

APOLLO ASCENDING
BOOK ONE

A
VEIL
OF
GODS
AND
KINGS

NICOLE BAILEY

A VEIL OF GODS AND KINGS

Apollo Ascending Book 1

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Author's Note

While *A Veil of Gods and Kings* is inspired by a Greek myth and pulls from many ancient cultures, the world-building is entirely new for this story.

Because of that, you will see things that wouldn't have existed in Ancient Greece (saddles for the horses) and reimagining of existing ideas (for example, discus which I've transformed from a track-and-field event into a full-contact sport.)

I hope you enjoy the world of Niria and the characters that live there.

-Nicole

A character pronunciation guide and full size map can be found on my website at:

www.authornicolebailey.com/FATEbonus

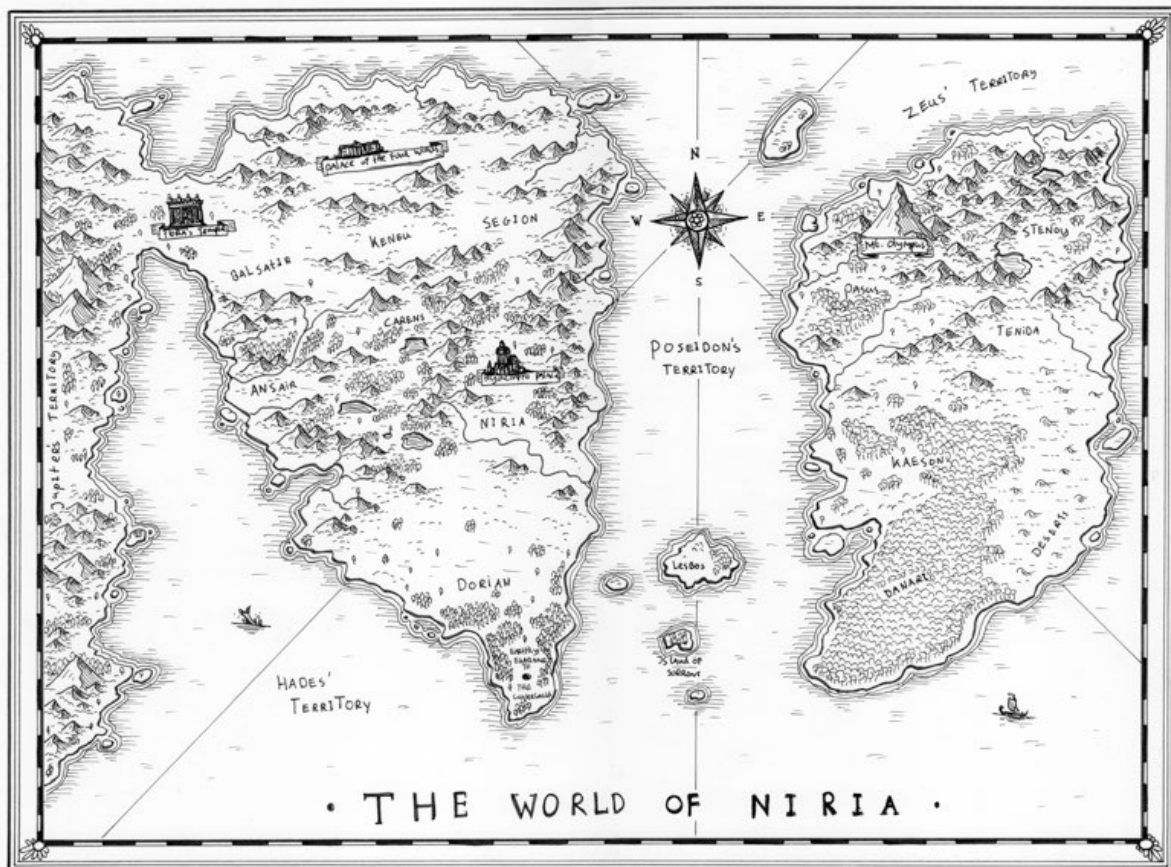
Content Warnings

Please note that these content warnings will contain some spoilers for the book.

A Veil of Gods and Kings depicts issues including hunting, animal death, animal sacrifice (mentioned), misogyny, a father hitting an adult son, blood, death, sexual assault (mentioned), and deaths in fire.

