, and so too lately born to be a novelty among the Titans or the Gods. By the time she emerged, lithe and childlike from the edge of the Black Sea, her pale hair stuck wetly down her back and her eyes dark and swollen with salt, she already knew what she was.

Her own mother, Tethys, possessed a maritime attractiveness. Below the surface of the water, her eyes were a murky sea green, all shadow and gloom, looming out from skin so pale it glowed with a strange bioluminescence. On the occasions that she was dredged up from her repose beneath the waves, those same eyes glittered and gleamed like molten bronze when they caught the sun. She had polished thousands of children inside of her, had sheltered and shaped them in the womb of the ocean itself. And she had nursed them on the sweet fresh water from which she drew her own powers. If she had been mortal, she might have felt her body shoring against itself, straining under the pressure of producing infant after infant. But she was a Titan, the wet nurse of the earth. And so, she gave birth to the rivers, which roared with vitality, and the streams, which moved more softly; the clouds that grew heavy with rainwater; and the springs that bubbled up from the center of the world. Such was the fertility of Tethys.

From the Titan who birthed her, my mother acquired two things. The first was a body. Miniature and without blemish, skin as smooth and transparent as sea glass. The child was anointed in oils and swad-

dled in strands of kelp. Tethys, wan and exhausted from labor, handed over the newborn willingly into the arms of her other daughters.

The second gift my grandmother gave before returning to her own chambers beneath the sea was a name.

*Idyia.* Tethys would have conveyed it in her usual manner, a manner that did not involve language, for there was no need for words among the old Gods. And then, a promise, as her womb began to reknit itself. *She will be the last of your brood.*

And so it was Idyia's sisters who whispered to the youngest the secrets of herself, explained the jagged gills that loomed like lacerations down her neck, and the webbing between her fingers and toes. Playfully they would trace, with graceful, darting fingers, the veins, which stood pronounced under the blue-green highlights of her skin. So perfectly was she suited for the sea that should she have beached herself, no mortal could possibly have confused her for a human child.

From her sisters, she understood that she was not quite a nymph, but a Naiad. They passed her among themselves, delighted by the fair hair that curled at the back of her neck.

For the children of Titans, time does not pass in the way it might for mortals. My mother spent only a matter of painful hours teething, and by the end of that first day, had gained a set of pale, pointed fangs. Her expressive eyes, initially a clouded sea green, would polish themselves in her infant sockets until they were clear gray orbs. How queer it must have been to hold her, to reconcile the supple sweetness of her newborn face with the deadly power of her muscles, the vivid sharpness of her fingernails.

From her father, Oceanus, she knew intimately of her own naturalness. He informed her in the same way he informed all his daughters, somewhere between conception and the accumulating sentience of each successive rippling impulse. She was the thing that flowed, a current that ebbed and settled itself like a compulsion. The urge that heaved against riverbanks. A shored thing. An infinite thing. She could be cut, by ship or swimmer, but never wounded. This is water's divinity.

It was known that the daughters of Tethys and Oceanus made enviable wives. Although each was distinct, all possessed a perilous beauty—

the kind of aching loveliness that drew sailors to their graves. In these daughters flowed the source of all things, and the Olympians, from on high, had ordained that they should preside over the young, nourishing and nurturing in the manner that they themselves were accustomed to. So alluring were the Oceanids that Zeus himself took some for wives.

And so when my father, Aeetes, landed upon the rocky shores of Kolchis, his eagle eyes penetrating and sharp, already surveying the land for what he could extract from it, Idyia came willingly out from the surf. It would be easier this way—if the local Naiad came to the new king's bed willingly. They already shared blood; the new king of Kolchis was Idyia's nephew, the peculiar and solitary son of her elder sister Perses. Even before his eyes fell on her and fixed upon the damp ringlets of her hair and the startling whiteness of her face, she knew what she would be to him. Even with the primordial essence of the earth and sky mixing in her veins, she was still only a woman.

