

Chapter Two

On subsequent hunting missions, Amanda flew solo, wandering deep into the woodland forests, seeking her favorite prey: moth and beetle larvae. Not only did she seek out oak and maple trees, but cedar, cypress, and fir trees in the higher elevations of the Western Hills.

Many of the trees showed the effects of disease and parasitic damage. Generally, forests located on south- and west-facing slopes grow under adverse conditions, due to hotter and drier conditions that are aggravated by the terrain shielding them from eastern-bound precipitation. The prolonged drought, which had robbed the valley of rain for years, did not help. Furthermore, the soil of the Western Hills and foothills had high clay content, limiting the penetration of tree roots. Fortunately the grey-wasp colony was located in a section of forest where the soil conditions were relatively favorable. Still, many of the trees were showing signs of water stress, with wilting leaves, delayed budding, and the development of cavitation on the trunks. The weakened condition of the trees made them more susceptible to fungi and pests, which worked in the favor of the wasps. The caterpillars and larvae were prime food sources for the paper wasps.

Amanda noticed that there were some plants in the

forest that were invasive, disrupting the ecological balance of the flora. Occasionally, she would encounter mustard plants, which surrounded dying trees affected by their presence. Spreading like weeds, they would kill the beneficial fungi that the young trees depended upon, inhibiting their growth.

Amanda struggled to avoid competition from other foragers in the hive. Because of the unusually large size of the colony, plus the ravaging effects of the drought, the wasps were finding it ever harder to collect food and find prey. Amanda was willing to fly further than most of the grey wasps were to search for food.

Amanda landed upon a fir tree and inspected its trunk. Finally, she saw a crevice and extracted from it a large caterpillar.

Flying back to the colony, she saw several other workers flying in the same direction, some carrying prey and others without any bounty. Exhausted from her long journey, Amanda landed on a milkweed bush and proceeded to feed upon its nectar. Unaware of any danger, Amanda was bumped off her perch and dropped her prey. She recovered quickly and flew to retrieve the caterpillar, but the paralyzed creature was quickly seized by two grey wasps, who sped toward the nest.

“What are you doing? That’s mine! That’s my prey!” shouted Amanda, chasing after them.

“Sorry, northerner! It’s ours now!” replied one of the grey wasps, laughing.