The book also contains strong language and sexual content.

I hope readers will find that I've handled these topics with sensitivity. However, I wished to include a note for anyone who may find this content triggering.



“The sun inside of him
rages like wildfire
and he is
gold
gold
gold
and he is
scorching the skin of my heart,
yet still he pretends
that he is safe for me to love,
that his hands are gentle,
that his fingerprints won’t be
seared into the notches of my spine

The sun inside of him
could set the kingdom ablaze;
he knows this, he does.
And he still asks me to love him,
to face the flame.
Find me in the ashes.”

-Apollo, Emily Palermo

Apollo

A blade could have sliced at my head with the way it ached. It hurt so much I might not even fight a weapon aimed at me. Not that a blade could kill me.

I sighed and stretched. The mattress crinkled with the movement. Gray light filtered in through a stone window. Birds heckled each other, their squalling echoing around the shadowy room.

“Blergh.” I moaned and rolled over.

Someone lay in bed with me, their dark form rising and falling with their breath, blankets tucked over their head.

I groaned again and eased off the mattress, stumbling across my bedroom, the cool touch of the stone biting at my bare feet.

Grabbing the bucket of water that sat inside the doorway, I cupped a handful and splashed it over my face, the droplets dripping down my chest and speckling the floor. A bronze looking mirror hung on the wall, and I peered into it, ruffling my hand through my coarse curls to tame them.

A silver glow emanated over the surface of my skin.

It had returned so soon.

I clenched my jaw and pushed my powers out.

The glowing diminished, a veil slipping over my features, softening the sharp edges, muddying the golden eyes to a standard brown, reducing the height and broad shoulders, giving a matte texture to the light brown of my skin.

And otherwise wiping away the visual signs of a deity.

I pressed my fingers to my temples, drawing the headache out.

Snagging the ivory tunic off the hook on the wall and slipping it over my head, I stepped out into the hallway, clipping down the stairs and into the kitchen to pluck an apricot out of a bowl. I strode towards the open door where sunshine and a spring breeze trailed in.

“Not so fast.”

Shit. I was supposed to be veiled as a house attendant. What would they be doing right now? Well, they wouldn't have snagged fruit off the counter. I tucked the apricot behind my back as I turned around. “Yes, mistress. Can I help you?”

Temi crossed her dark arms over her plum tunic, her lips pinched, her eyes darkening. “Don’t think you fool me with that cheap magic, Apollo.”

I clicked my tongue. “Cheap doesn’t quite feel fair. I’ve all but perfected this trick now.” I winked.

Her frown deepened. “You’re supposed to learn the powers of a deity, and the only one you’ve mastered—the only one you’ve even tried—is disguising yourself to not look like a deity. Do you know what that sounds like to me?”

I snagged my sandals and pulled them on. “A failed plan since you recognized me anyway.”

She rolled her eyes, her ebony braids scraping her shoulders. “Like someone who doesn’t know who they hell they want to be.”

I thrust a finger in the air. “That’s where you’re mistaken. I know exactly who I want to be. Not a god.”

“So, you’re an idiot fighting your fate?”

“With a vengeance. Is there anything you need? I was leaving.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you leaving here before your companion even wakes?”

I shrugged. “You know, I have so many plans. I just don’t have the time to lie about waiting all day.”

“I’m sure.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Do you think you could escort her, or him, or them... whoever it is, out?”

Temi’s arms dropped, and she clicked her fingernails against the wooden work table. “Are you seriously going to tell me you don’t even know the

gender of who you slept with last night?”

“It all blurs together over time, you know?”

“Actually, I don’t.” She made a noise in her throat. “Thankfully.”

“Some of us enjoy sex.”

I turned, but she reached out and snagged me. “What you say is true. Some people enjoy sex. But you aren’t one of them.”

“Temi...”

“Don’t ‘Temi’ me.” She jabbed a finger into my chest. “You know why it all blurs together? Because it means nothing. Because it doesn’t satisfy you. You can drink and party and sleep around all you want, and it will always leave you feeling empty inside. What you need is a real connection and a real purpose in your life.”

I groaned. “Yes, Father. May I go play outside now?”

Her features scrunched together. “Do not even teasingly compare me to your father.”