■ ■ ■

My father built his palace at the edge of the cliffs overhanging the Black Sea. Perhaps he wanted to make his new bride feel more at home on dry land, or perhaps the construction was an homage to his own sea nymph mother. In truth, I suspect his reasons were not so straightforward or sentimental. My father, who was capable of all manner of things, from the breathtaking to the nightmarish, was naturally suspicious of every other creature he encountered. He assumed his own propensity for darkness flourished in them as well. His house, that palatial manifestation of his own power, should provoke terror in the hearts of his enemies, and kindle admiration in the breasts of his allies. A fortress straddling land and sea was militarily advantageous, aesthetically intimidating, and ideally situated for his experimentation.

But Idyia had little interest in the accommodations of mortal men. While her husband marveled at her neat ankles and luminous golden hair, she stared restlessly out of windows at the churning waters below, her yearning couched delicately on an elbow.

In the beginning, the new king refused to let her out of his sight. He had heard stories about the men foolish enough to leave their Oceanid

wives to their own devices. The pull of the sea always proved too mesmerizing to nymphs. Neither riches nor mortal love rivaled the slow, dark paradise beneath the surface. My father observed his new wife closely, his golden hands never far from her throat, or the smooth skin of her inner thigh. During the moments when he could not be with her, he consigned her to the tent they shared while the palace grew out of nothing, and posted guards at the entrance to keep her confined. With Idyia trapped, he could let his frenetic mind wander over plans for the new fortification that was growing stone by stone, or through the churning texts of plants and herbs that were so critical to his sorcery.

In the evenings he returned to her, his keen eyes scouring her cheeks for flush, her legs for scrapes and bruises—any sign that she had gone out upon the beach without his permission. When he was satisfied that she was docile and obedient, he led her to the bed. Idyia's skin was cold to the touch, as though slightly damp with sea mist, but he did not mind. He was a child of the sun itself, that most powerful of the Titans, Helios, and so he glowed hot enough for the both of them.

It was known in those days that the best and only way to keep a Naiad was to give her a child. By the time the first stones had been laid, and the lumber set aside for furniture of the most opulent order, Idyia's stomach had already begun to swell. And so my sister, Chalciope, was born.

Chalciope emerged from my mother's womb with damp curls the color of soil rich with iron, and bronze skin, darker already than that of either of her parents. My father took her gingerly into his golden palms, appraising her as she fussed. He had wanted a boy, but he could wait. Aeetes had always been confident, and he knew his line was assured. For now, this child would suffice. He was pleased with her glimmering skin and how quick she was to quiet. She might even make a favorable match to some far-off king or demigod when she grew older and into her looks. Idyia was confounded by the child she had sired, this strange mix of herself and a mortal. She had known other infants, of course, had cradled them in her long transparent arms, and blown bubbles around their cheeks to make them laugh. But this one was quiet where the others, her multitude of nieces and nephews, had been playful and raucous, dark and radiant where they had been pale and softly glowing.

After the birth of my sister, it was as though my mother had passed a test. Aeetes could content himself that she would come back to him and to their child. Besides, she was more present with him on the evenings when she returned, skin frigid with chill and hair thick and glittering with salt water. And so Idyia was allowed to venture between the starkness of the sea and the opulent towers of my father's construction. Occasionally, she took Chalciope with her down beneath the surface, manipulating the currents so that a strand of air bubbles would wind around the child's face, providing her oxygen and refuge from the salt. Together, they would examine the treasures of the tides: starfish that were coarse to the touch, and anemones that sucked my sister's miniature fingers into their center, urchins that pricked her soft palms, and snails that attached themselves fondly to her legs. Chalciope was clumsy on land, but not in the sea, and so preferred the beach to anywhere else.

My sister was sweet and delicate, deprived of gills and of some of the native wildness that might have gone to her. If she scathed her knees on the uneven stones beside the beach, the wounds did not heal in a matter of moments, but lingered, ugly and vermillion and stinging under the open sky. Every bruise that appeared upon her flesh was a reminder to Idyia that her child was only semidivine. *How dreadful to beget something that would only age and die*, my mother must have thought, as she watched Chalciope wander around the newly erected palace on her fat baby legs. Death, to Idyia, seemed to go against the very laws of nature, for nature had, until that point, always been kind to her. Her daughter's mortality felt foreign and faraway, impossible to hold, and so I imagine that after a time, she ceased to think about it altogether.

