

# AGE BEFORE BEAUTY

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*The town of Brookhaven was home to the Goddess Copacia, patron of abundance. For generations she ensured that the land was fertile, the people healthy. It was said that wherever she walked flowers bloomed and that anything she gazed at flourished.*

*The land was lush, but the people were not so lucky. A few months ago, one of the temple attendants, Miya, came screaming into Brookhaven. She babbled nonsense about hearts and blood until the temple guards dragged her away.*

*She was never seen again.*

*A new girl replaced the old. And then more new girls were required. More girls, and younger too. Each time sooner than the last.*

*It wasn't until the weary guard captain declared that the goddess was asking for toddlers that fear set in.*

*What was she doing to all those children? Why did she need so many?*

*The guards never answered, refusing frantic relatives who begged to at least see their children. The goddess had need of them. That was all that mattered.*

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There was nothing left to do. No more reasons to stall.

Elody took one last look around her cottage. The linens had been sealed away, all the food eaten or given to the neighbors, and the floor swept. She placed the note addressed to her daughter on the mantle, gripped her cane, and walked out the door.

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The temple glowed in the evening light. Shining golden spires pierced the sky. Elody didn't glance up; she had seen the temple too often to be impressed. She knew from experience that the front entrance was lavish. Engraved wooden doors showed a beautiful woman giving baskets of food to an adoring crowd. She knew that last week Robert, the town's miller, had slashed the carved woman across the eyes before he had been dragged away.

Elody went towards the back, where there was a meadow and a small garden that the temple's attendants used to grow their own food. The garden had gone to seed, and the surrounding meadow was covered in slight mounds.

The door into the temple was left ajar. Good, Aaron had followed through. She eased the door open. Nothing stirred. Aaron had told her that the guards would either be in their barracks or on guard at the front of the temple. Elody crept down the hall as quietly as she could with her knees loudly creaking at every step. The only light came from the open back door. She passed a kitchen and a corridor that must have led off to dormitories and work rooms for the attendants.

Was Clover still there? Was anyone? What Elody desperately wanted to do was find the children and spirit them away to safety, but it would be no use. Even if she managed to get them down the cliff, they would be brought back to the temple. This problem had to be cut off at the source.

The hall floors switched from rough stone to polished marble, the walls moved farther apart, and soon Elody was facing the doors to the temple's inner sanctum. The doors were three times Elody's size and were made of a material that looked like gold but shimmered in a rainbow hue. Engravings of the same woman, this time surrounded by adoring animals, embellished its face. Guards stood on either side of the door—a young boy, only eighteen, who kept fidgeting with his sword, and the dreaded guard captain, who was the temple's spokesman. When the captain came, parents locked their children inside. But it never did them any good.

A scream pierced the heavy silence.

Elody flinched. The guards didn't. The captain waited for an eternal minute and then knocked on the door. It swung open. The younger guard glanced quickly at the hallway where Elody was hidden before following him inside.

Elody stood pressed against the wall; her eyes closed. She was too late. Who had that been? Clover, Robert's four-year-old daughter? She would have to bring Robert a pie when she got back. If she made it back.

The door opened again, and the guards emerged. The young guard was cradling a small blood-soaked figure in his arms. He paused and looked desperately down Elody's hallway.

"Aaron!" The captain snapped, "Get on with it. Or do you want to inform Johnson and Clark about their shift change?"

Aaron straightened. "No sir, I'm going, sir." He attempted a salute and almost dropped the motionless child. The captain sighed and marched off towards the barracks.

Aaron started down the hall that led towards the meadow and Elody. He looked at Elody and inclined his head towards the golden doors. She patted his arm in silent thanks. Then he continued walking, taking Clover to her final resting place.

Elody took a deep breath and marched up to the door. She knocked and, like before, it swung open.

The hall was massive. The whole town square could have fit inside twice over. The walls and floor were covered in rich intricate weavings, and piles of gold and jewels were tossed haphazardly on the floor.

She was lounging on a gilded chair at the end of the hall.

Copacia.

She was younger than Elody expected. She looked around ten, but her hair cascaded like a river of gold and her skin seemed to sparkle. She looked at Elody and smiled. Her teeth were stained with blood.

Copacia hopped out of her throne and walked towards Elody. Each step was accompanied by a small thud. As she got closer, Elody could see coins and jewels bursting forth where the girl had stepped.

Copacia waved a hand, and the doors thudded shut. She grinned, the smile splitting her face. "Well, it isn't often that one of Brookhaven's 'brave heroes' announces themselves. You must be quite special."

Elody lifted her hood; secrecy wouldn't help her anymore. "You're killing our children," she stated bluntly.

The goddess blinked. "Great skies you're so *old*." She laughed like chiming bells, "How do you stand it?"

Elody gritted her teeth, "I manage."

Copacia spread her arms. "And you've come all this way to kill me. How sweet. Who are you avenging?"

"My grandson."

The goddess's brow wrinkled. "I don't kill boys."

Elody's mind flashed back to the night her grandson had done the bravest thing anyone can do: Ask for help.

*Aaron had stumbled into her cottage, panting and glancing around as if he expected the walls to start attacking him. He was too young to be so scared of the world.*

*"She kills them. I don't know why, but their chests...I've seen the bodies. I've buried the bodies. Oh god!" And then he buried his face in his hands and cried.*

"You're killing him all the same."

The goddess shrugged. "Okay." She raised an eyebrow as Elody adjusted her cane. "You can't kill me you know, even if you did bring a weapon. I'm immortal."

Elody knew that, but she had to do something. "You need to stop killing our children."

Copacia growled, "That's what they all say. I have given everything to you pathetic humans. Every prayer is answered. You never go hungry, and all your business prospers. But still, you complain about the loss of a few measly children."

"Their families—"

The goddess rolled her eyes. "All humans die eventually. I just...speed up the process a little." She leaned closer. "Do you know what I do to those poor little girls? I summon them, and then I rip their hearts out of their chests and eat them."

Elody swallowed around the rising horror in her throat. "Why?" She croaked.

"To taste human life." The goddess grinned, happy as only a child could be. "I like the way they flutter in my mouth."

What could Elody do? She couldn't kill Copacia, but she had to stop her somehow. Her heart beat loudly in her chest. "What if I make you a deal?"

"What sort of deal?" Copacia asked.

"I give you a heart full of life, and once you've eaten it, you stop stealing our children."

"And whose heart would I get?"

Elody swallowed, "Mine."

The goddess blinked. "Even if I wanted your heart, why would you sacrifice yourself?"

“I’m doing what I always believed you did: giving to others.” Elody faced the goddess. “You eat hearts to feel alive. I have lived longer than any of your other sacrifices. My life has been full.”

Copacia stared. “And what’s to stop me from deciding I like the taste of old women and continuing to feast?”

Elody gripped her cane. “Only your word. To an old woman who once believed in your goodness.”

Copacia shook her head. “Why are you doing this?”

Elody’s eardrums pounded loudly. Pictures flashed before her eyes: her daughter holding an infant Aaron. Jonas, her husband, smiling at their wedding. Her long-gone mother singing her songs about the goddess. All the friends she made. All the people she had known, some gone, and some waiting.

“For love.”

Elody made her stooped frame as straight as she could make it. “So, oh Goddess. What will you do?”