“Gods. Noted. Why are you so pissy today?”

She grabbed a clay bowl and smacked it down hard enough against the table that it clinked. “So, you forgot about this evening, did you? Why does that not surprise me?”

I paused. “What’s today?”

She dumped flour into the bowl, puffs of it rising like a fog around her hands. “The convoy?”

My heart leaped into my throat. “My father comes?”

She blew out a breath. “Thank the gods, no. It’s just Ares.”

“See.” I laughed. “Nothing to worry about.”

She snagged an egg out of a basket and cracked it against the side of the bowl. “Yeah, your brother who can start a war by raising an eyebrow. Nothing to worry about.”

“Temi, relax some. Come on.” I stepped towards the door again.

“Are you seriously still going to leave after I just told you Ares is coming?”

I placed my hands on the stone door sill. “He’s coming for dinner, isn’t he?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then I have plenty of time.” I tossed her a smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back by dusk.”

I stepped out into the golden sunshine of the day, but her voice carried to me as she yelled, “Apollo, I swear! And don’t expect me to handle this person in your bed. I’m your sister, not some attendant of yours.”

I chuckled and snatched a bite of the apricot. The juice dripped down my chin, and I wiped it away with the back of my arm. The golden sun stretched over the ridge, tossing out its warmth over the valley. A field of early blooming lavender danced in the wind, the purple flowers twirling and pirouetting around each other.

I eased down the hill and turned the corner at an apricot orchard. Clusters of the fruit, like a million miniature suns streaked in golds and oranges, were tucked in between the emerald of the leaves, splashing the world with their colors.

A child with dark curls and bright blue eyes twined between the trunks, ducking down and swiping up a piece of fruit. She wrinkled her nose and dropped it back to the ground.

“Hello there,” I said.

She jumped, her hands trembling, tucking the basket she held against herself. “Good day, sir.”

“Are you looking for fruit?”

Her cheeks pinkened. And despite the healthy color spreading over her skin, her features edged too sharp, her eyes gaunt, her clothes threadbare in several spots. “I assure you, sir, I follow the law. I’m only picking fruit up from the ground.”

I stepped in closer to her and retrieved an apricot from beneath a teepee of long grass. Its skin was splotched with bruises, and a bug wriggled down in its flesh. “It doesn’t seem like you have many good options here on the ground.”

She swallowed, her throat bobbing. “Yes, sir, but the fruit on the trees belong to the gods.”

“How generous of Zeus that he has the law that anyone can choose fruit that has fallen?” I said, and I snapped my fingers. Thud, thud, thud. Apricots fell from the branches, landing around the orchard like a hail storm.

The girl's eyes popped bluer than the sky. Her mouth parted, but words didn't come.

I smiled. "Run along—get to it before the worms do."

She bobbed her head and turned, her basket flying out behind her.

Her slight form weaved through the rows of trees. Her curls flowed in the breeze. She bit into the flesh of an apricot and sighed, flecks of the fruit smattering her chin.

A smirk touched my lips, and I continued down the path.

On the next turn, the village came into view. Hundreds of cream and tan houses lay tucked into the valley and undulations of the surrounding mountains. Wisps of smoke swept into the air from the ivory temple, the largest building in the town.

It was the weekly dedication day. Time for the villagers to pay tribute to the gods. Right.

I clenched my teeth.

The smoky smells turned my stomach.

But, wait, there was a way I could use this in my favor.

A smile edged up along my lips as I tapped into my power and changed my veil to that of an old man with worn, dark skin and a mop of gray hair. I pulled a gold sash out of my knapsack and tossed it on over my clothes. The perfect disguise.

The glow from the midday sun caused the ivory marble walls of the temple to gleam like a pearl. As I approached the steps, I raised my voice. "Oh hear me, fellow citizens!"

The crowd turned towards me, eyes bright.

"Hear what the gods have spoken to me."

A woman near me with a mahogany tunic that rippled in the breeze gasped and pulled the bundle in her arms closer.

"Ares requires dedication today."

A man with bushy, dark eyebrows cocked his head to the side. "Ares? Does he intend to declare war on us, wise man?"

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "He has considered it." The crowd sucked in breaths. "He wants to see if you will heed his words and honor him."