For a while, at least, my mother was happy. She had a child of her own to care for, to imbue with the same wonder that she carried inside of her. Aside from the inconvenience of her husband, she was content.

It might have gone on like that, halcyon and sweet, if not for me. My mother's stomach began to swell again, the telltale signs of a body readying itself for creation. In the early months, this was not as noticeable. My mother was naturally slender, the smooth texture of her bones stood out against her indigo-toned skin, and she concealed me beneath the heavy folds of silk and lace.

Eventually, Father caught on, noticing the change in the way his wife carried herself, carefully, as though wary of damage. He observed the effulgent flush of her cheeks, the odd fire in her eyes that signaled a sacred kind of knowledge.

"You are with child," he asserted one evening, after Chalciope had been ushered away to bed. Idyia wrung the seawater from her hair, her soaked clothes clinging to her. It was not a question, because Aeetes was never uncertain.

Her eyes flicked up to his face, meeting the trenchant gaze that had always unnerved her. He shone too brightly, this husband of hers. There was too much of the sun in him for comfort. Everything he looked upon shriveled up, scalded.

"Yes, my lord," she murmured shyly. My mother had a voice that was simultaneously melodious and hissing, like waves crawling up a rocky shore.

He regarded her for a long moment, his eyes softening slightly in the candlelight. Moving forward, he took her in his arms, and pressed her cold, narrow frame against his chest.

"It will be a boy this time. An heir fit for the son of Helios." He smiled into her hair.

My mother said nothing, biting her lip, and grounding herself in the far-off sound of the surf below. Her name, *Idyia*, meant "knowing one," some intuition of her own mother, Tethys, that the last of the Oceanids would be prone to prophecy. Everything in my mother's uncanny body pointed toward another daughter. A boy would come eventually, but not now.

"I want you to stop going out in the mornings," Aeetes went on, arms tightening around her slightly. "We need to keep my heir safe, and the sea is no place for a woman in your condition. Chalciope is beginning to learn how to speak, and she should be inside, accompanied by nurses and tutors. When she comes back on your hip, her hair is a mess and she shrieks like the wind. It is unbecoming for a princess to be raised in the rough, don't you agree? No honorable man will want a savage bride."

Idyia, for her part, kept her mouth tightly closed. She knew better than to argue with my father.

CHAPTER TWO

# Like a Blade to the Back

My birth was a difficult one, or so my mother would tell me in those soft hours of the early morning, before the servants collected me and Chalciope from her bed and took us to the nursery. We would lie tangled up together in between soft purple sheets my father had imported from Athens. I would awake first each morning and stare fixedly at my mother's sleeping face. I would chart the points of her eyebrows, the soft hook of her aquiline nose, and the prim rosebud mouth that opened and closed softly as she dreamed.

These were the best hours, because Father could not touch us. He had his own chambers at the opposite end of the palace, built facing the Valley of Phasis. He rose early and went out to collect herbs, a fine leather journal clasped in his arms. Sorcery, I knew, even as a child, was an all-day affair. And so we had our mother to ourselves, at least for a little while.

Then, Chalciope would stir, her face contorted in childish angst as she took in the streaming sun and stretched.

Today, I watched as her muscles flexed, revealing the secret texture of ligaments and bone.

"Tell me again, the story of how I was born," I implored Mother as she too rose gracefully from the pillows, leaning her cheek against the magnificently carved headboard.

Chalciope, always ready with a rejoinder, retorted, "No, Mama, we hear that all the time. Tell us about how you used to take me under the

sea before Father put a stop to it! Tell us how you helped me to breathe underwater. Medea won't know because she's only a baby, and she wasn't even born when we used to go together!" I scowled darkly at my elder sister, and she flashed me a sly smile.

"I imagine that we have time for both," Mother soothed, her fingers slipping through my hair as though to tame it.

Chalciope was right—the story was always the same, but it thrilled and troubled me, nonetheless.

"You came early—far too early. It gave your father and me a terrible fright," my mother began, her eyes unfixing themselves. I could tell that she was more absent than usual. Later I learned that Aeetes blamed our mother for my early delivery; he assumed that she had gone out to the water against his wishes, and that the sudden surge of cold had brought on the contractions. In truth, the long days of inaction had gotten to my mother. Even with Chalciope to distract her, the inaccessible roar of the sea had mingled with her burgeoning anxiety. A perfect storm.

"Your elder sister was an easy birth," my mother went on, snapping back to the moment, her eyes flicking playfully to Chalciope, her long white fingers dancing under my sister's chin.

"That's because I'm always easy. Father says I'm the most enchanting daughter he might have asked for," Chalciope chirped proudly, glancing at me. Her statement echoed painfully inside my head, even though it was true. Chalciope was long limbed and lithe, even at seven years old, her eyes soft and demure, and her voice meek and lilting. She moved like water, a gift from our sea-nymph mother, but the resemblance stopped there. In every other way, she shone as brightly as our father, her skin tan and her once dark red hair gradually bleaching itself in the sunlight until it was a sweeter shade of flaming blond. She was everything a girl should be, and someday, as Aeetes was fond of saying, she would make a good wife and bring glory to our line.

I, on the other hand, possessed very little of my mother's maritime grace. I was pale like she was and had inherited her uncommon translucence. But I did not glow, shimmering faintly, like a light at the bottom of the sea, as she did. My hair, which was the metallic green of rust, hung in dark tangles around my face, growing impossibly fast.

With my bright red mouth and clouded gray eyes, I had the look of something sickly and unhealthy. To make matters worse, I lacked the easy charm of my sister, the molten something in her look, which drew all manner of people to her and made them love her immediately. She smelled of sweet summer breezes, and I reeked of Kolchis itself: cold, salt-stripped, and forbidding.

"Both of you are assets to this house," my mother supplied diplomatically, her eyes going vague again. "Your father and I—" She broke off, her fingers straying across her mouth, as though to stop herself from saying something. Outside, the wind howled, and pine boughs scraped against the shutters. The sun shone haphazardly through the clouds, and I shivered.

"The story, Mama," I reminded her softly, burrowing closer to her chest, watching the sense return to her.

"The winter was unusually brutal, and the contractions began in the dead of night. Your father was in his own chambers, tucked away and cloistered with his books of *Pharmakon*, and so I summoned the nurses myself to attend the birth."

"You did not tell Father that I was coming?" I inquired, though I already knew the answer. I watched her carefully for the smallest flicker of anxiety or uncertainty, but she knew better than to reveal such things to me.

"No, I had no need of him."

"Because you knew I would be a girl, and not a prince?" I pressed, again already knowing.

My mother nodded, not looking at me. She bit the edge of her lip pensively, her face as blank as a pool of water before it is disturbed. Even then, I guessed that the real reason was slightly more complicated.

"The labor dragged on for hours," she continued. "I felt as though I were being torn apart from the inside. But this was not what made the hours long. In truth, I had a knowledge of what *you were*, Medea. *Of what you would be*, even before the midwife pulled you from me." She chose her words carefully, her eyes fluttering shut briefly, as though to ward off some unpleasant sight.

"A brat, you mean." Chalciope giggled under her breath. I glowered

at her. My mother gazed unseeing at my sister, before dropping her eyes to her hands, which were twisting fluidly in her lap.

"No, not that," she intoned. "It's never that clear. Prophecy comes in fragments, Chalciope, in hard rushes of feeling and sudden dread. It strikes through you like a blade to the back." She shivered, and instinctively I offered her some of my blankets. She smiled faintly at me, shaking her head.

"So what did it feel like? What did you predict about me?" I asked in a hush, not wanting to pry but feeling compelled to.

"Nothing much at all," my mother murmured, as she always did whenever I asked. "Just a feeling."

"A good feeling?" Chalciope drawled, quirking her head to the side and looking bored. A wave of nausea rose in my chest.

My mother offered a thin smile, before returning to her story.