“Please tell us,” another woman with a sharp nose said, “what he desires, so we can honor his name.”

They bobbed their heads, and I had to fight a grin. “He wishes for a thimble of olive oil with six petals of lavender within it.”

Everyone froze for a moment. A man with thick arms lifted his chin. “Such a paltry offering, no blood or even wine? Are you sure, wise man, this is what Ares desires?”

I raised my hands. “May the gods strike me dead if I speak false.” If only I could be so lucky. “This is his desire. He longs to see if the people of your village are faithful.”

“Of course we are,” the first woman said. “We shall make this offering at once.”

I nodded and turned, exiting the town and heading into the foothills before I changed my veil again and burst into a bright laugh. Oh, now I truly had something to look forward to in seeing Ares.

The hills rolled like waves in a peaceful sea, their greens all blending in together. The sky spread out as blue and pure as Delphinium. And I didn’t care what anyone said—there was no scene as beautiful as this little unknown valley tucked in the middle of the continent, Olympus certainly included.

I stretched out onto a rock and drew my lyre out of my knapsack before tucking the bag behind my head as a pillow. I plucked my fingers and thumbs over the strings. The twangy, bright music danced through the spring air while fleecy clouds drifted across the sky. Sunshine sparkled off the boulders, casting the scene like the heavens it was.

Out there with the world unfolding around me as though I’d fallen into an oil painting, I could almost forget.

The sordid past stretching behind me, the ghosts whispering to me.

And the haunting future stretching ahead.

My fate trapped me.

But there, for just a moment, I sat as free as the birds swimming through puddles of milky clouds.

A bleat drew me out of my meditation.

A lamb with creamy wool butted its rough nose against the back of my shoulder.

I scratched behind its ear, the gritty texture of its fleece scraping my fingers. “Well, hello, you.”

Maaa. The lamb demanded again.

“What are you doing out here, little one?”

It cocked its head to the side like it tried to make sense of me.

I chuckled. “I imagine your shepherd is worried sick about you. Come along.”

I stood and tucked the lyre away again and patted the lamb on its rump to usher it along the path. “Come on, now. Let’s find your flock.”

I prodded the creature forward on the trail. It jumped and tumbled across the pebble-swept path, and I chuckled.

“Me-yo,” a voice rang out like a song, echoing against the hills.

“Ah, ha,” I said. “Now, there’s your mistress.”

“Me-yo,” the voice came again.

“And she sounds worried. Come on, you.”

I pushed the lamb through a copse of trees, and it stumbled out into a valley as I remained tucked behind the scrambling greens of the leafy limbs. A shepherdess with dark hair bound back with a headband thrust her hands on her hips. “There you are, you naughty thing.”

Maaa, the lamb responded as it jumped in with its companions.

The girl clicked her tongue. “I swear, you’re more trouble than a pack of stray cats.” But she pursed her lips in a smile, her eyes sparkling. She dropped back into the long grasses and picked up a flower wreath, weaving foliage and lilac blooms into it.

For a few moments, I remained there. Wisps of the girl’s hair trailed out on a breeze, her skin shone like olive pottery in the sunlight. She hummed a song, and it drifted to me.

And that scene was everything.

Everything beautiful in life.

And everything I would never have.

I turned and walked back out onto the trail.

Apollo

The stars speckled across the navy expanse of the sky like a field full of crystal flowers as I ambled up the hill to the house and entered through the kitchen door.

Temi shot her dark eyes towards me and then back down to the deer that lay on the counter. She stabbed the knife into the animal and slit down its stomach, the still-warm musky scent of blood bringing bile to the back of my throat. She clenched her jaw. “I’ll be home by dusk, he says.”

“Temi.”

“Do. Not.” She jabbed the blade down again with a thunk. “Don’t even give me your lame excuses.”

“Did you bring this animal in all by yourself? You’ve become quite the huntress in the past year.”

She hissed through her teeth and pushed her arm into its stomach. “Don’t try to flatter me, especially so falsely. Ares has been waiting for an hour—”

“Oh, so he made it?”

“Of course he made it.”

“Then why are you in here?”

“Because”—she thrust entrails out of the animal and into a bowl with a smack and I shuddered—“he’s your guest, not mine. Speaking of which, you should see to him.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Temi.”