"The truth is that I dreamed of both of you girls before you were born. Even before you had bodies of your own, you came to visit me in the evenings. Such beautiful dreams they were . . ." She trailed off, looking at the ceiling. "And that is how I knew what both of you would look like, how you would feel swaddled in my arms." Slowly the anxiety melted from my limbs as I allowed myself to imagine the incredible warmth of these fantasies.

"And you saw our brother too," my sister verified, her eyes sparkling. "The one who isn't born yet."

My mother nodded, and instinctually wrapped her arms around her stomach. Her face flashed with some unreadable emotion. I attempted to catch her eye, but she avoided my gaze.

"But how could we come to see you in dreams if we weren't even alive yet?" Chalciope laughed, her warm face lit with good humor. She had not seemed to notice our mother's change in mood.

"The Gods on high make all manner of impossible things possible." My mother's hands smoothed my hair absently, but her look remained fixed elsewhere.

"What will our brother look like?" I asked her, hoping that if I spoke, she might look at me again.

But instead she turned to Chalciope as she answered. "His skin is

like the bronze of your sister's, but even brighter. He could almost rival your father with the light that spills from him. His hair, though, will be long and light as sunlight, and his eyes will be the same color as mine. And his smile is such that it will delight the world."

"What will we call him?"

"That is for your father to decide."

"You must have some idea?" my sister pushed, leaning her chin on her hands and making her eyes sweet and amenable.

"My propensity for prophecy does not extend to your father's decisions," Mother explained in a resigned monotone, and then catching sight of Chalciope's unhappy expression, she added, "But to the three of us, he will be our shining one, Phaethon."

"Phaethon," Chalciope whispered to herself in awe. "Phaethon. My brother, the Prince Phaethon. Oh, I like that, Mama. And will he be more fun to play with than Medea?" I elbowed her in her perfect ribs, and she shrieked with laughter.

"Don't be so cruel to your sister," Mother chided, looking tired although we had been awake only a few hours. "Now didn't you want to talk about our visits to the sea?"

Just then, a hard, cold knock fell upon the chamber door. It was our nurse, ready to ferry us away for a day of needlework and boredom. Chalciope was old enough, and her fingers long and deft enough, to play upon our mother's own lyre, a contraption carved from polished abalone that refracted ethereal colors on the ceiling while she fingered the strings. I was given a pan flute to finger, and no particular instruction.

"Must I go with her?" I whispered in my mother's ear, clutching her hand to my heart as Chalciope leaped from the bed, like the obedient charge she was.

Mother said nothing but stiffened beneath my fingers, and pulled away, her face backlit with something like revulsion. I felt the beginnings of tears well up in my throat. Just as quickly, the look was gone, and the kind, compassionate mother I was used to had resumed her place.

"It's only for a little while," she offered, along with a small smile. "If

you behave well, perhaps tonight we can tell more stories before you fall asleep."

This promise was enough, for my mother's storytelling was unrivaled. She would whisper to us of the monsters that lurked beneath the ocean's surface, undisturbed for centuries, or that terrifying Lord of Time, Kronos, who had devoured his own children until Zeus put a stop to it.

Sometimes, she would wax poetic about the great war between the Titans and the Gods. Our father disliked this habit, because he loathed being reminded that he was of Titan stock. Even though Helios had fought for the Olympians in the conflict, and had earned himself a reputation as the best of his kind as a result, our lineage was still tainted. That we all narrowly escaped Tartarus was never far from my father's mind, and so he took special pains to keep it constantly in ours as well.

CHAPTER THREE

# Witchery

In the beginning, my father was reluctant to teach me anything of his sorcery. When I asked to look over his scrolls, or to go with him when he went out to catalog plants, he would simply stare at me coldly, his coral-colored mouth thin with distaste.

"You're too young, Medea. There is no natural reason for you to entrench yourself in these things. You ought to be focusing on your embroidery, or your musicianship, or your Greek. Your coarseness proves to everyone who hears you that you have come up among a savage race. No king will ever want you for a bride if you cannot speak his language." Father was desperate for us to learn Greek. Our own native tongue, the dialect of Kolchis, was rough and uncouth—hardly respectable. It marked us as outsiders, just as our Titan blood did.

Chalciope was better at her Greek than I was, in the same way that she was better at everything. At nine years old, the once harsh iron-colored curls of her babyhood had begun to fall in softer pomegranate waves down her back, and her skin was bronze-toned, prone to shimmering in the sun. Our nurses fell over themselves to provide her with anything she might need—fresh milk, chilled in the cellars after being procured from the goats, or vivid wildflowers to weave into her hair. Her fingers moved fluidly along lyre strings, creating melodies that echoed out of the palace windows and made the gardeners in the courtyard below pause in their work, their expressions dazed and dreamy.

"Chalciope can marry a king, and I can stay with you and Mother," I

offered after a moment of intense thought. "She will make a better wife than I will. And that way you can teach me about *Pharmakon*."

My father's face went, if possible, darker as I said this, his bright eyes flashing.

"It is not becoming, especially not for a girl child," he intoned roughly. I knew that this was the real reason he had denied me his knowledge. He was holding out for a proper heir to endow with the nuances and intricacies of his life's work.

"But what of Aunt Circe?" I retorted, blood thundering in my ears. "She is a woman and a witch all at once, is she not? Mother said that her knowledge rivals even yours—that she can turn grown men, burly, bearded soldiers, into writhing little animals at the flick of a wrist."

"We do not speak of her here. I've told your mother enough times to keep her mouth shut about magic she does not understand. What has she been telling you?" he snarled, rigid and taut under his cloak. These were the times my father was most dangerous, crackling and smoking with the scalding volatility of a disturbed fire.

"Nothing," I backtracked, heart hammering. "Nothing really. Just that it was she who raised you. Fed you and sung you to sleep when you were still a baby, and that she adored you utterly. And that when you grew a little older, she taught you all she knew about—"

"That's enough, Medea." His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, his jaw working madly.

"If she really is your dearest sister, why haven't I ever met her? Mother says she lives far away on a beautiful island all alone. It must get lonely."

"I said, that's enough."

I fell silent.

I cannot say whether my father was always uncanny and strange, or if his sorceress sister made him that way. Despite my father's resistance to the subject, thoughts of Circe kept me up at night. I fell asleep imagining scenarios in my head where I would join her out upon Aeaea, that unreachable island she was condemned to. I attempted to picture what a feminine version of Aeetes might look like. Would she have my father's glowing skin, always hot to the touch? Would she have his same

shrewd, calculating eyes that never missed even the tiniest detail, the slightest movement?

She would take me in her arms, and whisper to me the secrets that I had so far been deprived of. Under her tutelage, I would become a witch in my own right, more powerful than my father, more desirable than Chalciope, freer than my mother. But, of course, the days slipped into months, and I remained rooted at the palace in Kolchis, a prisoner of opulence.

There were always rumors about Circe, no matter how hard my father attempted to crush them. Some were not so pernicious—that she had spent too much time in Helios's subterranean palace and that it had warped her mind, or that she had an intense fascination with humans that bordered on the obsessive. Other tales were more insidious—that she had poisoned her husband, a prince from Kolchis, years before; that with her knowledge of the secret uses of flowering things, she had irreversibly transformed beautiful nymphs into hideous monsters. Other rumors cast Aeetes in a kind of antiquated perversion. The servants loved to whisper among themselves that before he had married Idyia, my father and Circe had been lovers. The old Gods did not possess the same distaste for familial relations that mortals did, for it was a way of keeping the bloodline pure and the power distilled, for all the good that did.

■ ■ ■

And so I determined that I would need to teach myself the intricacies of *Pharmakon*. My father departed early in the mornings, occasionally staying out for weeks at a time, always in the pursuit of forbidden and perilous knowledge. When he did return from near or far, he would be changed. Incrementally, gradually, but always darker than he had been. The kind of work he did left its mark somewhere. When he was gone, my mother would also flee, although while Aeetes went out toward the Caucasus or beyond, she would slip down into the murky depths of the Black Sea. I could not begrudge her this. After all, life on Kolchis was eerie and dull.

My sister and I were frequently left to our own devices. After our

morning lessons, Chalciope meandered around the courtyards, flirting with serving boys and when there were none of those about, making conversation with slaves. She had no need for me, this much I knew. Unobserved and unbothered, I would stray farther and farther from the palace walls. In the beginning I stayed in the shadow of the towers, picking at the sweet grass that grew up around the stones. Each day, I scouted out some new and previously unexplored perch, sometimes down by the beaches, among the kelp-strewn sea caves, sometimes up on the bluffs, under the gnarled olive trees.

These adventures made my chest tight with distress—so many of our mother's stories had revolved around those who went a step too far in their wanderings, who, without meaning to, had crept beyond the realms of protection that naturally encircled them. But the rush of finding some deserted clearing in the woods, or a particularly oddly shaped piece of driftwood, was worth those fleeting nerves. Besides, my mother was not there to warn me back to the safety of my chamber.

It was here, far away from the watchful eyes of the nurses and servants, that I began my studies. From my own spying, I had caught glimpses of my father's papers and knew a little with which to begin. The art of *Pharmakon* was concerned with unlocking the secret powers of plants and flowering things. The Greek word *pharmakos* echoed around sweetly in my head, the only bit of the foreign tongue that seemed to make sense to the wildness coursing through me. I knew from my tutors that it had a double meaning: it could refer to a medicine, something to usher life back into a body and make it strong and vital again, or it could mean "poison," some substance that would send a soul directly down to those black-lit halls of the underworld. How deliciously ambiguous it all was. The thoughts of coaxing the poison from green stalks and promiscuous blooms sent terrifying thrills through me, but how exactly was one to learn which plants were benevolent, and in what amounts something could be dangerous?

Occasionally, my father would refer to the ways in which the plants he tended *spoke to him*.

A visiting king might ask how he knew what ingredients to put in a salve, or my mother might wonder aloud how my father had found

the flowers for her hair, and Aeetes would respond with a sardonic half smile, "I merely asked the poppy and the aloe and the nightshade for their thoughts, how else?"

And so, in those early days, I tried speaking to the plants on my solitary forays. I asked the grass that darted up around my ankles how it was feeling, and from where it derived its sweetness. I inquired of the olive trees what they knew of their creator, that gray-eyed Goddess Athena. Of the pine trees that dappled the edge of the forest, I requested some knowledge of the properties of their sap, all to no avail.

At first, the foliage kept its secrets, whispering quietly in the cold breeze, rustling in a language only the dryads might understand. Perhaps it was a symptom of my loneliness that even though my charges did not return my friendliness, I continued to talk to them. I spent hours telling them the childish details of my life, and they listened back easily, a passive audience. Nothing was too minor or trivial for them. Occasionally I sang to them the clumsy songs of my own creation, or else the famous ones that Chalciope liked to play upon her lyre—those melodious meanderings of heroes and Gods.

Gradually, I learned to observe the leaves as they glittered in the sun, or stood out darkly against the fog that swept in from the sea. To analyze the bark that sprung up rough and heady from the earth itself. To fall into meditations on the supple flexibility of stems and stalks that bent easily under my fingers, nature's fare rendered supplicant and demure.

My father was right: the trees and blossoms were more than willing to teach any disciple who regarded them closely enough.

Every living and vibrant thing was a clue to this baffling puzzle I had been born into. Each ripening fruit, or steadily wilting sapling, encompassed a snapshot of the energy that engendered it, the mad passion that even now dwelled within its vegetable body. In my own crude scrawl, I began to take notes that were mostly just questions and passing associations. I fancied myself a miniature version of my father, conducting experiments with herbs and recording the results.

I spent hours poring over slivers of darting acanthus leaves, the rough bark of oak saplings—towering cypress trees and more modest

myrtle shrubs. It was miraculous what time alone in the quiet with even the most unassuming weed could do for the mind.

I broke off pieces of juniper shrubs, crushing fragments in my palms to release their scent, exalting in the ooze of sap between my fingers. How impossible it seemed that a berry might exist external to my own body, distinct and unfathomable, yet also inevitably nurtured in the heat of the same sun that rose on me each morning—sustained with the same water that I used to quench my thirst. As I played with the lively green spines and delicate blue-frosted berries, I considered their secret meanings and uses. Why would the plant take this form? Why either those sharp, needlelike leaves, or blunt, scaled-over stalks ending in premature cones? The potent aroma and immature scaled shoots were reminiscent of mortal lungs, something I had noticed during tedious anatomy lessons with Chalciope. And so, I wondered if the juniper might be used for treatment of asthma, the clearing out of airways polluted by phlegm.

Though I was barely into my sixth year, the knowledge I derived from the plants and shrubs around me made me feel uncommonly wise. In those early days, witchcraft for me was a game of associations. The thick bark of the cypress tree reminded me of the time a laborer broke his leg. I recalled how the bone stuck out of his flesh at a terrible angle, pale and polished even where it had splintered. And this was how I came to know that the bark's peeling rinds could be soaked or chewed to strengthen the bones.

In secret, I imagined myself as a healer, sage and assiduous among the blossoms and weeds. If one of the serving girls nicked their palms while preparing dinner, I pressed fresh stalks of yarrow into their hands in secret, the bloodred blossoms ready to dress their wounds. If panic emerged in my breast from nowhere, I recited to myself the secret properties of healing herbs and imagined myself protected. When my father grew cruel and snappish in the evenings, I meditated upon the thistle, with its crown of thorns and vivid violet insides, or the acanthus, sharp and protected from any fool who might seek to unsettle it. For the first time, I had a sense of myself and my power.

I moved gradually from the familiarity of benign flora toward their

more insidious counterparts. As it turned out, I had a penchant for poisons.

Oleander grew in heady bushes around the outer rim of the forest. The blooms came in a million sunset hues, some the soft color of a peach, others the vivid magenta of spilled blood. I was hypnotized by the delirious spiraling petals that emerged from the center of its flowers, by the leaves that were green and glossy in youth and then suddenly dull as the virescence ebbed. There was something of Aphrodite in the cacophony of color and sweetness, in the pale pinks and violent reds, as though all of this existed to say *love has its own edge.* When crushed with a rock, the leaves released a bitter scent that made my nostrils flare.

I learned that this bitterness made the plant unpalatable—that if I wanted to slip it into a concoction it would require the addition of honey to mask the taste. The trunk, thick and stubby, could be cut into small logs or shaved down into kindling and snuck into stores of firewood. Anything cooked over the ensuing flames would be deadly if consumed. When the secreted oil met skin, it could cause rashes and irritation.

In the back of my mind, I noted that the flowers were reminiscent of the kind that Chalciope liked to wear interspersed throughout her hair. It would not be too difficult to slip them among the other blossoms that her maids placed behind her ears and under her coronet, if she was unkind to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

# On Resemblance

Eventually my father tired of waiting for a son. I was freshly into my seventh year, and my mother was gone more often than she could be found wandering the palace corridors, or reclining in her quarters. Even when she did deign to spend the evening with us, her eyes were far away, misty and unreachable.

One day, after Chalciope and I concluded our morning lessons, I made my way down to the ground level, intending to take notes on the bougainvillea that climbed so easily along the garden walls. The hours in the stagnant air of our tutor's apartment disoriented me, as daydreams became more vivid than the lessons at hand. We had been discussing the significance of textile weaving in the Greek city-states, a topic that Chalciope found infinitely fascinating, for she had recently taken up the loom herself. Meanwhile I had drifted off into a reverie of the previous afternoon, when I stumbled upon a sea cave I had never noticed before, tucked in between the crags and the rolling surf. The walls were slick with displaced kelp, and the floor glittered with pockets of ocean water. It was an entire realm of tide pools sheltered from the worst of the elements. I wanted to remember to tell Mother when she returned from her latest deep-sea excursion. And so the minutes meandered past with devastating slowness—my eyes glazed over with waking dreams. When at last the allotted hour was up, I moved hastily toward the door.

As I snuck down the spiral staircase over the throne room, a voice beckoned me.